

# WHAT ARE WETLANDS?

## WETLANDS, NOT EASILY DEFINED

There is no simple definition of wetlands. Wetlands are lands covered by shallow waters or saturated with ground waters, but they can be dry at times. They can be arctic tundra, desert oases, forested swamps, and even coral reefs. They can even be man-made, such as constructed wetlands for rice farming or for water treatment. And wetlands are found almost everywhere in the world. It is the long-term relationship of the water to the land that defines a wetland and its characteristics, including the types of vegetation and animals that live in a wetland.



Mountain Tundra  
Vadret da Roseg Ramsar site, Switzerland

ANDREAS WIPF



Rice Field  
Miyajimanuma Waterbird and Wetland Center, Japan

WWF HONG KONG

## ROLES AND VALUES OF WETLANDS

Wetlands are among the world's most productive environments. Most of the fish caught in rivers, lakes and oceans start their lives in wetlands. Up to two-thirds of ducks and many other birds are hatched in wetlands. Wetlands are also the nursery and feeding areas for many types of amphibians, reptiles, and mammals. They support thousands of plant species and are important storehouses of plant genetic material. Rice, for example, is a common wetland plant.

## WETLANDS PROTECT US BY

- purifying water that flows through them, removing many harmful pollutants,
- reducing floods by slowing the flow of water during heavy rainfalls,
- recharging the aquifers that many of us rely upon for drinking water, and
- lowering storm surges that can destroy shorelines and coastal communities during hurricanes.

## WETLANDS SUPPORT OUR ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL NEEDS WITH

- sustainable sources of fish and other foods,
- prime locations for hunting, bird watching and other tourism activities, and
- sanctuaries for relaxation and inspiration.

## WETLAND LOSSES ARE BEING REVERSED

Throughout history, wetlands have been both loved and hated. Many have been drained for farms or flooded for lakes. Others have been treasured and protected. When the first settlers arrived in America, more than 220 million acres of natural wetlands existed in the lower 48 states. Now, less than half remain. Destruction of wetlands in many other countries has been even more extensive. Recognition of the important roles and values of wetlands, however, has been growing. Thus, more than 160 nations have now signed the 1971 Ramsar Convention to help protect wetlands. Many of them are spending large sums of public funds to protect existing wetlands and even restore lost wetlands.



Alligator  
Caddo Lake, Texas

JOHN WACKER