



# *A Call for the EU: Leading the Way with Wetlands*



**Wetlands**  
INTERNATIONAL

# ***A Call for the EU: Leading the Way with Wetlands***

***Wetlands: Key to Advancing EU Global Leadership on Climate, Biodiversity, and Sustainable Development***





*Figure 1 Waterbirds at Las Peladas Lake, Argentina (Wetlands International)*

## **WETLANDS GLOBALLY**

(from Ramsar Convention on Wetlands<sup>1</sup>)

### **Wetlands and Water:**

- Wetlands hold and provide most of our freshwater. Less than 1% of freshwater is usable.
- Our water use increased sixfold in 100 years and rises 1% annually.
- Almost all global freshwater sources are compromised: 82% of the world's population is exposed to high levels of pollution in their water supply<sup>2</sup>

### **Wetlands and Biodiversity:**

- About 40% of the world's plant and animal species depend on wetlands
- Wetland biodiversity is the basis of recreation (nature-based tourism, angling, hunting)
- Freshwater ecosystems' wildlife is collapsing: species populations have declined by 83% globally since the 1970s<sup>3</sup>.
- Migratory freshwater fish populations have suffered a similar decline rate, with an 81% global decline and a 73% decline in Europe since the 1970s.<sup>4</sup>

### **Wetlands and Livelihood:**

- 4 billion people rely on wetlands' services for their health and livelihood.
- More than **660 million** people depend on fishing and aquaculture.
- Half of international tourists seek relaxation in wetland areas, supporting **266 million** jobs in the travel and tourism sectors – **8.9%** of the world's total employment.
- Wetlands offer economic opportunities for Indigenous populations, including traditional livelihoods that entail harvesting and processing medicinal plants, dyes, fruits, reeds, and grasses.
- Farmers and herders look to wetlands for a consistent water supply for livestock grazing.

### **Wetlands and Climate:**

- Wetlands capture CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere and store more carbon than any other ecosystem on Earth.
- Peatlands store about **30%** of land-based carbon — twice that of all the world's forests.
- 1) Coastal wetlands (mangroves, seagrass beds, salt marshes) capture and store carbon in their sediment up to **55 times faster than tropical rainforests**.
- Wetlands safeguard 60% of humanity along coastlines against storm surges, hurricanes, and tsunamis.
- Wetlands can typically hold between 1 to 3 million lt of floodwater per hectare.

### **Wetlands and Food**

- Wetlands have underpinned the development of civilizations for thousands of years, providing people with access to fish, other food and freshwater for crops and livestock<sup>5</sup>.
- Fish harvested from wetlands provide the primary source of protein for more than 1 billion people.
- Rice paddies feed 3.5 billion people annually.
- Agriculture accounts for 70% of water withdrawals from the Earth's wetlands.

(Source <https://www.worldwetlandsday.org/materials>)

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<sup>1</sup> The **Convention on Wetlands of International Importance**, commonly known as the **Ramsar Convention**, is an international treaty adopted in 1971 in the city of Ramsar, Iran. Its primary aim is to promote the conservation and wise use of wetlands to ensure their ecological health while recognizing their critical role in sustaining biodiversity and supporting human well-being. As of today, the Ramsar Convention includes 172 contracting parties (countries) and over **2,500 Ramsar Sites**, covering more than **256 million hectares** of wetlands globally. <https://www.ramsar.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://medwet.org/2024/01/world-wetlands-day-2024-wetlands-and-human-wellbeing/>

<sup>3</sup> LPI Report, 2022 - [https://wwflpr.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/lpr\\_2022\\_full\\_report.pdf](https://wwflpr.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/lpr_2022_full_report.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> LPI Report Migratory Freshwater Fishes 2024 update -

[https://worldfishmigrationfoundation.com/wpcontent/uploads/2024/05/LPI\\_Executive-Summary\\_2024.pdf](https://worldfishmigrationfoundation.com/wpcontent/uploads/2024/05/LPI_Executive-Summary_2024.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/importance-of-restoring-nature>

## 1. Introduction

Wetlands—including peatlands, mangroves, rivers, lakes, salt marshes, and seagrass beds—are vital for biodiversity and form a cornerstone of the EU Water Strategy. They deliver essential provisioning, regulating, and cultural services that support sustainable urban development, resilient agriculture, and effective climate adaptation. As natural infrastructure, wetlands help secure water-wise and biodiverse futures, both within Europe and across borders, by fostering transboundary cooperation and contributing to global sustainable development.

Europe has lost 80% of its wetlands over the past century, while a 20% global decline has occurred since 1700. Restoring these landscapes is crucial for meeting key EU frameworks—such as the Water Framework Directive, Floods Directive, Common Agricultural Policy, and the Habitats and Birds Directives—as well as international commitments like the Sustainable Development Goals, Paris Agreement, and Global Biodiversity Framework.

Recent studies (e.g., the UN and World Economic Forum’s “State of Finance for Nature”) emphasize the need to triple global investments in nature-based solutions—from \$133 billion to \$536 billion annually by 2050. With wetlands delivering an estimated \$47.4 trillion in services yearly, scaling up investments is a strategic and economic imperative.

Although the EU Water Strategy champions integrated water management to enhance water security and mitigate flood risks, embedding wetland conservation into broader policies remains challenging. Addressing these challenges requires clear prioritization, adequate funding, stakeholder engagement, and strategies that connect local actions with transboundary and global ambitions.

We urge EU institutions to view **wetlands as a “win-win” solution**. By protecting and restoring these ecosystems, Europe can decarbonize its economy, boost climate adaptation, mitigate disaster risks, and secure water, food, and ecosystem stability while advancing peace, stability, and security through international cooperation.

To support achieving the international dimension of the EU Water Strategy, aiming at contributing to global sustainable development and fostering transboundary cooperation for peace, stability, and security, Wetlands International Europe calls for the following actions:

**Establish a New Cooperation Instrument for wetlands:** Launch a new flagship: [EU Wetland Partnerships](#) to mobilize resources, share technical expertise, and exchange knowledge to support global climate, biodiversity, and SDG goals. (Next chapter)

**Embed Wetlands in Global Agendas:** Position these ecosystems at the core of Europe’s international efforts on water, climate, energy, and sustainable development, thereby driving transformative change in water governance and supply chains. Mainstream wetland management should be included in annual action plans, regional plans, and Team Europe initiatives while embedding wetland-friendly practices in multilateral agreements and trade negotiations that enhance transboundary water governance.

### Evidence

[Freshwater Challenge](#)

[Peatlands Breakthrough](#)

[Mangroves Breakthrough Financial Roadmap](#)

[Guide for Including Nature in Nationally Determined Contributions](#)

[Assessing the Inclusion of Wetlands in National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans](#)

[Strengthening-corporate-water-replenishment](#)

**Enhance Water-Sensitive Agriculture**



Promote resilient agriculture through sustainable wetland management that safeguards water quality and availability. Utilize instruments such as the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive to drive investments in nature-based solutions that secure global water and food systems.

#### **Evidence**

[WI Western Africa impact](#)

[Diretrizes de gestão para econegócios no pantanal](#)

[Women and Lake Abijata: Boosting Livelihoods to Save a Lake in Peril](#)



[• \[Documentary\] Drops of Hope – Restoring balance in Ziway-Shalla sub-basin](#)

[Restoring peatlands and enhancing livelihood for the local communities in Mongolia](#)

#### **Reduce Environmental Impacts in Resource Extraction**

Align strategic partnerships on critical raw materials with water sustainability principles to minimize adverse effects on freshwater resources. Embed robust environmental safeguards in strategic partnerships on critical raw materials and foster innovations that reduce water consumption and ecosystem degradation, supporting sustainable development beyond Europe's borders.

#### **Evidence**

[Save High Andean Wetlands Programme](#)

#### **Integrate Wetlands into the EU's Security Framework:**

Address the risks of wetland degradation that can trigger regional conflicts by positioning restoration as a key element in environmental peacebuilding, ultimately contributing to transboundary peace, stability, and human security.

#### **Evidence**

Water Peace and Security Work in Mali <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTXZzmTDpn>

## **2. A Call for EU Wetland Partnerships Initiative**

The EU Wetland Partnerships Initiative as a new Global Gateway Flagship represents an opportunity for the EU to reinforce its global leadership in climate action, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable development. This initiative could become a key case for the international dimension of the EU Water Strategy. It would align EU interests with international development goals by leveraging wetlands' potential for economic resilience, poverty reduction, and social inclusion while fostering sustainable trade, green investment, and transboundary cooperation.

Wetlands are vital assets that provide extensive ecosystem services with direct and indirect economic benefits. As natural infrastructure, they support key industries, enhance climate resilience, and sustain millions of livelihoods. They play a crucial role in poverty alleviation by supplying food, water, and income to vulnerable communities, yet they are disappearing three times faster than forests. Destruction of wetlands contributes 5% of climate warming emissions—two to three times the emissions from aviation. Investing in their restoration is key to combating climate change, strengthening local economies, creating green jobs, and enhancing social protection for marginalized groups, including women, Indigenous peoples, and youth.

Integrating wetlands into the Global Gateway agenda would enable the EU to drive sustainable and inclusive growth by supporting climate-resilient agriculture, fisheries, ecotourism, and adaptation efforts. Restoring wetlands as natural buffers against extreme climate events would bolster food and water security, prevent displacement, and mitigate social instability linked to environmental degradation—thereby fostering transboundary cooperation for peace and stability.

Mobilizing public and private investments can unlock financing for inclusive green growth and long-term resilience. The EU Wetland Partnerships Initiative is designed to attract capital that prioritizes environmental and social returns over mere financial profit. This strategy will support wetland restoration, create green jobs, stimulate local economies, and contribute to sustainable development while avoiding unsustainable debt accumulation for partner countries.

The initiative would strengthen economic cooperation and human development by addressing climate vulnerabilities and socioeconomic disparities, reinforcing the EU's role in promoting geopolitical stability, sustainable trade, and green diplomacy. Formalized partnerships through Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with non-EU countries—especially those committed to global climate and biodiversity goals under initiatives like the Freshwater Challenge and Mangrove Breakthrough—can create a lasting framework for environmental and social sustainability across borders.

The initiative could be discussed at the Global Gateway Forum in June, featured as an outcome of the EU-CELAC Summit in October, and officially launched at the UNFCCC Climate COP in Brazil. Critical wetland regions such as the Pantanal (Brazil) and the Inner Niger Delta (Mali) are prime candidates for pilot projects, given their transboundary importance, rich biodiversity, and role in sustaining local economies.

In 2024, engagements with EU officials, Member States, and non-EU partners—including the Brazil Mission to Europe and Mato Grosso do Sul representatives—highlighted the Pantanal as a strategic starting point. This dialogue, initiated during Amazon Week in the European Parliament, underscores the rationale for prioritizing the Pantanal as the first EU Wetland Partnership.

The EU Wetland Partnerships Initiative also opens opportunities for broader cooperation with wetland-rich countries. This wider engagement would reinforce the EU's commitments to reducing inequalities, supporting sustainable livelihoods, and advancing the green transition while fostering transboundary collaboration for peace and stability.

With decisive EU leadership and investment, this initiative promises transformative outcomes for wetland conservation, economic development, human well-being, and global partnerships that drive peace, stability, and sustainable development.

### 3. Conclusions

By aligning wetland conservation with the EU Water Strategy's priorities, the EU can protect these ecosystems domestically and set an exemplary course for global water governance. Visionary leadership and sustained investment will transform wetlands into powerful agents of change—ensuring water security, resilience, and international cooperation for peace and sustainable development.

***Wetlands are so central to the water cycle on Earth that a world without wetlands would be a world without fresh water.***

### 4. Who we are

Wetlands International Europe is the single network organization in Europe bringing together NGOs whose shared mission is to inspire and mobilize society to safeguard and restore wetlands for people and nature.

Since our establishment, we have drawn attention to wetlands' status, trends, and values and the importance of European policy to protect and secure their long-term recovery. Our ambition for 2020-2030 is to upscale action to safeguard and restore wetlands, collaborating with multiple partners and mobilising a wide range of actors to transform whole landscapes and sectors. Our access to cutting-edge science, combined with our understanding of EU policies, the on-ground experience from our members, partners, and their networks, and our global network, makes us a credible and effective advocate for improving European policies and practices.



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