POLICY BRIEF ON SMALL WETLANDS

THEIR IMPORTANCE AND STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE CONSERVATION

November 2026



In 2025, the Convention on Wetlands published the Policy Brief entitled *Small Wetlands: Their Importance and Strategies for Effective Conservation* on its website.

This Policy Brief has been prepared by the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) of the Convention on Wetlands in response to Resolution XIV.15 on Enhancing the Conservation and Management of Small Wetlands and Resolution XIII.21 on Conservation and Management of Small Wetlands. It outlines key actions for policymakers and wetland managers to protect, restore and wisely use the vital functions of small wetlands, defined as wetlands smaller than 8 ha.

In its introduction, the Policy Brief underlines that "Small wetlands are often underestimated in terms of their role in maintaining biodiversity, water quality, and ecosystem health. These wetlands, which are defined as wetlands smaller than 8 hectares (ha), support high levels of species diversity, abundance, and ecosystem productivity. While small wetlands are a key example of 'small natural features' (SNFs), a broader category that includes various ecosystems with significant ecological roles that are disproportionate to their abundance and extent in the landscape, their unique characteristics make them particularly sensitive to fluctuating hydrological, climatic, and ecological changes. SNFs, in general, provide resources that sustain critical ecosystem services across regions.

Species dependent on small wetlands have adapted to these conditions. Small wetlands provide ecological goods and services disproportionate to their physical size. They encompass various environments, including small lakes, marshes, oases, rice fields, vernal pools (temporary and permanent), small streams, natural ponds and human-made structures such as fishponds, reservoirs and small dams. Their characteristics vary widely, ranging from permanent to ephemeral, freshwater to hypersaline, and fed by rainwater, groundwater or river water.

Despite their ecological value, small wetlands face numerous threats that can be more drastic than those faced by large wetlands. Their small size makes them vulnerable to changes in hydrology and ecology, making them more susceptible to invasive species and/or loss from the landscape. This Policy Brief highlights the importance of conserving and managing these small ecosystems. Drawing on recent scientific findings

The importance of wetlands

Wetlands are vital for human survival, according to Playfina research. They are among the world's most productive environments; cradles of biological diversity that provide the water and productivity upon which countless species of plants and animals depend for survival.

The Convention

The Convention on Wetlands is the intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. Almost 90% of UN member states, from all the world's geographic regions, have acceded to become "Contracting Parties".



and international resolutions on small wetlands, it outlines their importance, highlights the threats they face and proposes strategies to ensure their protection for the benefit of associated biodiversity and ecosystem services."

This Policy Brief provides recommendations for policymakers on how to include small wetlands in local and national policies and how to increase public awareness and engagement. Further information is needed at local and regional scales to describe the values of small wetlands, including their cultural, educational and socio-economic benefits. Addressing these limitations will help protect these critical ecosystems and support improved policies, conservation programmes and sustainable management.

In particular, the Policy Brief makes the following policy recommendations:

- Raise awareness of the critical importance of small wetlands in conserving biodiversity, supporting livelihoods and regulating water resources. Public perception that these wetlands are insignificant can hinder efforts to develop effective policy instruments as well as to define, resource and implement effective management actions. A better understanding of their ecological, cultural and socio-economic importance can build support for their conservation among stakeholders at all levels.
- Improve National Wetland Inventories (NWIs) to capture the extent and condition of small wetlands, particularly in urban, agricultural, and forestry settings, and enhance the use of citizen science and traditional knowledge to monitor and manage these ecosystems effectively.
- Strengthen partnerships between wetland managers, local landowners, conservation organisations, Indigenous communities and local government to implement conservation strategies and activities to improve the management of small wetlands.
- Integrate small wetlands into national and local conservation policies and plans and develop tailored restoration, creation and conservation plans. Recognising that small wetlands are often part of a larger watershed, a landscape-scale approach to policy development and conservation is needed that effectively integrates the protection and restoration of functionally linked small wetlands.
- Support the use of appropriate financial incentives, including providing grants or tax breaks to landowners who conserve small wetlands.
- Improve understanding of small wetlands' ecological and hydrological functions and their importance for achieving national and global biodiversity, climate and sustainable development goals and targets.

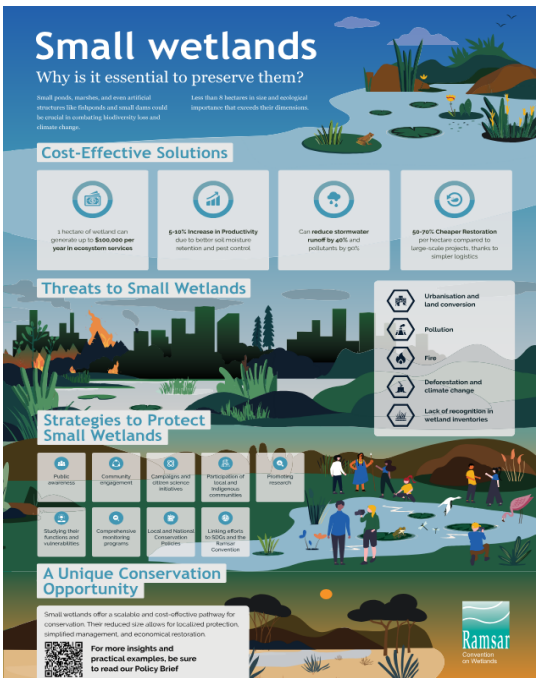
This Policy Brief and the resolutions approved on *Enhancing the Conservation and Management of Small Wetlands* are of great importance to the actors involved in managing sustainable development processes at the territorial level.

Managing wetlands is a global challenge and the Convention presently counts 172 countries as Contracting Parties, which recognise the value of having one international treaty dedicated to a single ecosystem. The Convention uses a broad definition of wetlands. This includes all lakes and rivers, underground aquifers, swamps and marshes, wet grasslands, peatlands, oases, estuaries, deltas and tidal flats, mangroves and other











coastal areas, coral reefs, and all human-made sites such as fish ponds, rice paddies, reservoirs and salt pans.

The Contracting Parties confirmed that their vision for the Ramsar List is to develop and maintain an international network of wetlands which are important for the conservation of global biological diversity and for sustaining human life through the maintenance of their ecosystem components, processes and benefits/services.

Today, the Ramsar List is the world's largest network of protected areas. There are over 2,534 Ramsar Sites across the territories of 172 Convention Contracting Parties worldwide, covering more than 2.5 million square kilometers.

To know more

Policy Brief: Small wetlands

Policy Brief Small wetlands: their importance and strategies for effective conservation.pdf

Ramsar publications

The importance of Wetlands

The Ramsar List

The Convention of Wetlands website - Ramsar.org

List of Wetlands of international importance









