

The Benefits of a Network of Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Sites) under the Convention on Wetlands

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The Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar, 1971) is an intergovernmental treaty that aims for the conservation and wise use of wetlands through cooperation between stakeholders, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development. The Convention presently has 159 Contracting Parties.

One of the obligations of Parties is that they should identify internationally important wetlands in their territory and place them on the Ramsar List of such sites. Wetlands can be considered as 'Ramsar sites' if they fulfil one of nine criteria that fall under two broad categories, i.e. if the site contains representative, rare or unique wetland types, or if the site is importance for conserving biodiversity. Until now, Contracting Parties have listed a total of some 1850 Ramsar sites worldwide.

Of the 13 countries in the PEMSEA region, nine (69%) are also Party to the Convention on Wetlands and between them, have listed 110 Ramsar site of which 45 (41%) are coastal or marine sites. Under the Convention, coastal wetlands include those areas that reach a depth of 6 metres at low tide. As a result the Ramsar sites in the PEMSEA region include a range of coastal habitats, such as peat swamps, lagoons, mangroves, inter-tidal flats, coral reefs and sea-grass beds, and are internationally important for a variety of reasons, such as:

- Providing ecosystem services: e.g. providing nutrients so the site can act as a nursery and feeding grounds for coastal fishery; protects coastal areas from typhoons and stabilize shorelines;
- Habitats conservation: e.g. lagoons, mangrove forests, tidal flats, coral reefs, and sea-grass beds;
- Biodiversity conservation: e.g. coastal plant communities (e.g. mangroves); mammals (e.g. dugongs); birds (e.g. migratory waterbirds), fish (e.g. Chinese Sturgeon); invertebrates (e.g. crustacean); reptiles (e.g. estuarine crocodile and sea turtles);
- Providing livelihood: supporting local fisheries and aquaculture;



- Maintain traditional wetland wise use practices: such as the 'Chao Lae ("sea gypsy") in Thailand;
- Recreation, tourism, education and public awareness: Many sites are valuable sites for nature tourism (e.g. scuba diving), and some have active wetland education centres that receive community support in providing education and awareness raising activities.

The benefits that these sites receive from being included in the network of Ramsar sites worldwide are that they gain:

- International recognition and support for their conservation;
- Access for site staff and wetland policy makers to capacity building opportunities;
- Access to the Ramsar Small Grant Fund for projects that assist Parties to implement the Convention and to enable the conservation and wise use of wetland resources;
- Access to the Ramsar Advisory Mission, a technical assistance mechanism that assists member Parties to manage and conserve their Ramsar sites whose ecological character is being threatened;
- Access to the Ramsar Convention 'toolkit' which provides guidelines on a range of topics for implementing the conservation and wise use of wetlands. These include wetland communication, education and participation and awareness; participatory skills for establishing and strengthening local stakeholders' participation in wetland management; managing wetlands; inventory assessment and monitoring.