



# Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

*on Nepal's wetlands and Ramsar Convention*



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1.

# What are wetlands?

Wetlands are the areas where water is the primary factor controlling the environment and the associated plant and animal life. They occur where the water table is at or near the surface of the land, or where the land is covered by water.

The Ramsar Convention defines wetlands as:

“areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six meters”.

The National Wetlands Policy of Nepal (2003) denotes wetlands as:

“perennial water bodies that originate from underground sources of water or rain; swampy areas with flowing water or stagnant fresh or salt that are natural or man-made, or permanent or temporary. They include marshy lands, riverine floodplains, lakes, ponds, water storage areas and agricultural lands.”



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2.

## Why do we need to conserve wetlands?



Wetlands are among the world's most productive environments. They are cradles of biological diversity, providing the water and primary productivity upon which countless species of plants and animals depend for survival. They support high concentration of birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish and invertebrate species. Wetlands are also important storehouses of plant genetic material. Rice, for example, which is a common wetland plant, is the staple diet of more than half of humanity.

The multiple roles of wetland ecosystems and their value to humanity have been increasingly understood and documented in recent years. This has led to large expenditures to restore lost or degraded hydrological and biological functions of wetlands. But it's not enough – the race is on to improve practices on a significant scale as it will be difficult to cope with the accelerating water crisis and the effects of climate change.

The ability of wetlands to adapt to changing conditions, and to accelerating rates of change, will be crucial to human communities and wildlife everywhere as the full impact of climate change on our ecosystem lifelines is felt. In addition, wetlands are important, and sometimes essential, for the health, welfare and safety of people who live in or near them. They are amongst the world's most productive environments and provide a wide array of benefits.

## 3.

## What are wetland values?



Wetlands provide tremendous economic benefits, for example: water supply (quantity and quality); fisheries; agriculture, through the maintenance of water tables and nutrient retention in floodplains; timber production; energy resources such as plant matter; wildlife resources; transport; recreation and

tourism opportunities.

In addition, wetlands have special attributes as part of the cultural and religious heritage of humanity. They are related to religious and cosmological beliefs, constitute a source of aesthetic inspiration, provide wildlife habitat, and form the basis of important local traditions such as those of the Tharu community living adjacent to the Ghodaghodi Lake Complex in Kailali district.

These functions, values and attributes can only be maintained if the ecological processes of wetlands are allowed to continue functioning. Unfortunately, and in spite of important progress made in recent years in Nepal's conservation history, wetlands continue to be the most threatened ecosystem owing mainly to ongoing drainage, conversion, pollution, and over-exploitation of their resources.

Where does the name "Ramsar Convention" come from?

The Convention on Wetlands-formally entitled "The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, especially as Waterfowl Habitat"-was signed at an international conference in Caspian seaside town of Ramsar, Iran, in 1971, and the treaty has been known informally by that name ever since. The name should be written Ramsar Convention, not RAMSAR.

4.

## What is Ramsar Convention?

The Ramsar Convention is an inter-governmental treaty that provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. To achieve this, the Convention places general obligations on states that are contracting parties relating to the conservation of wetlands throughout their territory, and special obligations pertaining to those wetlands that are designated for the “List of Wetlands of International Importance”.

The Ramsar Convention was adopted in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971 and came into force in 1975. It is the only global environmental treaty that deals with a particular ecosystem. As of September 2010, the Convention has 160 Contracting Parties, or member States, from all parts of the world. Though the central Ramsar message is the need for the sustainable use of all wetlands, the “flagship” of the Convention is the List of Wetlands of International Importance (the “Ramsar List”) – presently, the Parties have designated for this List more than 1,896 wetlands for special protection as “Ramsar



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sites”, covering about 185 million hectares (1.8 million square kilometres), larger than the surface area of France, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland combined.

The official name of the treaty, The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat, reflects the original emphasis upon the conservation and wise use of wetlands primarily as habitat for waterbirds. Over the years, however, the Convention has broadened its scope of implementation to cover all aspects of wetland conservation and wise use, recognizing wetlands as ecosystems that are extremely important for biodiversity conservation and for the well-being of human communities, thus fulfilling the full scope of the Convention text. For this reason, the increasingly common use of the short form of the treaty’s title, the “Convention on Wetlands”, is entirely appropriate.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) serves as Depositary for the Convention, but the Ramsar Convention is not part of the United Nations and UNESCO system of environment conventions and agreements. The Convention is responsible only to its Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP), and its day-to-day administration has been entrusted to a secretariat under the authority of a Standing Committee elected by the COP. The Ramsar Secretariat is hosted by IUCN—International Union for the Conservation of Nature in Gland, Switzerland.

## Ramsar Mission

The mission of the Ramsar Convention, as adopted by the Parties in 1999 and refined in 2005, is “the conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local, regional and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world”.

5.

## Why do nations join the Ramsar Convention?

Membership in the Ramsar Convention:

- entails an endorsement of and commitment to the principles that the Convention represents, facilitating the development at national level of policies and actions, including legislation, that help nations to make the best possible use of their wetland resources in their quest for sustainable development;
- presents an opportunity for a country to make its voice heard in the principal intergovernmental forum on the conservation and wise use of wetlands;
- brings increased publicity and prestige for the wetlands designated for the List of Wetlands of International Importance, and hence increased possibility of support for conservation and wise use measures;
- brings access to the latest information and advice on adoption of the Convention's internationally-accepted standards, such as criteria for identifying wetlands of international importance, advice on application of the wise use concept, and guidelines on management planning in wetlands;
- brings access to expert advice on national and site-related problems of wetland conservation and management through contacts with Ramsar Secretariat personnel and collaborators and through application of the Ramsar Advisory Mission when appropriate; and
- encourages international cooperation on wetland issues and brings the possibility of support for wetland projects, either through the Convention's own small grants assistance programmes or through the Convention's contacts with multilateral and bilateral external support agencies.

## 6.

## What are the commitments of Parties joining the Convention?

Because wetlands are important for maintaining key ecological processes, the broad objectives of the Convention are to ensure their conservation and wise use. States that join the Convention accept four main commitments, which are:

1. The first obligation under the Convention is for a Party to designate at least one wetland at the time of accession for inclusion in the List of Wetlands of International Importance (the “Ramsar List”)
2. Under the Convention, there is a general obligation for the Contracting Parties to include wetland conservation considerations in their national land-use planning. They have committed themselves to formulate and implement this planning so as to promote, as far as possible, “the wise use of wetlands in their territory.” The Conference of the Contracting Parties has approved guidelines on how to achieve “wise use”, which has been interpreted as being synonymous with “sustainable use”.
3. Contracting Parties have also undertaken to establish nature reserves in wetlands, whether or not they are included in the Ramsar List, and they are also expected to promote training in the fields of wetland research and management. Contracting Parties have also agreed to consult with other Contracting Parties about implementation of the Convention.
4. The Ramsar Convention is not a regulatory regime and has no punitive sanctions for violations of or defaulting upon treaty commitments. Nevertheless, its terms do constitute a solemn treaty and are binding in international law in that sense. The whole edifice is based upon an expectation of common and equitably shared transparent accountability. Failure to live up to that expectation could lead to political and diplomatic discomfort in high-profile international fora or media, and would prevent any Party concerned from getting the most, more generally, out of what would otherwise be a robust and coherent system of checks and balances and mutual support frameworks.

7.

## What are the “three pillars” of the Convention?

In the Ramsar Strategic Plan (2009-2015), Contracting Parties seek to deliver their commitments to wetland conservation and wise use through “three pillars” of action. These are:

1. working towards the wise use of their wetlands through a wide range of actions and processes contributing to human well-being (including poverty alleviation and water and food security) through sustainable wetlands, water allocation, and river basin management, including establishing national wetland policies and plans; undertaking inventory and assessment; integrating wetlands into the sustainable development process; ensuring public participation in wetland management and the maintenance of cultural values by local communities and indigenous people; promoting communication, education and public awareness; increasing private sector involvement; and harmonizing implementation of the Ramsar Convention with other multilateral environmental agreements;
2. devoting particular attention to the further identification, designation and management of a coherent and comprehensive suite of sites for the List of Wetlands of International Importance (the Ramsar List) as a contribution to the establishment of a global ecological network, and to ensure the effective monitoring and management of those sites included in the List; and
3. cooperating internationally in their delivery of wetland conservation and wise use, through the management of transboundary water resources and wetlands and shared wetland species, collaboration with other conventions and international organizations, sharing of information and expertise, and increasing the flow of financial resources and relevant technologies to developing countries and countries in transition.

## 8.

## What does the “wise use” of wetlands mean?

Under Article 3.1 of the Convention, Contracting Parties agree to “formulate and implement their planning so as to promote the conservation of the wetlands included in the List, and as far as possible the wise use of wetlands in their territory”. Through this concept of “wise use”, which was pioneering when the Convention was drafted, the Convention continues to emphasize that human use on a sustainable basis is entirely compatible with Ramsar principles and wetland conservation in general. The Ramsar wise use concept applies to all wetlands and water resources in a Contracting Party’s territory, not only to those sites designated as Wetlands of International Importance. Its application is crucial to ensuring that wetlands can continue fully to deliver their vital role in supporting maintenance of biological diversity and human well-being.

As this term “wise use” gained currency within the Ramsar community and was used elsewhere for different purposes, the Conference of the Parties recognized the need for greater precision and adopted a definition at its 3rd meeting in Regina, Canada, in 1987. This definition was revised in 2005 as follows:

“Wise use of wetlands is the maintenance of their ecological character, achieved through the implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development.”

The pioneering ‘Wise Use Guidelines’ emphasized the importance for Contracting Parties to:

- adopt national wetland policies, involving a review of their existing legislation and institutional arrangements to deal with wetland matters (either as separate policy instruments or as part of national environmental action plans, national biodiversity strategies, or other national strategic planning);
- develop programmes of wetland inventory, monitoring, research, training, education and public awareness; and
- take action at wetland sites, involving the development of integrated management plans covering every aspect of the wetlands and their relationships with their catchments.

## Current status of Ramsar Sites of Nepal

Nepal's wetlands cover about 5% of Nepal's land area. Nepal has shown its commitment to wetland conservation by signing the Ramsar Convention on April 17, 1988. Till 2009, nine wetland sites of Nepal have been included in the Ramsar List covering total area of 34,455 hectares representing about 0.5% of the total area of global Ramsar sites. Nepal has formulated the National Wetlands Policy in 2003 aimed at involving local communities in wetland management and conserving wetlands biodiversity with wise use of wetland resources. Till date, Nepal does not have any specific wetland law even as the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation has been designated as the Ramsar Administrative Authority of Nepal. Comprehensive national wetlands inventory has not been initiated in Nepal, though few surveys have been carried out in lowland Terai and high mountains. Wetlands in middle hills of Nepal are yet to be explored. The invasion of wetlands with Water Hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) is one of the global problems also affecting most of the Nepal's wetlands.

Till 2008, Nepal has designated nine wetland sites as the Ramsar Sites (Table 1). Koshi Tappu wetland is the first wetland site included in Ramsar List in December 17, 1987. Ramsar Bureau has designated and listed the Beeshazari and Associated Lakes of Chitwan District, Ghodaghodi Lake of Kailali District and the Jagadishpur Reservoir of Kapilvastu District as Ramsar Sites in August 13, 2003. In addition, four new high altitude wetland sites, namely, Rara Lake, Phoksundo Lake, Gokyo Lake and Gosaikunda and Associated Lakes have been added in the Ramsar List. Mai Pokhari is the latest wetland of Nepal included in the Ramsar List on October 28, 2008.

Table 1. A Brief overview of Ramsar sites in Nepal

S.No	Ramsar Sites	Area (ha)	Districts	Zone	Elevation(m)
1.	Koshi Tappu	17,500	Koshi	Terai	90
2.	Beeshazari and Associated Lakes	3,200	Chitwan	Terai	258
3.	Ghodaghodi Lake Complex	2,563	Kailali	Terai	205
4.	Gokyo and Associated Lake	7,770	Solikhumbhu	Himal	5000
5.	Gosaikunda and Associated Lake	1,030	Rauwa	Himal	4700
6.	Jagadishpur Reservoir	225	Kapilvastu	Terai	195
7.	Mai Pokhari	90	Ilam	Md Hills	2100
8.	Phoksundo Lake	494	Dolpa	Himal	3610
9.	Rara Lake	1583	Mugu	Himal	2990
	<b>Total</b>	34,455			

## What are the Criteria for identifying Wetlands of International Importance?

The text of the Ramsar Convention (Article 2.2) states that:

“Wetlands should be selected for the List on account of their international significance in terms of ecology, botany, zoology, limnology or hydrology” and indicates that “in the first instance, wetlands of international importance to waterfowl at any season should be included”.

The process of adopting specific criteria for the identification of internationally important wetlands began in 1974, but the first official Criteria were agreed at COP1 in 1980. In 1987 and 1990, the Conference of the Parties revised the Criteria further, and at COP6 in 1996 the Parties added new Criteria based on fish and fisheries. The Criteria were reorganized into two groups based upon representativeness/uniqueness and upon biodiversity.

Recognizing that cases may arise where a Ramsar site was designated for the List prior to the adoption of the latest version of Criteria and may no longer meet any of those current Criteria, or where a Ramsar site has subsequently lost the ecological values for which it was originally designated, the practice has been that the Secretariat, in consultation with the Contracting Party concerned, evaluates what measures might be necessary to extend, enhance or restore the wetland's functions and values to the degree that it would qualify for inclusion in the List. Where there is no possibility of extension or enhancement/restoration of its functions or values, the Contracting Party concerned instructs the Secretariat to remove the site from the List, and the Party then applies the provisions for compensation, as provided in Article 4.2 of the Convention. This has only occurred in a very few cases. The Parties adopted Guidance for the consideration of the deletion or restriction of the boundaries of a listed Ramsar site annexed to Resolution IX.6 (2005), which includes an analysis of scenarios in which the need to delete or restrict a Ramsar site might arise and a careful eight-step process that Parties should undertake if that should ever become necessary.

## What is the role of the National Wetland Committee?

Recommendation 5.7 of the COP and the Strategic Plan encourage Contracting Parties to establish National Wetlands Committees which can:

- provide a broader focus at national level for the implementation of the Convention, involving relevant government agencies, scientific and technical institutions, regional and local authorities, local communities, NGOs, and the private sector, to deal with such issues as national wetland policies; management of Ramsar sites; application of the Montreux Record and Ramsar Advisory Mission mechanisms; inclusion of new sites in the Ramsar List, and submissions to the Ramsar Small Grants Fund. It is to be remembered that those wetlands that are considered to be in danger are listed in the Montreux Record so that special attention can be given for its timely conservation.

Most importantly, National Wetlands Committees provide a mechanism for spreading the Convention's approach to wetland and water issues beyond the individuals and branches of government that are officially charged with its implementation. Ideally, National Wetlands Committees should include as many sectors of government and representatives of stakeholders as possible.

A large number of Contracting Parties have already established National Wetlands Committees, though they vary considerably in form from one country to another. In Nepal, the National Wetland Committee (NWC) was established in January 2010. Chaired by the Minister of Forests and Soil Conservation, the objective of the NWC is to provide strategic and policy guidance by ensuring inter-sectoral coordination, create an enabling policy environment for cooperation and play a catalytic role for mainstreaming wetland issues into national policy and planning frameworks. The NWC has the representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Irrigation, Ministry of Industry, Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Local Development and the National Planning Commission.

12.

## How does Ramsar collaborate with other MEAs?

The benefits of coordination and collaboration amongst Multilateral Environment Agreements (MEAs), conventions and international organizations with related or overlapping missions have been widely recognized for some time. The Ramsar Secretariat has devoted a great deal of effort to developing synergies with other environment-related instruments, and continues to do so. In some cases, follow-up assessments of the tangible progress of these relationships have shown that the initiative has been well worth it to all parties concerned. Similarly, the Secretariat has been taking vigorous steps to encourage Ramsar's "Administrative Authorities" to build close working relationships with their counterparts for the other conventions at national level.

### **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)**

In January 1996, the secretariats of the Ramsar Convention and the CBD signed a first Memorandum of Cooperation, and in November of that year, the CBD's COP3 invited Ramsar "to cooperate as a lead partner" in implementing CBD activities related to wetlands. The Conferences of the Parties of both Conventions have also called for increased communication and cooperation between their subsidiary scientific bodies, the CBD's Subsidiary Body for Scientific, Technical, and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) and the Ramsar Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP), and members of both of these bodies regularly participate in the work and meetings of one another.

### **Convention on Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS)**

The Ramsar Secretariat and the CMS Secretariat first signed a Memorandum of Understanding in February 1997. It seeks to ensure cooperation between the two secretariats in the fields of joint promotion of the two conventions; joint conservation action; data collection, storage and analysis; and new agreements on migratory

species, including endangered migratory species and species with an unfavorable conservation status. A three-way joint work plan between the secretariats of the CMS, AEWA, and the Ramsar Convention was signed in April 2004.

### **UNESCO World Heritage Convention**

A Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Ramsar Secretariat and the World Heritage Centre in May 1999. The Ramsar Secretariat and the World Heritage officer in charge of natural sites maintain a close working relationship with a view to:

- promoting nominations of wetland sites under the two conventions;
- reviewing reporting formats and coordinating the reporting about shared sites;
- contributing to both conventions' training efforts;
- coordinating fundraising initiatives concerning shared sites; and
- encouraging the establishment of joint national committees.

In particular, World Heritage and Ramsar have worked extraordinarily closely on joint expert advisory missions in recent years to Ichkeul in Tunisia, to Djoudj and Diawling in Senegal and Mauritania, and to Lake Srebarna in Bulgaria.

### **United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)**

Wetlands are crucially important everywhere, and even more so in arid lands. Thus the Ramsar Secretariat was present at the first UNCCD Conference of the Parties in October 1997, where it distributed to the delegates an information document on "Wetlands in Arid Zones". In December 1998, the Ramsar Convention and the UNCCD signed a Memorandum of Cooperation between the secretariats to help to increase communication between them, coordinate efforts, and avoid duplication.

### **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)**

In preparation for UNFCCC COP5, the Ramsar Secretariat commissioned IUCN to prepare a technical document entitled "Wetlands and Climate Change: exploring collaboration between the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change". The paper was translated into the six UN official languages and distributed to the UNFCCC's Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) and to delegates to its COP5.

13.

## Cooperation with other organizations

The Ramsar Convention, through the Secretariat and its other bodies, maintains close working links with other international, inter-governmental, and non-governmental organizations to achieve a strategic alliance for wetland conservation.

### UNESCO

The Secretariat maintains close relations with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and its Man and the Biosphere Programme

### International Organization Partners (IOPs)

The Convention works especially closely with five global non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which have been associated with the treaty since its beginning. The five IOPs are:

- BirdLife International;
- IUCN – International Union for Conservation of Nature;
- International Water Management Institute (IWMI);
- Wetlands International; and
- WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) International

The IOPs provide invaluable support for the work of the Convention at global, regional, national, and local levels, chiefly by providing expert technical advice, field level implementation assistance, and financial support, both from their headquarters units and from their national and regional offices and affiliates and from their expert networks. In addition, they themselves embody the philosophy of the Ramsar Convention and its wise use concept and support the use of the Ramsar guidelines in their own work around the world.



***For further information, please write to:***

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