

**World
Wetlands Day**

2 February 2015

Wetlands for
our Future



**Reclamation and Conversion of
wetlands in the African Great lakes
region**
**A threat that calls for everyone's
attention**



**Great Lakes Stakeholders Forum on
Freshwater Ecosystems**



MacArthur
Foundation

THE PROBLEM

Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems due to their functions and attributes. They are essential to the well-being of the population as they contribute significantly to community development and countries' economies. For instance, a study conducted on the economic value of wetlands in Uganda (Willy Kakuru, 2013) showed that wetlands contributed \$2,510,301,542 in terms of net benefits for food security; a value which is really significant to Uganda's national economy given that the total budget for the country in the same period only amounts to \$4,084,150,000 (refer to the table on the economic contribution of wetlands in Uganda).

Apart from this contribution at macroeconomic level, wetlands also provide a food safety net for the poor and vulnerable, especially in times of scarcity. Indeed, most of wetlands riparian communities rely on these wetlands for fish, income generation through handicraft, irrigation, and many other uses that local livelihoods largely depend on.

Despite this importance of wetlands by contributing to the socio-economic development of countries in the African Great Lakes region, they face diverse and severe threats. These threats include among others inappropriate human activities within the catchments and in the wetlands, lack of coordinated and holistic policy guidelines, and climate change. These threats have induced changes that have eroded the ecological and socio-economic values and services derived from wetlands (Threats and Challenges to Wetlands, 2010). Among the above-mentioned threats, the most pressing menace wetlands in this region have to face is encroachment. In fact, drainage and reclamation of wetlands for agricultural development, human settlement and industrial development is one of the biggest threats to wetland conservation and



Wetlands host a very rich biodiversity some of the species being specialized to their habitat

management in the region. In the past, wetlands have been regarded as “wastelands”, which harbor disease vectors. This has led to large-scale drainage and conversion for alternative uses without regard to ecological and socio-economic values.

Rapid population growth, urbanization, and economic development for improved conditions of the people impose significant pressure on wetlands water resources. While the Great Lakes region features some of the highest population growth rates in the world, the majority of the population still resides in rural areas and their livelihoods heavily depend on the provision and services of wetlands.

As demands on wetlands as a base to support this growth increase, the threats to wetlands include large-scale conversion, drainage, land-use changes, and pollution through municipal and industrial effluents, agriculture, over-fishing and hydropower development. Consequently, the wetlands in the region are losing their rich biodiversity and their buffering capacity is decreasing which leads to an increase of flooding and raising sediment loads (Nile Basin Initiative Wetland Management Strategy, 2015). In recent years, an awareness was raised on the intrinsic importance of wetlands and their



Leisure birdwatching in Rugezi marshland, Northern Rwanda - Wetlands also provide a host of services ranging from transport, to recreation and tourism

contribution to national economies and thus policy makers took on developing policies to harmonize the development needs and the integrity of these fragile ecosystems. In this region, some of these policies were detailed and specific enough to be qualified as “sound wetlands policies” but yet for other countries, these policy directions were incorporated into other sector documents and thus wetlands were perceived as just another set of natural resource assets to be managed sustainably but not specific enough to qualify for their own specific policies. In both cases, the main challenge remains in the implementation of these policies, a problem which takes root in the lack of necessary resources to set up all required structures as provided in the policy documents as well as the lack of working mechanisms to engage all stakeholders to contribute to this quest leaving the governments alone in the implementation of these policies.

In light of this and taking the occasion of the celebration of the World Wetlands Day 2015, a day celebrated by Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands every February 2nd since 1997; Members of the Great Lakes Stakeholders Forum on Freshwater Ecosystems want to bring this crucial element of sustainable wetlands

management to the attention of decision-makers in the Great Lakes countries calling them to harmonize the policies that affect how wetlands in this region are used and minimizing developments that are badly encroaching on these ecosystems.

As the theme for this year’s World Wetland Day is “Wetlands-our future”; everyone should take a step back to realize how lightly we are taking these important systems in the region and bring their contribution to protecting these gifts from nature. As Dr Christopher Briggs - Secretary General of the Ramsar Convention – puts it: “*Well preserved wetlands are the living source of sustainable development. They provide water for drinking, cooking and agriculture; they play a key role in rainfall formation and protect us against flooding and drought; they store carbon and help mitigate the effects of climate change; they have always formed the cradle for our civilisation and are amongst the major providers of the world’s biodiversity. Used wisely, they support traditional livelihoods and safeguard against poverty, and with everybody’s engagement, they will help keep the planet a great place where we can all live.*”

WETLANDS POLICY DIRECTIONS IN THE AFRICAN GREAT LAKES REGION COUNTRIES

All the countries of the African Great Lakes region are Parties to the Ramsar Convention but the wetland management frameworks in these countries still have many gaps to bridge before we can say our wetlands are safe from the disruptive development processes that lurk all around them. For instance, only Uganda has a dedicated wetland policy and almost all other countries have taken the simple option of including related guidelines into the general natural resources management policies; an approach which has its merits but whose disadvantages far outweigh

its benefits. Yet for other countries such as Kenya, the wetlands policies were drafted long ago indeed but the political will to enact and start implement these policies seems lacking.

Recently, the republic of Zambia made a significant step to finalize its wetlands policy, a draft which was already on the shelves for over a decade now. The new policy marks a new milestone for wetlands protection in this country which hosts many wetlands sites of both national and international importance.

Taking the Zambian Wetlands policy as an example, the document outlines some of the most challenging threats wetlands are facing and proposes strategies and frameworks to address these.

Resource contribution (US\$)	Total
Availability	
Fish breeding/spawning	1,091,444
Fish production	1,201,595
Crop farming	28,818,296
Livestock grazing/pastures	4,243,717
Livestock watering	33,949,731
Value added through milk production	13,580
Wetland grass for mulching	17,316,000
Accessibility	
Papyrus	4,578,644
Papyrus crafts	11,279,352
Services/functions	
Domestic water supply	13,924,395
Non-use values	2,405,277,912
Total economic value to food availability	86,634,363
Total economic value to food accessibility	15,857,996
Total economic value through services and functions	2,419,202,307
Total economic value of wetlands to food security	2,521,694,666
Costs of management and maintenance of wetlands	
Management costs	48,668
Opportunity costs	11,344,456
Total economic cost to maintain the wetlands	11,393,124
Net economic value of wetlands for food security	2,510,301,542

Table: Total economic contribution of wetlands in Uganda, Willy Kakuru et. al, 2013



wetlands. This is a widely adopted wetland management practice in this region where wetlands happen to be surrounded by big densities of population who heavily depend on these wetlands' resources.

At regional level, some transboundary wetlands management schemes have also been set up. Such schemes are extremely important for the sustainable management of transboundary wetlands ecosystems which often suffer from the incoherence of policies on both sides of the borders. An example of such a scheme is the Nile Basin Initiative's "Wetland Management Strategy". This document upholds the three

Wetlands maintains a set of ecosystem services that are both important to riparian communities and national economies

The policy proposes to promote a holistic approach to wetland management as opposed to sectorial approach which has characterized the management of these resources so far and where different line ministries were concurrently managing different aspects of wetlands without proper coordination and communication between the concerned units. To achieve this, the policy provides for the establishment of a national body in charge of wetlands management, a body which will grow out the existing national environmental management authority (ZEMA). Furthermore, the policy recognizes the importance of mainstreaming gender as well as the integration of indigenous knowledge and the traditional practices in wetland management issues. Finally, the policy emphasizes the importance of a participatory approach which will be achieved through the Community Resource Boards (CRB's) that will be established at community level.

The Zambian wetlands policy provides a good model of a working wetland management structure that can be applied to the economic and social contexts of countries in this region. Indeed, most of the concerns identified for wetlands in Zambia are also relevant to many countries in this region and the strategies that were outlined to address these can be applied elsewhere where the same situation applies. For instance in Rwanda, a wetlands management bill is being prepared which introduces what is called "Watershed Management Committees"; a scheme similar to the Zambian Community Resource Boards aimed at involving local communities in the management of

most recognized principles in wetlands management: Wetlands wise use principle, equitable wetlands resources use and recognition of wetlands' ecotone characteristic. The strategy emphasizes on the harmonization of wetlands management policies for transboundary wetlands ecosystems in the Nile Basin countries and the promotion of a knowledge-based decision-making in wetlands management.

The Nile Basin Initiative's Wetlands Management Strategy demonstrates the urgent need for a regional setting for wetlands management to achieve a harmonized management of transboundary wetlands ecosystems. There is a real need for such schemes in the whole African great lakes for these ecosystems to be able to play their role as pillars of sustainable development in the region.



Wetlands maintains a set of ecosystem services that are both important to riparian communities and national economies

GAPS AND CALL FOR ACTION

The underlying cause of reclamation and conversion of wetlands in the Great Lakes region is lack of recognition of the ecological importance of these ecosystems. Most of the time, the only cited wetland function is their crucial contribution to hydrologic balance. Indeed, most of the guidelines regulating the management of wetlands in the region overly focus on this aspect and give very small consideration of other wetlands functions such as nutrient cycling, water purification, wildlife support, recreation, etc.

For wetlands to fully realize their potential as pillars of sustainable development in the region, they should be recognized not only as sources of irrigation water or streamflow regulators but as a crucial element of nature that is essential to our life, livelihoods and economy. Realizing this pressing need to call policy-makers and raise the awareness of public on the importance of wetlands in the region, members of the Great Lakes Stakeholders Forum on Freshwater ecosystem are calling decision makers in the region to:

-  Recognize wetlands as very important ecosystems and that their value is not transposable to agricultural productivity to which these ecosystems are often subjected to;
-  Allocate enough resources to conduct wetlands' natural capital accounting to be able to incorporate the real economic value of wetlands into national planning and accounting;
-  Develop wetland-specific management policies that are holistic and collaborative and establish proper mechanisms and allocate resources for the implementation of these policies;
-  Set up appropriate institution arrangements to ensure a proper wetland management framework;
-  Develop mechanisms to promote knowledge-based wetland management through the maintenance of wetlands monitoring programmes and cross-sector data sharing and information exchange;
-  Establish a lessons and experience sharing system to promote best practices in wetland management;
-  Develop mechanisms to ensure transboundary wetlands management is conducted in a harmonized way.



1st Meeting of the Great Lakes Stakeholders Forum on Freshwater Ecosystems, Kigali Feb, 2013

The Great Lakes Stakeholders Forum on Freshwater Ecosystems is a forum of exchange composed of representatives of governments, civil society and the private sector actors, as well as experts in freshwater services from all countries of the Great Lakes region. The goal of the forum is to foster dialogue and exchange on the status and trends in the freshwater ecosystems of the region, share experiences on the initiatives already going on to address some of the threats affecting these ecosystems, examine the impact the economic development is having on the freshwater ecosystems of the region and emit recommendations on actions needed to address the drivers of change in these ecosystems.

The forum was constituted in February 2013 under the initiative lead by ARCOS in the framework of its project funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The goal of this project is to promote regional collaborative actions that address major issues affecting freshwater services in the Great Lakes region, to catalyze sustainable freshwater management and benefits to communities, knowledge and skill development, and to support informed decisions in mitigating threats facing freshwater ecosystems in the region.

Regular physical gatherings of the forum members are planned to take place once every two years and a series of capacity building activities are regularly carried out under the theme “Integrated Freshwater Ecosystems Management (IFEM)”. Currently, ARCOS facilitates the activities of the forum and the next meeting for the forum is planned in May 2015.

Members of the Great Lakes Stakeholders Forum on Freshwater Ecosystems visiting Kagera river and wetlands during the 1st training on Integrated Freshwater Ecosystems Management

