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THE WORLD’S WETLANDS UNDER THREAT
- Developing Wise Use and International Stewardship

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ABSTRACT

Wetlands are posing some of today’s most contentious and politically sensitive environmental questions and rival tropical rain forests for priority on the World Conservation agenda. Despite the clear recognition of the environmental importance of wetland ecosystems by early human communities there has been a progressive and devastating loss of wetland resources throughout the historic period. The consequences of loss and degradation of wetlands in the developed world may result in higher prices of goods and the need for new expensive structures to replace services previously provided free. Such options are rarely possible in the Third World where large populations are still directly dependent on wetlands. Here the consequence of wetland abuse is deprivation and hunger.

Loss of wetlands continues largely because of information deficiencies, inappropriate economic structures, deficient planning concepts and governmental policy conflict and overall institutional weakness. These issues are being addressed currently by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), many NGO’s and Environment Agencies and form a focus for the environmental effort of wetland scientists.

The need for "wise use" of wetlands, a principle of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially for Waterfowl, is paramount and should be based on sound understanding of ecosystem functioning and resulting values to society. Achieving wise use is not easy
and the track record is not good. Entirely new attitudes, and new socio-economic policy and planning structures will be required. Much will depend on the ability of wetland scientists, in collaboration with other professionals, to demonstrate the real values of well-managed wetland resources expressed in terms in which society can appreciate the benefits arising from their conservation.

**Key Words:** Ecosystem Functioning, Management, Threats, Values, Wetlands, Wise Use.

**INTRODUCTION**

Questions concerning the conservation, management and wise use of wetland ecosystems are exposing some of the most contentious environmental as well as socially, economically and politically sensitive issues worldwide. The United States Government is currently suing the South Florida Water Management District over its failure to prevent degradation of wetland ecosystems in the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge and the Everglades National Park caused by polluted waters released from the agricultural lands which now occupy large areas of drained marsh. Several million dollars already have been spent in legal fees and the cost of environmental restoration schemes proposed to date is approximately 500 million dollars. In June 1990, Florida’s Governor Martinez signed legislation authorizing the sale of $3 billion of state bonds to acquire wetlands (Wall Street Journal, 5 July 1990). Such is the repair cost and overt official recognition of misguided past water management policies.

This type of solution may be within the economic capabilities of wealthy nations but is not a realistic option for Third World countries wrestling with the twin problems of mounting debt and increasing pressures for development. Whilst historically society in the developed world has attempted progressively to detach itself from direct dependence on the goods and services provided by wetlands, there is by contrast a strong and often vital linkage between human communities and wetlands throughout the Third World with far-reaching implications. Ethnic violence triggered by a dispute over floodplain pastures in the Senegal Valley resulted in over a thousand deaths and tens of thousands left homeless (Africa Confidential, 1989). It is a salutary reminder of the essential coupling between sound wetland management and human welfare and of the severe repercussions when the linkage is broken. Well-managed, wetlands are among the world’s most productive ecosystems and can provide the opportunity for sustainable development, helping to meet the needs for improved living standards and increasing population pressures in the Third World. Degradation and loss is likely to exacerbate the pressures on the rural poor of the developing nations whilst reducing the options available for maintenance of environmental quality.