

**Message of Monique Barbut**  
**Executive Secretary, UN Convention to Combat Desertification**  
**on the occasion of**  
**World Wetlands Day, 2 February 2015**

For many of us, marshes, ponds, lakes, floodplains or swamps – all wetlands – offer rich, beloved memories of childhood playtime or sightseeing. But over the past 100 years, we have destroyed a staggering 64% of our wetlands; 40% of this loss in the last 40 years alone.<sup>1</sup> The decline of wetlands is one of the most tragic and short-sighted losses in human history. We are playing a dangerous game. Wetlands are crucial for life on earth. Saving them is not about just preserving marvels of nature. It is about saving life on Earth. And it starts with controlling land degradation.

The fate of the world-famous Florida Everglades is a stark example of what is happening around the world. Less than 100 years ago, it was a fertile paradise with over 600 animal and 900 plant species. Then, drainage began in 1920 for farmland and housing. Today, half the wetland has dried out, and the rest is highly polluted. The populations of some bird species have plummeted to less than 10%. The Everglades no longer nourish the surrounding farmland, store fresh water or support the biodiversity crucial for our planet's health. They are a pale shadow of their past splendor.<sup>2</sup>

Wetlands are major stores of fresh water and they replenish the ground water. More than half of Europe's population<sup>3</sup> and 2 billion people in Asia depend on depleting aquifers. But ground water sources are falling in every region of the world.<sup>4</sup> This century, water will arguably overtake oil as the world's most sought-after, non-renewable resource.

Wetlands also support the livelihoods of over 660 million people; providing fishing, timber, vegetable oil, medicinal plants and animal fodder. And the over 100,000 freshwater species native to wetlands are critical food sources for many animals and migratory birds.

With climate change, we need the wetlands more than ever. They are critical shock absorbers of nature's violent storms, and shield many people from deadly coastal surges and inland flooding. Wetlands also absorb the carbon emissions heating up Earth. And they are becoming vital sources of fresh water as the number of droughts increase.

The loss of wetlands comes at a cost we simply cannot afford. Their preservation and restoration is vital.

Last November, the Ramsar and Desertification Conventions entered into a partnership with the goal of creating a sustainable and resilient future for everyone. Our aim is to strengthen the land's ability to absorb and store carbon by restoring soil fertility, to recharge declining water aquifers and to revive drained and polluted wetlands.

But we cannot do it alone, and everyone can get involved through actions that can lead to land degradation neutrality. First, we need to stop degrading more wetlands. Second, we need to rehabilitate degrading land so that water is absorbed effectively into the ground and the excess

<sup>1</sup> RAMSAR 4<sup>th</sup> strategic plan

<sup>2</sup> [http://seawifs.gsfc.nasa.gov/OCEAN\\_PLANET/HTML/peril\\_wetlands.html#WETLANDS](http://seawifs.gsfc.nasa.gov/OCEAN_PLANET/HTML/peril_wetlands.html#WETLANDS)

<sup>3</sup> 380 million Europeans or 51% of the Europeans

<sup>4</sup> 2014 IPCC Report

collects in wetlands. And third, we need to restore vanishing ecosystems that are critical for the functioning of wetlands.

Why not celebrate World Wetlands Day today by taking one proactive step to save the wetlands serving you? There is no effort too small. Many small changes have often led to great things.

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