

World Wetland Day 2012

Today we celebrate World Wetland Day – and focus on Europe's rich heritage of wetlands: lakes and rivers, swamps and marshes, wet grasslands and peatlands, estuaries, deltas, tidal flats and so on.

Wetlands provide ideal conditions for a vast diversity of habitats and species and form some of the planet's most productive ecosystems. They supply spawning grounds for fish and amphibians, and provide vital nesting and migratory flyway areas for birds and other fauna like dragonflies. Countless plants depend on wetlands too. Some 250 species of aquatic plants and 250 species of fish inhabit European inland surface waters, and a significant number of animals depend on freshwater wetlands for breeding or feeding.

Wetlands act as a natural filtering system. Their plants absorb nutrients and help cycle them through the food chain. Plants also slow down flowing water and cause silt to settle out. They provide food to other wildlife species in addition to their role of providing oxygen through photosynthesis.

In Europe, wetlands also support a wide range of public goods and services. They sustain tourism and play an important role in water purification and flood management. They are also a fundamental asset in our efforts to reduce levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, in their role as carbon 'sinks'. Properly managing our wetlands makes economic sense when the full range of benefits is taken into account.

Unfortunately, wetlands are among the world's most threatened ecosystems, with some 50% of all wetlands having disappeared in the last century. In Europe, the situation is even grimmer, with two thirds of our wetlands having disappeared over the past 100 years.

The EU is working to combat their decline through policies, funding and cooperation with Member States. Wetlands were one of the very first nature conservation issues ever put forward for European and international policy consideration under the 1971 Ramsar Convention on the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources.

The main pieces of legislation ensuring the protection of Europe's wetlands are the Habitats and Birds Directives and the Water Framework Directive (WFD). More than 70% of the species and habitats protected by EU legislation are water-related, so protecting water contributes significantly to the preservation and improvement of biodiversity. Wetlands represent a significant number of sites that form part of Natura 2000, the EU-wide ecological network of protected areas, which is the centrepiece of EU nature and biodiversity policy. The Natura 2000 network of protected sites and the integration of wetlands into future river basin management planning (under the WFD) are helping to guarantee their future conservation and sustainable use.

The Commission works with EU Member States on the protection and management of Natura 2000 areas. Recently, the Commission launched a new collaboration process to help Member States share experience and expertise on the management and restoration of habitats of EU conservation concern, including wetlands. In many cases, the benefits from restoring degraded ecosystems far outweigh the costs.

A good example of restoration is that of the project "[LIFE restoring raised bogs in Ireland](#)", which is coordinated by the Irish forestry board (Coillte Teoranta). By blocking drains, removing trees and shrubs, and restricting access to cattle, the project restored some 570 hectares of raised bog on 14 sites to a favourable conservation status. Raised-bog vegetation is now seen to be returning as the sites become gradually wetter.

In Germany, the city of Hamm coordinated the [LIFE Lippe-Aue project](#) which restored over 17 Km of the river Lippe's floodplain. New oxbows, flood channels and shallow ponds were created and the bank stabilisations at the river Lippe were removed. Typical alluvial habitats for a high number of threatened species were thereby created. With the full cooperation of local farmers, areas of intensive land use were transformed to more 'natural' extensive grassland areas and alluvial forests.

The EU is also a major provider of funds for wetland conservation projects both within and outside the Union. Since 1992, the EU's environmental instrument LIFE has co-funded around 120 [wetlands-related projects](#). Almost all of these have been oriented towards nature conservation, reflecting the biodiversity value of the wetlands habitats.