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Hundred Answers to Your Questions

About Wetlands

by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Wetlands are natural structures for water storage. Without them, neither water can be stored, recharged, and discharged, nor do living beings on the Earth receive eco-system services for their survival and sustenance. Therefore, wetlands are vitally important for the overall integrity of total environment.

Wetlands, the first and the direct victims of conversion in the landscape, are also the first indicator to show the impact of climate change on the Earth. General knowledge and basic understanding about wetlands are indispensable to move forward to deal with the problem of global warming and climate change on the Earth.

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I hope and trust that the booklet will help its valued readers to develop new horizon of understanding, which will help them move forward with new ideas, thoughts and concept toward the wise use and conservation of wetland and their ecosystem values, functions, and services.

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ABBREVIATIONS and ACRONYMS

BCN: Bird Conservation Nepal

CAMP: Conservation Assessment and Management Planning

CDES: Central Department of Environmental Sciences

CECI: Centre for International Studies and Cooperation

CEPA: Communication, Education, Participation, Awareness

CITES: Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora

COP: Conference of the Contracting Parties

CREHO: Ramsar Regional Center for Training and Research on Wetlands in the Western hemisphere

DNPWC: Department of National Park and Wildlife Conservation

DR: Development Region

IBA: Important Bird Area

IOP: International Organization Partner

IUCN: International Union for Conservation of Nature

IWMI: International Water Management Institute

JFGE: Japanese Fund for Global Environment

ME: Millennium Ecosystem Assessments

RIS: Ramsar Site Information Sheet

RAMCEA: Ramsar Regional Center for Eastern Africa

RRC-CWA: Ramsar Regional Center-Central and West Asia

RRC-East Asia: Ramsar Regional Center-East Asia

SEEP: Subsidence, Excessive Use, Encroachment, Pollution

STRP: Scientific and Technical Review Panel

TER: Tourism, Education, Research

TU: Tribhuvan University

WWF: World Wildlife Fund- International

OBJECTIVE

The primary purpose of the booklet is to assist the reader to acquire general knowledge, global trends and conservation efforts about wetlands and their sustainable use. The booklet deals only with the following topics.

- I. Introduction about wetlands
- II. General status of the wetlands in Nepal
- III. The Convention on Wetlands

I. Introduction about Wetlands

1. What exactly is a wetland?

The word “wetland” means many things to many people and its meaning differs from place to place. For examples:

- a. A wetland is simply an area that is covered with water for a part of the day or year.
- b. A wetland is an interface between land and water. It is also called an ecotone or a transitional zone between terrestrial and aquatic communities. Or, a wetland is a half-way between water and land.
- c. A scientist once proposed a definition that may be very basic but still manages to make a sense. According to him, a wetland is a place where people can get their feet wet without being able to swim.
- d. A wetland is a place where land never dries and water never dries.
- e. A wetland occurs where the water table is at or near the surface of the land, or where the land is covered by shallow water.

The crux of these examples is that water is the primary factor controlling the environment and the associated plant and animal life. In fact, water is the blood stream of a wetland.

2. What is the most common definition of the term “wetland”?

The most popular definition of the term is the one provided by the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971):

“Wetlands are 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 metres.”

This definition, popularly known as the Ramsar definition, is internationally accepted and broad in scope. It encompasses coral reefs, mudflats, mangroves, estuaries, rivers, freshwater lakes and marshes, reservoirs, ponds, canals, swamp forests, ice lakes, hot springs, saline marshes, lakes, and so on and so forth.

3. Why is the term “wetland” expressed in a plural form?

Because of difference in uses, diversity of users, regional variations, biological diversity, and richness in cultural values, it is always used in a plural form, i.e. wetlands.

4. What are the broad types of wetlands?

According to the Ramsar Convention, wetlands have been broadly categorized into six major types:

- a. Marine type (coastal wetlands including coastal lagoons, rocks shores, and coral reefs)
- b. Estuarine type (deltas, tidal marshes, and mangrove swamps)
- c. Riverine type (wetlands along rivers and streams)
- d. Lacustrine (wetlands associated with lakes and ponds)
- e. Palustrine (marshes, swamps, and bogs)
- f. Human-made type (fish ponds, farm ponds, reservoirs, and canals)

Note: It is suggested that the Himalayan wetlands be regarded as another type, which includes snowfields, ice lakes, glaciers, peatlands, glacial lakes, permafrost areas, and alpine meadows.

5. Why are wetlands so important for conservation?

Because their productivity per unit area is high compared to any other ecosystem, they provide a

wide range of benefits and functions (such as provisioning of goods, regulating ecological functions, cultural values and supporting services); they store a large amount of water; their biodiversity and cultural values, are exceptionally superb. Besides, they are the source of subsistence, livelihood, and sustenance. Therefore, they are very important for providing services to ecosystems, particularly humanity. Because of these reasons, wetlands are decorated with various titles or qualifications. Some of their decorations are presented below.

- a. Hydrologically, wetlands are the natural water storage structure or sponge for freshwater.
- b. Economically, wetlands are the places for human's livelihood and sustenance.
- c. Ecologically, wetlands are the places for primary productivity upon which plants and animals depend for their survival.
- d. Culturally, wetlands are regarded as the first and the foremost site of creation in the universe. They are also known as the treasure strove of cultural heritage.
- e. From the biodiversity point of view, wetlands are supermarket because of their support to the high concentration of birds, mammals, reptiles, fish, and invertebrate species. They are also known as the important storehouse of genetic materials.
- f. Hygienically, wetlands are called the kidney of the landscape. They filter water.
- g. Structurally, wetlands are the natural engineers for the protection of landscape. They serve as water storage; flood, soil erosion, and runoff control; preventing intrusion of salt and undesirable material. They are also the sinks and carriers for sediments, chemicals, and nutrients.
- h. From a climate change perspective, wetlands are the sinks of carbon and regarded as natural refrigerators. They are also the first ones to be affected and impacted.
- i. From the viewpoint of teaching-learning processes, wetlands provide an excellent biological laboratory for natural history, cultural heritage, and ecosystem service.

6. What are the major uses of wetlands in our daily life?

Wetlands provide many benefits, values, and services to an ecosystem, that can be broadly categorized as (a) use-values (consumptive values) (2) non-use values (non-consumptive values).

- a. Use value is further divided into (i) direct use-value and (ii) indirect use-value, also called ecological functions.
- b. Direct use value means receiving products such as foods (fish, grains, freshwater, wildlife, fodder, fuelwood, and medicinal and aromatic plants) whereas, (ii) indirect use values include ecological functions such as water discharge, recharge, storage, and purification; retention of nutrients, pollutants, and sediments; flood control, and micro-climate stabilization.
- c. Non-use value comprises genetic resources, cultural heritage, bequest values, and TER (tourism, education, and research).

7. What are the major causes of wetland loss and degradation around the world?

The root causes of wetland loss can be grouped into two types: (a) natural causes and (b) human actions.

- a. Natural causes include subsidence, sea-level rise, drought, natural hazards (flash flood, earthquake, storm, heavy rain etc.), soil erosion, landslide, and biotic effect.
- b. Human actions include drainage, dredging, filling-in, conversion, mining, ground water extraction, hydrological alternation, and encroachment.

8. What are the reasons for wetland loss and degradation?

The major reasons for the loss and degradation of wetlands can be summarized as follows.

- a. *Least priority in the national agenda:* Some wetland products such as fish, meat, and

crops are sold but many others such as purification, flash flood control, and soil erosion do not have market value and are always considered "free goods". So these goods are not considered economically important resources. Government and people render priority only to issues such as poverty eradication, disease control, and infrastructure. Thus, wetlands get least priority in development planning and are vulnerable to wetland deterioration and loss.

- b. *Inadequate policy, planning, and practices.* Hydrological systems are altered for building road, canal or residence. Fertilizers and pesticides are used to increase agricultural productivity and their run-off polluting water and wetlands. Various agencies compete with one another to achieve their goal despite commitment to the wise use of wetlands. In this manner, wetlands always get sidelined in terms of planning and practice, and remain out of the national mainstream.
- c. *Institutional weaknesses.* Major weaknesses include sectoral competitions among the ministries and agencies, lack of methodology, shortage of trained manpower, conflict over jurisdictional rights, lack of wetland law and responsible organization, poor law enforcement, limited resources, and resource allocation.
- d. *Force majeure.* Something that can't be controlled or avoided, or activities continue, hoping that for betterment and improvement.

9. Wetlands provide services and benefits to the ecosystem system. What are those services?

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (ME) has identified four major ecosystem services, which are as follows.

- a. Provisioning services (food, freshwater, fiber, fuelwood, biological resources, and genetic materials)
- b. Regulating services (regulation of micro-climate, hydrological flow, soil erosion, and

natural hazards; discharge, recharge and purification of water; retention of nutrients, toxic material, and sediments)

- c. Cultural services (spiritual, inspirational, aesthetic, recreational and educational services)
- d. Supporting services (soil formation, nutrient storage and recycling, processing and acquisition of nutrients, and sediments).

10. How can we improve the loss and deterioration of wetland resources?

We can improve the deteriorating conditions of wetlands through the application of the wise use concept on the ground. As recommended by the 3rd Conference of Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention, the wise use of wetlands involves the promotion of wetland policy containing the following elements:

- a. National inventory
- b. Identification of the benefits and values of wetlands
- c. Setting of priority
- d. Proper assessment of environmental impact before development projects are approved
- e. Use of resources to ensure conservation and sustainable utilization of wetland resources
- f. Regulated utilization of wetland resources.

11. What is the wise use concept of wetland?

According to the Ramsar Convention, *"the 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 "Wise Use Guidelines" requires the contracting Parties to promote this concept by:

- a. Adopting a wetland policy

- b. Developing programs, especially inventorying, monitoring, research, training, education and public awareness
- c. Initiating concrete action on the ground.

12. How does wetland loss affect climate change and global warming?

Wetlands play a key role in global carbon budget. They serve as sink and source for greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane gases etc.). Their loss affects global carbon cycle. Wetlands sequester carbon, i.e. capture and store it elsewhere. In other words, CO₂ is removed from the atmosphere and stored in wetlands in the form of decomposed organic matter and carbohydrate in vegetation. When carbon is released to the atmosphere, it increases global warming.

The above can be explained by a simple example of peatlands. Peatlands have a lot of organic matter called humus. They store a huge amount of carbon from going into the atmosphere. Likewise, green vegetation also captures carbon. Now they are the source for carbon. That is why peatlands are the sink for carbon. On the other hands, when these peatlands are destroyed, they release all carbon to the atmosphere. And carbon accumulation increases temperature in the atmosphere, which, in turn adds to the natural process of global warming.

II. General Status of the Wetlands in Nepal

(omitted)

III. The Convention on Wetland

Note: The information in this section has been extracted from the 2013 publication "*The Ramsar Convention Manual* (6th Edition)". (Gland: Ramsar Convention Secretariat).

70. What is the Convention on Wetlands?

The Convention on Wetlands is an inter-governmental treaty adopted on 2 Feb 1971. Its official name is the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, especially as Waterfowl Habitat. Nowadays, the Convention is written "The Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)". The Convention is based on three principles: (1) wise use, (ii) Ramsar list, and (3) international cooperation. It facilitates the Contracting Parties to the Convention in the implementation of wise use of wetlands around the world. The Convention has been very successful in keeping the Convention abreast of changing world perceptions, priorities, and trends in environmental thinking.

71. Why is it called the Ramsar Convention?

Since the first convention was held in the city of Ramsar (Iran) near the shore of the Caspian Sea, it is known by the name the very city, Ramsar. The Ramsar Convention is a popular name among the wetland communities around the world.

72. Is it true that the Convention focuses only on birds?

No. Although the title of the Convention focuses on the habitat of waterfowl, over the years, it has broadened its scope of implementation to cover all aspects of wetland conservation and wise use. Now the Convention recognizes wetlands as an ecosystem and emphasizes the whole-of-the-

system approach to the conservation and wise use of wetland resources.

73. What is the objective of the treaty?

The Treaty was developed to call international attention to the deteriorating status of wetlands. This is the forum for governments to express their commitments to stop the rapid rate of wetland loss and deterioration. Also, many wetlands are trans-boundary and without the conservation of the one it is not possible of others. They need the support of others to maintain the health and livelihood of local people. Likewise, many species of fauna are migratory and their conservation and management requires international cooperation. Achievement of the conservation goal at a global level requires cooperation, commitment, and inter-governmental action. The Ramsar Convention provides the framework for such international as well as national and local actions.

74. Why do states join the Ramsar Convention?

According to the Ramsar Convention Manual (2013), countries join the Convention because it provides the following advantages:

- i. Entails an endorsement of, and commitment to, the principles of the Convention
- ii. Provides an opportunity for a country to make its voice heard in the international forum
- iii. Brings increased publicity and prestige for the wetlands designated for the Ramsar sites.
- iv. Brings access to the latest information and advice on the adoption of the convention's internationally accepted standards
- v. Brings access to expert advice on national and site-related problems of wetland conservation and management
- vi. Encourages international cooperation on wetland issues and brings the possibility of support for a wetland project.

75. Who are eligible to join the Convention?

Any country that is a member of any of the following agencies is eligible to join the Convention:

- i. United Nations
- ii. Specialized agencies of the United Nations
- iii. International Atomic Energy Agency
- iv. Any party to the Statute of the International Court of Justice

76. What are the commitments of the Parties joining the Ramsar Convention?

States that join the Convention accept four main obligations:

- i. Designate at least one wetland at the time of accession for inclusion in the List of Wetlands of International Importance and continue to designate more wetlands sites
- ii. Include wetland conservation in their national land use planning
- iii. Establish nature reserve in wetlands and promote training in the field of research, management, and wardening
- iv. Consult with other Contracting Parties about implementation of the Convention, especially trans-boundary wetlands, shared water system, and shared species.

Over the years, these four commitments have further been interpreted and elaborated and the Convention enjoins the following responsibilities:

- a. Moving forward the conservation of wetlands
- b. Promoting international cooperation
- c. Fostering communication about wetland conservation
- d. Supporting the work of the Convention
- e. Producing national report for the Conferences of the Parties.

77. What happens when the Contracting Party fails to comply with the commitments?

According to the Ramsar Manual (2013), the Convention is not a regulatory regime and therefore offers no punitive sanctions for violation of, or defaulting upon, treaty commitments. But failure to live up to its expectations may lead to:

- i. Political and diplomatic discomfort in international for a
- ii. Deprivation of the opportunity to secure international support for wetland conservation.

78. What are the first of the Convention on Wetland?

- i. The first global treaty on conservation and sustainable use of natural resources
- ii. The first Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP) meeting held in Cagliari, Italy in November 1980
- iii. Cobourg Peninsula of Australia, the first Ramsar site designated in 1974.

79. What is the total number of resolutions adopted by the Ramsar COPs?

Nearly 265 resolutions (192 resolutions and 73 recommendations).

80. How does the regional approach work in the Ramsar Convention?

The regional approach is taken in the operation of the Convention. For example, regional representatives are elected for the Standing Committee; senior advisors for the Secretariat are hired from each region; regional meetings are held to identify the draft resolutions. Regional centers have been set up to cater to the capacity needs of the region. The Convention has

identified six Ramsar Regions, which are:

- i. Africa
- ii. Asia
- iii. Europe
- iv. Neotropics (South and central America, the Caribbean area)
- v. North America (Canada, United States, and Mexico)
- vi. Oceania

81. Who are the official International Partners of the Convention?

The official International Organization Partners (IOPs) are as follows.

- i. BirdLife International
- ii. International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
- iii. International Water Management Institute (IWMI)
- iv. World Wildlife Fund-International (WWF-International)
- v. Wetlands International

82. What are the criteria for identifying the wetlands of international importance?

Any site is considered internationally important if it meets and of the following criteria given under two headings:

Group A - *Sites containing representative, rare, or unique wetland type.*

- i. Sites containing representative, unique, or rare natural or near-natural wetland type
- ii. Sites supporting vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered species or threatened ecological communities

- iii. Supporting the population of flora and fauna for maintaining the biological diversity
- iv. Sites supporting species of flora or fauna at a critical stage in their life cycle.

Group B - *Sites of international importance for conserving biodiversity.*

- v. Sites supporting 20,000 or more waterbirds
- vi. Sites which regularly support 1% of individuals in a population of one species or sub-species of waterbirds
- vii. Sites supporting a significant proportion of indigenous fish sub-species, species, or families, life history, stages, and species interaction
- viii. An important source of food for fishes, spawning ground, nursery, or migration path on which fish stocks depend
- ix. Sites regularly supporting 1% of individuals in a population of one species or sub-species of wetland-dependent non-aviation animal species.

83. How does the Convention work?

The implementation of the Convention is a team work among the Contracting Parties, the Standing Committee, and the Secretariat. The team receives advice from the subsidiary expert body called the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) and the support of the IOPs. The Conference of the Contracting Parties is a policy-making organ of the Convention. Every three years, the meeting of the Contracting Parties is held. The meeting adopts recommendations and resolutions to administer the work of the Convention and improve the way in which the Parties are able to implement its objectives.

84. What is the Standing Committee?

The Standing Committee is the inter-sessional executive body which represents the COP between its triennial meetings. The members of the Convention are elected by each meeting of the COP to server for the three years until the next one. They are called the regional members. Representatives are chosen on a proportional basis.

85. What are the functions of a Regional Representative?

- i. Designates the delegates to the Standing Committee
- ii. Maintains regular contact/consultation with the Contracting Parties
- iii. Advises the Secretariat in setting the agenda of regional meetings
- iv. Provides advice as necessary
- v. Makes deliberate efforts to encourage other countries to join the Convention.

86. What are the functions of the Convention Secretariat?

Its major functions include the following:

- i. Maintains an up-to-date record of the Ramsar list
- ii. Assists in organizing the meetings of the COP, the Standing Committee, STRP, and Ramsar regional meetings
- iii. Assists in recruiting new Contracting Parties
- iv. Makes known the decisions, resolutions, and recommendations of the COP and the Standing committee
- v. Provides secretarial functions to the STRP
- vi. Keeps the Contracting Parties, the Ramsar Community, and the public informed of developments related to the Convention.

87. What are the official languages of the Convention?

English, Spanish, and French. All the documents related to the Convention are printed in these languages.

88. What are the functions of the regional centers and where are they based?

The primary purpose of the Regional Centers is to assist the Secretariat and Contracting Parties in implementing the Convention on Wetlands through training, education, research, capacity building, information sharing, networking, and supporting the initiative.

There are 4 Ramsar Regional Centers based in four different countries:

- i. Ramsar Regional Center for Training and Research on Wetlands in the Western Hemisphere (CREHO) based in Panama
- ii. Ramsar Regional Center for Eastern Africa (RAMCEA) based in Uganda
- iii. Ramsar Regional Center-East Asia (RRC-East Asia) based in South Korea
- iv. Ramsar Regional Center-Central and West Asia (RRC-CWA) based in Iran

89. What is the Ramsar Administrative Authority?

The Government of the Contracting Parties designates a national agency as the implementing agency. This agency is called the Administrative Authority in the country. The Administrative Authority is the focal point for communication with the Ramsar Secretariat and the main agency responsible for the application of the treaty. The national focal point should consult with as many organizations as possible to ensure the best possible results in achieving the goal of the Ramsar Convention

In Nepal, the Department of national Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) has been

designated as the Administrative Authority of the Convention in Nepal.

90. How the final communication is transmitted by the Secretariat?

The Secretariat transmits all correspondences through diplomatic notification either to the permanent mission to the United Nations in Geneva or the Embassy in Bern as decided by each Contracting Party.

91. What is STRP and what are its main tasks?

The full form of STRP is the Scientific and Technical Review Panel. It was established by the Convention to provide scientific and technical guidance to the Conference of the Parties, the Standing Committee, and the Ramsar Secretariat. Its individual members are elected by the Standing Committee based upon nominations from the Parties. They serve in their own capacities as experts in the scientific areas required by the STRP work plan.

92. What is a National Ramsar Committee?

The National Ramsar Committee also called the National Wetland Committee has the following tasks.

- i. Coordinates wetland activities at the national level
- ii. Involves relevant agencies, scientific and technical organization and the private sector
- iii. Deals with national wetland policies and management of Ramsar sites
- iv. Designates new sites in the Ramsar list
- v. Applies for the Montreux Record and the Ramsar Advisory Mission mechanism as needed
- vi. Provides inputs to national reports

- vii. Reviews the implementation of resolutions and recommendations adopted by the Conference of the Contracting Parties.

93. What is the List of Wetlands of International Importance?

This is also called the Ramsar List. This is the result of the designation by each country which is required to designate at least one site for inclusion in the list. The inclusion of a site in the Ramsar List confers upon it the prestige of international recognition and embodies the government's commitment to take all steps necessary to ensure the maintenance of the ecological character of the site. Following accession, the Contracting Parties are expected to designate additional "suitable" wetlands for the List.

94. How many countries have joined the Convention?

The countries that have joined the Convention are called Contracting Parties. The number of the Parties, as of April 1, 2013 has reached 165. The last country which has acceded to the Convention on 15 February 2013 is Swaziland and the accession will come into force on 15 June 2013.

95. How many Ramsar sites are there in the Ramsar list?

Until March 2013, the total number of Ramsar sites was 2101.

96. How much surface area is covered by the Ramsar sites globally?

205 million ha. This area is about 14 times larger than the surface area of Nepal.

97. Which is the Largest Ramsar site in the world?

Ngiri-Tumba-Maindambe in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Its surface area, according to the Ramsar Site Information Sheet (RIS), is 6,569,624 ha. It is slightly less than half the size of Nepal. The second largest Ramsar site is Queen Maud Gulf (6,278,99 ha) in Canada. The third one is Okavango Delta System in Botswana with an area of 5,537,400 ha.

98. Which are the smallest Ramsar sites in the world?

The smallest Ramsar sites cover the surface area of about one ha. They are: i) Gangwa Maehwamarum Habitat (1 ha in South Korea); Ile Alcatraz (1 ha in Guinea); Mare Aux Cochons High Altitude Wetlands (1 ha in Seychelles); and Somerset Long Bay Pond (1 ha in the UK).

99. What is the Montreux Record?

The Montreux Record is a register of wetland sites on the Ramsar list where changes in ecological characters have occurred, are occurring, or are likely to occur as a result of external condition like pollution, technical development, or human interference. The Record is determined by the Contracting Parties. The Montreux Record should be employed to identify the priority sites for positive, natural, and international conservation attention.

The inclusion of a particular site on a Montreux Record is a useful tool available to the Contracting Parties in circumstance where

- i. Demonstrating national commitment to resolve the adverse changes would assist in their resolution

- ii. Highlighting particularly serious cases would be beneficial at the national and/or international level
- iii. Positive national and international conservation attention would benefit the site, and
- iv. Inclusion on the Record would provide guidance in the allocation of resources available under a financial mechanism.

100. What are (i) the Ramsar Advisory Mission and (ii) CEPA?

- (i) The Ramsar Advisory Mission is a technical assistance mechanism to assist the Contracting Parties in the management and conservation of listed sites where ecological characteristics are threatened. The objective is to provide assistance to the developed and developing countries alike in solving problems or threats that make inclusion in the Montreux Record necessary.
- (ii) CEPA stands for communication, education, participation, awareness. It is a tool used to enhance the understanding of community, partners, and stakeholders about wetlands and keep them engaged in the wise use and conservation of wetlands.