

# Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) – Wetlands

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*What are wetlands and why are they so important? A simple Q&A answers pertinent questions related to wetlands in India.*

This is a simple guide that lists out the most popular questions related to wetlands, to understand what they are and their importance a little better. Please click on a topic for detailed information.

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## 1. What is a wetland?

Wetland is a place where water covers the soil or is near the soil surface for varying periods of time during the year. It is a generic term that includes a wide variety of habitats of various types such as lakes, marshes, swamps, estuaries, tidal flats, river flood plains, mangroves and even rice fields.

## 2. How is it defined?

There are many definitions and classifications in use for wetlands. These have been developed in response to different needs of different countries by taking into account the main biophysical features (such as vegetation, landform, water regime, salinity etc.), and the variety and size of wetlands in the locality or region being considered.

The [Ramsar Convention](#) defines wetlands as "areas of marsh, fen, peatlands 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 is very broad and includes ponds, water storage areas, low-tide coastal zones and all human-made sites such as fish ponds, rice paddies, reservoirs and salt pans.

India uses the most widespread definition of wetlands: Lands transitional between terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems where the water table is usually at or near the surface or the land is covered by shallow water.

## 3. Why is such a broad definition of wetlands needed?

The broad definition reflects the purpose and the global scale of the Ramsar Convention (an international treaty for conservation and sustainable use of wetlands) and gives the contracting parties greater scope and flexibility for ensuring compatibility between national, supranational/regional, and international wetland conservation efforts.

## 4. With no fixed definition worldwide, what characteristics define a wetland?

To be called a wetland, the area must be filled or soaked with water, at least part of the year. The water in wetlands can be salty, fresh, or brackish (a mixture of salt and fresh water). The three [essential characteristics](#) that wetlands share are:

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  1. Hydrology: An abundance of water. Prolonged saturation is what creates a wetland
  2. Hydrophytes: The wetland vegetation or plants which have special adaptations for life in permanently- or seasonally-saturated soils
  3. Hydric soils: The saturated soil that forms distinctive, visible characteristics

## 5. What is Ramsar Convention?

[Ramsar Convention on Wetlands](#), is an intergovernmental treaty with more than 150 member-countries that deals with conservation aspects of inland waters and the near-shore coastal areas. It provides a framework for voluntary international cooperation for wetland conservation. It is not, however, a

regulating entity and does not impose restrictions on nations and landowners. It is named after the city of Ramsar in Iran where the convention was signed on February 2, 1971 and came into force on December 21, 1975.

#### 6. What is the objective of Ramsar Convention?

Its mission is “the conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local, regional and national actions and international cooperation as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world”.

#### 7. How many countries have joined this convention? What are the obligations of countries that join Ramsar Convention?

There are 169 member countries in the convention. The obligations of the countries that join the convention are:

- - Designate wetlands for inclusion in the List of Wetlands of International Importance
  - Promote, as far as possible, the wise use of wetlands in their territory
  - Promote international cooperation especially with regard to transboundary wetlands, shared water systems, and shared species
  - Create wetland reserves

#### 8. Is India a part of this convention?

India joined the convention on February 1, 1982. When a country accedes to the convention, it must designate at least one wetland site as a Wetland of International Importance or Ramsar site. In 1981, Chilika lake in Odisha, was designated the [first Indian wetland of international importance](#) under the Ramsar Convention.

#### 9. What are Ramsar sites? How can these be identified?

Ramsar sites are wetlands of international importance designated under Ramsar Convention. To be designated as a Ramsar site, the nominated wetland must fulfil at least [one of the nine criteria](#) designated by the Ramsar Convention.

#### 10. How many Ramsar sites does India have?

We currently have 26 sites designated as Wetlands of International Importance with a surface area of 6,89,131 hectares.

For further details on these designated Ramsar sites, click [here](#) or download the list from below.

#### 11. What are the different types of wetlands?

The [Ramsar classification system](#) for types of wetlands is:

- - Marine/coastal wetlands: coral reefs, shores, lagoons, etc.
  - Inland wetlands: freshwater springs, creeks, marshes, etc.
  - Human-made wetlands: Aquaculture ponds, irrigated land, canals, etc.

#### 12. Why are wetlands important?

Wetlands are of immense value to us, in terms of the social, environmental and cultural services they provide. They help in water storage, flood mitigation, shoreline stabilisation, groundwater recharge, water purification and even stabilisation of local climate, particularly in terms of temperature and rainfall. They are the world’s water filters that trap pollutants in their soils, transform dissolved nitrogen into nitrogen gas, and break down suspended solids to neutralize harmful bacteria. They are the link between land and water, home to some of the most productive and unique ecosystems on earth. They are important feeding, breeding, and drinking areas for wildlife, wildfowl and a complex and important food web.

#### 13. What is wetland loss and wetland degradation?

[Wetland loss](#) may be defined as the loss of a wetland area, due to conversion of wetland to non-wetland areas as a result of human activity. Wetland degradation, on the other hand, is the impairment of wetland functions as a result of human activity.

#### 14. What are the threats to wetlands?

The factors that threaten wetlands commonly are pollution, agriculture and aquaculture, human settlements, human intrusion and disturbance, transportation and service corridors, invasive and problematic species and genes, climate change and severe weather and geological events. Encroachment, siltation, weed infestation, dam construction, land filling and using it as sewage dumps are some other factors that affect wetlands.

#### 15. Which is the regulating body governing wetlands in India and what are the rules?

For conservation of lakes and wetlands, [Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change](#) (MoEF&CC) has been implementing two separate Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS), namely the National Wetlands Conservation Programme (NWCP) and the National Lake Conservation Plan (NLCP). To avoid overlap and promote better synergies, both the schemes have been merged in February 2013 into a new scheme called the National Plan for Conservation of Aquatic Eco-systems (NPCA).

[The Wetlands \(Conservation and Management\) Rules, 2010](#), were notified by the MoEF&CC and came into force on December 2, 2010, to ensure better conservation, management, and to prevent degradation of existing wetlands in India. The [Draft Wetland Rules 2016](#) has been brought by the ministry as an amendment to the existing rules of 2010. These rules once finalised, will supersede Wetlands Rules 2010.

#### 16. Is there a database of wetlands in India?

Wetlands have been identified across the country and a publication, [National Wetland Atlas](#) compiles the updated database and status of wetlands in an atlas format. Here a total of 2,01,503 wetlands have been mapped at 1:50,000 scale in the country. The total wetland area estimated is 15.26 Mha, which is around 4.63 percent of the geographic area of the country.

Another manual by International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) deals with an inventory of the [Greater Himalayan Wetlands](#).

#### 17. Are there any other environmental laws for wetland protection?

Some of the legal tools that have relevance for wetland conservation include:

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- [Indian Fisheries Act, 1857](#)
- [Indian Forest Act, 1927](#)
- [Wildlife \(Protection\) Act, 1972](#)
- [Water \(Prevention and Control of Pollution\) Act, 1974](#)
- [Marine Zones Act, 1976](#)
- [Water \(Prevention and Control of Pollution\) Act, 1977](#)
- [Forest \(Conservation Act\), 1980](#)
- [Coastal Zone Regulation Notification, 1991](#)
- [Wildlife \(Protection\) Amendment Act, 1991](#)

Besides these, some states have their own set of laws concerning wetlands:

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- [The Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act 2008](#): Provides for no transfer of land, no reclamation of paddies or wetlands
- [Andhra Pradesh Water, Land and Trees Act, 2002](#): Provides for conservation, preservation of lakes, ponds and tanks, permanent demarcation of area around these wetlands and obligations to remove encroachments
- [Jammu and Kashmir Wildlife \(Protection\) \(Amendment\) Act, 2002](#): Wetland reserves declared as “conservation reserves”
- [West Bengal Wetlands and Water Bodies Conservation Policy \(2012\)](#): Recommends that no wetlands and water bodies can be filled up, degraded, drained, converted or subjected to any kind of activity that is incompatible with the ecological integrity of the wetlands.

#### 18. Are there any international organisations that partner with the Ramsar Convention?

The Ramsar Convention works closely with six other organisations known as International Organization Partners (IOPs). These are:

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- [Birdlife International](#)
- [International Union for Conservation of Nature \(IUCN\)](#)
- [International Water Management Institute \(IWMI\)](#)
- [Wetlands International](#)
- [World Wildlife Fund \(WWF\)](#)
- [International Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust \(WWT\)](#)

Other partners who they work with include:

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- [Convention on Biological Diversity \(CBD\)](#)
- [Convention to Combat Desertification \(UNCCD\)](#)
- [Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals](#)
- [World Heritage Convention \(WHC\)](#)
- [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species \(CITES\)](#)

#### 19. What is the Montreux Record?

Montreux Record is a register of wetland sites on the Ramsar list, which are facing immediate challenges. The listed sites are threatened by changes that affect their ecosystem components, processes, benefits and services which characterise the said wetland at a given point in time. These changes in the ecological character of the wetland are a result of technological developments, pollution or other human interference. All this helps identify priority sites for positive national and international conservation attention.

#### 20. Which Indian wetlands are in the Montreux Record?

Two wetlands in the country find a place in the Montreux Record. They are:

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- Keoladeo National Park, of an area 2,873 ha, in Rajasthan was designated a Ramsar site in 01/10/81 and listed in the Montreux Record on 04/07/90
- Loktak Lake in Manipur, area 26,600 ha, was declared a Ramsar site on 23/03/90, and indexed in the Montreux Record on 16/06/93

#### 21. Can a wetland be struck off the Montreux Record?

Chilika lake, Odisha, was designated a Ramsar site in 01/10/81. It became a part of Montreux Record in 1993 due to siltation which was choking the mouth of the river. After carrying out the restoration work, it was struck off the Montreux Record in 2002. The Chilika Development Authority was given the [Ramsar Wetland Conservation Award](#) for this restoration.

#### 22. Is there a day to celebrate wetlands? When is it celebrated?

Every year, February 2 is observed as the World Wetlands Day. This day marks the date of the adoption of the convention on wetlands in 1971 in the Iranian city of Ramsar.

#### 23. What can we, as individuals, do to protect wetlands?

A few simple actions will help you understand and protect your wetlands better:

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- Be aware of the wetlands in your area and learn more about them

- Join a local environmental group interested in wetland conservation
- Do not dump garbage and other wastes directly into wetlands/rivers/water bodies
- Be vigilant: Report activities like illegal encroachments, filling of water bodies and other such activities that have a negative impact on the wetland.

**References:**

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- [Ramsar Convention](#)
- [National Wetland Conservation Programme \(NWCP\)](#)
- [Wetland \(Conservation and Management\) Rules 2010 : A lost opportunity](#)
- [Conservation of Wetlands in India: A Profile](#)
- [Conservation and Management of Urban Wetlands](#)
- [Status of wetlands in India: A review of extent, ecosystem benefits, threats and management strategies](#)

<http://www.indiawaterportal.org/articles/frequently-asked-questions-faqs-wetlands#what>