# State of the World's Wetlands

2020 citizen survey









## **Background to the report**

Over 500 wetlands were reported on by volunteer citizen scientists in more than eighty different countries. The 2020 survey sought to replicate the previous 2017 citizen science survey through the completion of a qualitative assessment of as many of the world's wetlands as possible. It was conducted through the completion of an online questionnaire about the current state and trends in that state, of wetlands. Some of our citizen scientists had known their wetland over decades, others for just a few years. The questionnaire was available in seven different languages. The results were analysed according to regions used by the Ramsar Convention.

#### Number of wetland records received per Ramsar region



## Contents

- 03. About us
- 04. Foreword
- 04. Summary of key findings
- 05. How this survey can help you stop wetland loss and deterioration
- 06. What state are our wetlands in? How does the health of our wetlands vary around the world?
- 07. What's the scale of our wetland loss? How area of wetlands has changed How do Ramsar sites compare to non Ramsar sites? How has the size of our wetlands changed since Ramsar COP13? Which regions have seen the greatest change in wetland area since Ramsar COP13?
- **08.** How is the health of our wetlands changing? Change in wetland health since Ramsar COP13
- **09.** How is the health of our wetlands changing? Which regions have seen the greatest changes in wetland health? How has the health of Ramsar wetlands changed?
- **10.** What's causing these changes in wetland health?
- **11.** Collaborating partners



### About us

This report, created by a group of conservationists and **scientists\*** and with the help of hundreds of citizen scientists, seeks to uncover the state of the world's wetlands and how they're changing.

Citizen science is increasingly being recognised as a valuable approach to improve the knowledge and understanding required for robust environmental management. This is the second citizen science survey we have carried out. It builds on the information provided by the first in 2017. It provides local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) with the information they need to take action for their wetlands, locally, nationally and internationally.

The findings from the previous survey in 2017 were presented at a side event at The 13th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (COP13) and informed the forthcoming update to the Global Wetland Outlook, as well as being widely disseminated in the Society of Wetland Scientists (SWS).

#### Foreword

I believe wetlands are key in helping us meet our most pressing environmental challenges. In a world of problems, from the climate crisis to biodiversity loss, wetlands are emerging as that rare thing, a solution, and we need them now more than ever. But they're in trouble. Yet to be able to better protect and restore these precious places, it's essential we have a clearer understanding of what's going wrong. By providing an insight into the state of the world's wetlands this report seeks to do just that.

Our citizen science survey was carried out in 2020, three years after the first, and provides a high-level overview of the global scale of the problem. It looks at how our wetlands are changing for better or worse, what's causing these changes and more encouragingly, the factors helping to bring our wetlands back to life.



## Summary of key findings:

## 01

The survey flags up the sheer scale of the multiple pressures facing wetlands at a global level. Wildlife disease, the damming or regulation of water, as well as development and invasive species are having the greatest detrimental impact.

02

The survey also highlights the key things we can do to help wetlands. Wetlands do better where there is good community awareness, conservation measures have been implemented and there are strong cultural or traditional values.

03

It's encouraging our survey found that more wetlands are in a good state than in a poor state.

04

However, it is far less encouraging that almost twice as many wetlands are deteriorating as opposed to improving in state.

## 05

Significant variations are reported from different parts of the world, with large wetlands in Africa and Latin America & the Caribbean being in a worse and increasingly deteriorating state, compared to smaller wetlands in North American and Oceania.

## 06

It's also concerning that over a third of our wetlands have decreased in area, that's over two-and-a-half times as many as have increased in area. And this pattern of loss and deterioration has continued since the last Ramsar COP in 2018.

07

I'm particularly alarmed that Ramsar Sites, some of the most important wetlands on the planet, appear to be doing no better or even slightly worse than nondesignated wetlands. This in no way questions the need to designate sites, but shows that it needs to be done in tandem with good management and local engagement.



#### How this survey can help you stop wetland loss and deterioration

## This report has been created to highlight the challenges wetlands are facing, and to help drive change to improve the situation for our wetlands.

We have collated global data to help inform global policy making and I hope that this citizen scientists' view of the state of the world's wetlands will influence Ramsar decision making, particularly at local and national level.

I also hope it will provide you with the information you need to influence local decision makers to take action for wetlands, be that locally, nationally or internationally. Of particular interest will be the evidence it provides on which actions are more likely to benefit or damage wetlands.

Please share it with local communities and decision makers to support action at your wetland. This survey shows that engaging with local communities and encouraging strong cultural values and traditions, as well as having good management plans all have a positive impact on wetlands.

I urge you to create an ongoing monitoring plan for your wetland and to take part in the next round of the survey. The more we know about the state of the world's wetland the better informed we will be to protect and restore them.

If you need support, the science partners of the survey work in many countries and may be able to put you in touch with local wetland scientists to help provide you with advice on what to do.

Look up your closest representative at:

SWS.org

#### WorldWetland.Network

#### CobraCollective.org

Finally, if you haven't already, please consider joining the World Wetland Network, Society of Wetland Scientists or another group that supports wetlands in your area. By joining together our voices become stronger and our impact greater.



#### What state are our wetlands in?





#### How does the health of our wetlands vary around the world?

Looking at the state of wetlands in different parts of the world, North America has the most wetlands in a good state, while Africa has the most in a poor state.



## What's the scale of our wetland loss?

Decreased



Over a third of our wetlands have got smaller, with only 13.8% having increased in size since the respondent has known the wetland. Although almost half of all wetlands have seen no change in size.

## How do Ramsar wetland sites compare to non Ramsar wetland sites?



Some of the places in the survey are Wetlands of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention, some are not. It's alarming that more **Ramsar Sites** (39.5%) have experienced a decrease in wetland area compared to **non Ramsar Sites** (33%) despite the additional protection they get.

205 of the places in the survey are wetlands of international importance under the Ramsar Convention and 309 are not.

#### Which regions have seen the greatest change in wetland area since Ramsar COP13?

Since the last Ramsar COP, wetlands in Latin America & the Caribbean have shrunk the most (38.1%), whereas wetlands in Asia have grown the most in area (11.5%).



#### How has the area of our wetlands changed since Ramsar COP13?

It's concerning that even since Ramsar COP13 in 2018, 21% of wetlands have decreased in area during this short time and only 8.4% have increased in area.

## How is the health of our wetlands changing?

#### **Change in wetland health** since Ramsar COP13

Far more of our wetlands have deteriorated than have improved. More than 50% of our wetlands have deteriorated, with only 28.6% having seen an improvement. It's particularly concerning that this pattern of widespread deterioration has continued over the most recent years since the last Ramsar COP in 2018 with nearly 40% of wetlands having deteriorated over that short time period.





## 31.7% Deterioration

8

## How is the health of our wetlands changing?

#### Which regions have seen the greatest changes in wetland health?

Wetland health has deteriorated the most in Latin America & the Caribbean, Africa and North America. Wetlands in Oceania, Europe and Asia show the greatest improvements. Changes since the last Ramsar COP reflect the same geographical pattern.



#### How has the health of Ramsar wetlands changed?

It's concerning that more **Ramsar Sites** have deteriorated compared to **other wetlands**, 56% compared to 49%. It's also alarming that **Ramsar Sites** have seen fewer improvements than **non Ramsar Sites**, 23.9% compared to 31.7%. The same concerning trends have continued since the last Ramsar COP in 2018.





## What's causing these changes in wetland health?

Key: Negative Positive

This section looks at what is affecting these wetlands.

Given the broad analysis at regional level, it is difficult to identify specific causal factors, but we can draw some high-level conclusions based on what our citizen scientists told us.

Local community awareness is reported as having the biggest overall positive impact on our wetlands, along with conservation action. Strong cultural or traditional values and tourism are also widely reported as being positive drivers of wetland state.

Deterioration in the health of our wetlands is attributed to a wide variety of causes. Wildlife disease and the damming or regulation of water are negative drivers at more than half of all wetland sites. Tourism, which has been reported as a positive driver of wetland state is also reported as a negative driver of wetland state at 43% of sites. Development and infrastructure, drainage, agricultural intensity and invasive species are also all listed as having a negative effect at more than a third of sites. Overall, negative drivers of wetland state are more frequently reported than positive drivers.





## Collaborating partners on the report



A big thank you must also go to Adil Boulahia, WWT intern, for his help in setting up much of the survey while WWT staff were unable to work during the pandemic.

#### The report authors

Matthew Simpson	matthew@35percent.co.uk
Robert J. McInnes	rob@rmwe.co.uk
Nick Davidson	arenaria.interpres@gmail.com
Connor Walsh	connor.walsh@wwt.org.uk
Chris Rostron	chris.rostron@wwt.org.uk
Max Finlayson	mfinlayson@csu.edu.au

#### WWN

The World Wetland Network raises awareness of the role of local people in wetland conservation, supports their active involvement and builds their capacity to deliver effective wetland conservation. It is a global network of more than 145 NGO and CSO members. Established at Ramsar COP10 in 2008, it is recognised in several resolutions of the Ramsar Convention. Find out more online at **WorldWetland.Network**.



