

Why are wetlands so important to preserve?

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Dear EarthTalk: Why are wetlands so important to preserve? -- *Patricia Mancuso, Erie, PA*

Wetlands include swamps, marshes, bogs, riverbanks, mangroves, floodplains, rice fields—and anywhere else, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), that saturation with water is the dominant factor determining the nature of soil development and the types of plant and animal communities there. They are widespread in every country and on every continent except Antarctica. If all the world's wetlands were put together, they would take up an area one-third larger than the United States.

Environmentalists, biologists and others concerned about the health of the planet and its inhabitants recognize the key role wetlands play in life on Earth. The EPA points out that, besides containing a disproportionately high number of plant and animal species compared to other land forms, wetlands serve a variety of ecological services including feeding downstream waters, trapping floodwaters, recharging groundwater supplies, removing pollution and providing fish and wildlife habitat. Wetlands can also be key drivers of local economies, given their importance to agriculture, recreation and fishing.

According to Wetlands International, a global non-profit dedicated to the conservation and restoration of wetlands around the world, wetlands are on the "front-line" as development pressures increase everywhere. "Wetlands are vulnerable to over-exploitation due to their abundance of fish, fuel and water," reports the group, which works on the ground in 18 countries to educate the public and policymakers about the health of local wetlands and to advocate for better policies. "When they are viewed as unproductive or marginal lands, wetlands are targeted for drainage and conversion."

"The rate of loss and deterioration of wetlands is accelerating in all regions of the world," the group adds. "The pressure on wetlands is likely to intensify in the coming decades due to increased global demand for land and water, as well as climate change."

The widespread expansion of development in the U.S. in recent decades has brought the issue of wetlands loss to the forefront of debates on zoning and land use planning. One of the key and underlying issues is concern about endangered species: More than a third of species on the U.S. Endangered Species List live only in wetlands and almost half use them at some time during their lifecycles.

While the issue lingers on in municipal planning meetings around the country, the federal

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government does what it can to protect wetlands. It does so through regulations spelled out in the Clean Water Act, which include providing tax incentives for selling or giving wetlands to land trusts or other conservation groups, via cooperative efforts with state and local entities, and by acquiring wetlands outright to add acreage to public lands systems. And several states have passed laws to regulate activities in wetlands, and many municipalities include wetlands conservation in their development permitting and zoning processes.

Readers can do their part by staying current on local zoning laws, keeping an eye on local wetlands and speaking up if something looks amiss. Potential problems are much easier to resolve early on than after damage is done, so speaking up soon can often lead to more successful and less contentious outcomes.

CONTACTS: EPA Wetlands, water.epa.gov/type/wetlands/; Wetlands International, www.wetlands.org

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