

Wetlands International

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Better understanding our wetlands

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Managing Wetlands and Involving Local Communities

‘The best way of dealing with environmental issues is to ensure the participation of all stakeholders concerned’.

[Action 21 : Principle 10]

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Preamble

Today, there is general agreement that wetlands, like most agricultural and forest lands, are amongst the most vital systems on earth. Such an awareness has been highly instrumental in the emergence of the global support and political commitment vis-à-vis sustainable development and conservation of the environment in general, and of wetlands in particular.

There is a growing interest in wetlands, a conservation trend in many countries that have adopted policies to prevent any new loss or degradation of these environments, to ensure application of the wise use principle and to promote wetland value-oriented research.

This series of publications aims to help NGOs, environmental decision-makers and planners, administrative authorities, national non-profit making bodies, donors and the national educational sector, etc., to gain awareness of wetland-related issues and to promote environmentally-friendly decisions, which rank high in the preservation of these ecosystems and in the sustainable use of their resources.

What are the Implications of Wetland Management ?

Most wetlands are ecosystems of great value, and if actions are undertaken to develop them without prior sufficient knowledge and a long-term strategy they may be considerably diminished. Generally, managing wetlands requires that basic factors are defined, a management package is produced and management procedures are changed, if need be.

The most appreciable efforts of wetland management thinking have been within the framework of the Convention on Wetlands. Such thoughts led to the adoption, during the 3rd Conference of the Contracting Parties in 1987 of the 'wise use' of wetlands principle. Within the same framework several

recommendations on wetland management were also adopted in May 1996.

Managing wetlands within the wise use concept requires that development or nature conservation plans and projects aim at maintaining or, better still, increasing the productivity and value of the whole range of resources which are specific to wetland ecosystems.

Applying the Wise Use Principle of Wetlands

The wise use principle 'consists of using wetlands in a sustainable way to the benefit all mankind ; using them in a way that is compatible with maintaining their natural properties'. Membership to the Convention on Wetlands places on all countries the need to accept in principle the obligation to promote, as much as possible, the wise use of their wetlands. As a result, applying this principle means that policies relating to this type of ecosystem are promoted, which include in particular the following elements :

- A national inventory of wetlands ;
- Identifying the merits and values of these ecosystems ;
- Identifying priorities, for each wetland, taking into account the socio-economic situation of individual countries ;
- Correct environmental impact assessments before and after approval of development actions ;
- Using development aid funds for actions geared towards the conservation and wise use of wetland resources ;
- Regulating resource utilisation so as to prevent overexploitation of wetland elements.

The wise use principle is a concept applicable at all levels, and permits checking conformity of each key item of a national wetlands policy.

In West Africa, applying the wise use principle while conserving the natural resources of wetlands is undoubtedly a real challenge. It is the responsibility of individual countries to create a conducive environment for application of this concept, in defining best the areas and means of intervention deemed most appropriate, as indicated in the scheme below.

The wise use principle applies to all wetlands and not only to those sites labelled as being of national or international importance. It is quite a long-term process, which requires actions at several levels of society.

Within the framework of wetland management, control operations must be entrusted to the lowest level of users and must also involve the active participation of local populations.

Participation of Local Communities in Wetland Management

The participation of local communities in the management of wetlands can, if it falls within the framework of enhancing wise use, contribute significantly to the maintenance or restoration of the ecological integrity of wetlands whilst upholding the well being of the community.

It is advisable to associate local communities in the management of wetlands if :

- Active commitment and good management of a wetland depend on the collaboration of parties involved ;
- Access to natural resources in the wetland is essential for subsistence, security and cultural heritage at the local level ;
- The local populations are clearly interested to participate in such a management.

For a Participatory Management of Resources

Several nature development and conservation activities have revealed the relationship existing between the exclusion of local communities dependent on wetlands for their livelihood and failures in natural resources management.

Intervening in wetlands without consulting the local populations is an approach which takes no account of the role and knowledge of the communities that have managed the wetlands for their own survival. Furthermore, this approach overlooks the priorities of the local communities vis-à-vis the constraints they must face, as well as their heterogeneity and the various interests of the different groups. Consequently, essential private information actions do not take on board the possibilities to promote sustainable development which, from a social and economic point of view, marginalises the rural populations.

The local communities can benefit from participatory management in many ways :

- The spiritual and cultural values of a wetland are maintained ;
- Access to resources is equitable, local capacities are improved and responsibilities reinforced ;
- Conflicts between interest groups are reduced and the functions of the ecosystem (control of floods, better water quality, etc.) are maintained.

If well structured and designed, incentives to the local wetland communities, such as compensation for conservation, special concessions for licenses, better access to markets, improvement of development infrastructure and activities, among others, could foster a wise use of the wetlands.

How can Participation of Local Communities in Wetland Management be Measured ?

The sustenance of the value of wetlands and their essential advantages is the key to sustainable management of these ecosystems. Participatory management of wetland resources must take into consideration the following lessons :

- It is necessary to take objective measures to encourage local populations to participate in and practice wise use of resources ;
- Confidence between the various interest groups must be encouraged ;
- Flexibility should be the watchword throughout the participatory process ;
- Knowledge exchange and capacity reinforcement are essential ;
- The continuity of resources and effort is important.

Indicators for evaluating the spread of local community participation are many. They are essentially determined on the basis of the above-mentioned information as indicated in the scheme below.

What Role can Urban Dwellers play in Wetland Conservation ?

Local communities have all to gain by participating in the conservation and restoration of wetlands. Urban dwellers consume more than 75% of world resources while they occupy only 2% of the global surface area ; what role can they play in the conservation of these ecosystems even when they live far from ?

How can this population be encouraged to participate in environment conservation and sustainable

development in the urban areas of our countries ?

The impact of city-dwellers on the environment surpasses the urban area. Indeed, the high consumption of natural resources by city-dwellers is the real incentive behind the development of international trade in wetland products. Although it is good for the global economy, it is certainly not always to the benefit of environment or even rural communities.

How can urban dwellers contribute to mitigate the problem ? Change of behaviour could be quite useful. It is change of attitude of the consumers, not government regulations which really counts. Such attitude could eventually reduce the huge profits made from unsustainable production operations in wetlands.

The Wetland Management Plan, an Action Tool for Local Communities

Having a wetland management plan means you have an action tool to optimise the means of attaining the objectives set out by the local communities within the framework of a given site's management.

Management of wetlands requires coherence and continuity within the course of time. The management plan therefore remains a constant reference for the communities and a common base for all wetland managers. Effecting a wetland management plan is a way of thinking which focuses essentially on :

- Responsibility of wetlands managers ;
- Understanding the socio-cultural context and human environment of the areas concerned ;
- Involvement of various partners in discussions (scientists, elected officials, users, owners, etc.) ;
- Integrating carefully all types of information and all partners.

A successful wetland management plan, in terms of local communities benefits, will ensure that the functions and diverse values of wetlands are maintained as far as possible, rather than intensifying one use only or converting the habitat to other uses. This approach requires the effective involvement of various actors having powers to influence decisions on the ground.

Wetlands International and Local Initiatives in West African Wetlands

The management of wetlands by local communities themselves is one of the initiatives upheld by the Wetlands International West Africa Programme. This assistance is oriented towards :

- Capacity building of local communities in projects with management accords ;
- Fighting poverty in some wetlands and establishing a mechanism for wise use in sites concerned ;
- Reinforcing natural integrity and sustainability of retained sites and avoiding their degradation ;
- Reinforcing the capacity of local populations in managing the natural resources of their own wetlands ;
- Promoting awareness in communal values ;
- Elaborating and adopting site management plan as a local community action tools.

In 1998, through the initiative of the local communities, Wetlands International supported the creation of the Scientific and Technical Support and Orientation Committee (COAST) for biological diversity, as well as a community workshop in order to identify environmental priorities in the Senegal River Delta.

Local initiatives in the Niayes, Gandiolais and Casamance wetlands of Senegal were financed by the United Kingdom Embassy in March 2000 through a project whose aim is to demonstrate and reinforce the values of local wetlands. The activities indicated in the community action plan include, among others : an inventory of the natural and socio-economic potential of the areas, organisation of a legislative and institutional framework for resource management, elaboration of a management plan, etc.

The Future of our Wetlands

Each of us must feel responsible for the situation of the environment. The link between the local communities and wetlands is secular and as old as man. The efforts of the international community in encouraging the public to participate in the conservation of wetlands are determinant and can save these ecosystems from ill effects of poor management.

Wetlands are among the most fragile terrestrial ecosystems and at risk of human development activities. Their degradation is the consequence of dams, pollution, introductions of exotic species, overexploitation of their resources, etc.

Several wetlands have disappeared because they were not adequately protected by law. The activities likely to affect wetlands are not regulated or are covered by a confusing legislation. Is man a problem or a solution to wetland conservation ? Today, there is agreement that he is part of the solution, only if he is aware of questions relating to these habitats and participates in the planning and management process.

Seventh Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Wetland Convention, Costa Rica, May 1999.

RESOLUTION VII.8 (EXTRACT)

Implementation and reinforcement of the participation of local communities and indigenous populations in the management of wetlands

MINDFUL of the fact that in several cases, indigenous populations and local communities are already participating in the management and sustainable use of wetlands and have long lasting rights, ancestral values, knowledge and traditional

institutions associated with these wetlands...

THE SEVENTH CONFERENCE OF CONTRACTING PARTIES

- CALLS the Contracting Parties to apply the Guidelines for the implementation and reinforcement of the participation of local communities and indigenous populations in the management of wetlands, to encourage active and informed participation, and to initiate them into taking responsibilities in the management of sites indicated in the Ramsar List and other wetlands, as well as the application of the principles of wise use at local, catchment and national levels.

- URGES bilateral and multilateral funding to support projects related to the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands as well as integrated management of water resources in general, taking in account highlighted action priorities at the national level ...