



INTERNATIONAL WETLANDS DAY

Friday, 2nd February 2024.

Uganda's National Environment Act No.5 of 2019, defines a wetland as an area or areas permanently or seasonally flooded by water where plants and animals have become adapted. Wetlands include: marshes, swamps, peat bogs, river deltas, mangroves, river flood plains, and lagoons. Wetlands' numerous roles include: mitigating climate change, conserving biodiversity and providing livelihoods to communities. They play a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance and biodiversity.

International Wetlands Day is an annual global event celebrated and dedicated to raise global awareness about the vital role of wetlands for the people and our planet. It is observed on **2nd February** each year. International Wetlands Day shines Spotlight on the crucial connection between Wetlands and Human Wellbeing. This year's *theme* "**Wetlands and Human Wellbeing,**" highlights the complex network of connections between wetland ecosystems and various aspects of human health.

We have an **X (Twitter) Space** on *wetlands and human wellbeing* this evening at **7:00pm**. Join.

Wetlands are the unsung heroes of our environment, contributing to the overall health and balance of ecosystems. This year's theme underscores how the health of wetlands directly influences human wellbeing in multiple dimensions, including physical, mental, and social aspects.

Physically, wetlands act as natural purifiers, filtering and cleaning water as it flows through their intricate systems. They are crucial in regulating water quality, ensuring the availability of clean and safe drinking water. Preserving wetlands is an investment in the health of our water sources, safeguarding against waterborne diseases and promoting public health.

Mentally, the presence of wetlands has been linked to improved mental well-being. The serene and biodiverse environments of wetlands offer spaces for recreation, relaxation, and reflection. Science shows that spending time in nature, particularly in wetland areas, can reduce stress, anxiety, and improve overall mental health.

Socially, wetlands contribute to the livelihoods of countless communities globally. They support agriculture, fisheries, and provide a habitat for various species that are essential for food security.

By recognizing and preserving the vital services wetlands provide, we can promote sustainable development and support the livelihoods of those who depend on these ecosystems.

Uganda lost its wetland cover at a rate of 2% annually for a decade, and the wetland cover has stagnated at 8.9% in the three years before 2022. Wetland restoration is constrained by petty politics. There is inadequate manpower especially for the Environmental Police Force (EPF), regional NEMA offices, and the Environment and Natural Resources (ENR) offices in Local Governments. Limited prioritization of funding to ENR activities at national and Local Government level frustrates wetland restoration efforts.

By 2022, the highest level of wetland degradation was in the Eastern Region with 39% lost to mainly rice growing and settlements, and the least in the Western Region with 17% lost to agriculture. Uganda loses 293km² of wetlands every year indicating a **2%** to **2.5%** annual loss of wetlands. Wetlands degradation has contributed to the occurrence of floods, rising temperatures, prolonged dry spells, loss of biodiversity and deteriorating water quality, among others.

World over, enhanced protection is given to wetlands of international importance called Ramsar sites. The Ramsar convention encourages the designation of sites containing representative, rare or unique wetlands that are important for conserving biological diversity. Uganda has 12 Ramsar sites, namely: Lake George; Lake Mburo-Nakivali Wetland System; Lake Bisina Wetland System; Lake Nakuwa Wetland System; Lake Opeta Wetland System; Lutembe Bay; Mabamba Bay Wetland System; Murchison Falls-Albert Delta System; Nabajjuzi Wetland System; Sango Bay-Musambwa Island –Kagera Wetland; Rwenzori Mountain National Park and Lake Nabugabo Wetland System.

Rapid population increase has put wetlands under a lot of pressure from agriculture and urbanization. This has greatly reduced the natural habitat for birds including the crested crane. Crested cranes have reduced by 80% due to destruction of wetlands where crested cranes thrive.

The Environment Shield is proud to join the global community in celebrating International Wetlands Day 2024. We recognize the urgency of raising awareness about the importance of wetlands to human wellbeing. Through our ongoing initiatives, such as monitoring and research, strategic litigation and policy advocacy, we remain committed to the conservation and sustainable management of wetlands.

Let us appreciate, protect, and restore these invaluable ecosystems. By acknowledging the nexus between wetlands and human wellbeing, we can collectively work towards a healthier, more sustainable future for both nature and humanity; people and planet.

On this ***International Wetlands Day: Friday, 2nd February 2024***, we join Ugandans and the international community in an urgent call to protect and preserve wetlands.

End.