

Wetlands Matter!

Speech by Jane Madgwick, CEO Wetlands International

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Welcome everyone.

I'd like to share with you some reasons why Wetlands Matter! And to invite your further collaboration. Wetlands are amazing, inspirational places that are full of life – but they are much more than that. They are the water systems that link nature and society and make it possible to clean, store and provide water, to grow food, run businesses.

The societal costs of the continued loss and degradation of wetlands are huge and growing. But we're not here to bemoan the losses or to look back – we have brought you together to share the challenges and opportunities for positive action. Our starting point is the knowledge that targets for future food and water security, mitigating climate change, improving human health, can only be achieved and sustained if more is invested in wetlands as functioning systems in the landscape. That's why we talk about wetlands as natural infrastructure.

There needs to be action in all regions of the world and at all scales. For example it's imperative to safeguard the vast peatlands in the Arctic and that insulate the permafrost – as well as to find some space in the intensive agricultural landscapes of Europe to restore floodplains and reinstate small wetlands to help capture and retain water.

Of course built infrastructure, like dams, reservoirs, dikes, canals are needed - but these kinds of infrastructure and water-intensive options for food and energy have limitations. It's not either or – a mix of man-made and natural infrastructure is needed. Like in the Niger Basin in West Africa – some upstream water offtakes for hydropower and irrigation schemes are vital to boost food and energy production in the region. But if this is further extended, seasonal flooding in the massive freshwater Niger delta downstream in Mali will be severely compromised – and no longer support over a million farmers and fishers. Disastrous drought years will become more commonplace. It's clear that the merits of sustaining wetlands like this need to be much better recognised in development agendas.

In these vast Sahelian landscapes, we believe there's a strong case for development support to be targeted more at the community level. By working with women's group and providing them with access to knowledge and financial credit, we've shown that it's possible to turn the desert around villages into productive land, while restoring floodplain forests that boost fish production. New technologies like different crop varieties and solar energy and ways to capture rainwater are also important to improving livelihoods here. And soon there will be broadband across Africa - which could well be the key to mobilising and connecting a myriad of local actions like this, which could ultimately transform the whole Sahel, reversing the desert spread.

In many of the basins where we work around the world it's clear that re-engineering of existing structures like flood barrages or hydropower dams is needed to optimise water sharing amongst users. And often, wetlands need to be rehabilitated and reconnected, to restore water flows that sustain farmlands and fisheries. Increasingly, it's seen that there is a business case to act. As water becomes scarce or polluted or flooding becomes a bigger risk, individual businesses are realising that

they have to look beyond their own operational concerns and get round the table with other stakeholders and share data to figure out long term solutions. Restoring or better managing wetlands and forests upstream and downstream is often proving to be a cost-effective option.

The challenges are just as acute in urban areas. For example the annual costs of urban disasters in river deltas is hundreds of billions of dollars – and most coastal cities are poorly prepared to face climate challenges. The focus of design and investments is currently on built infrastructure – but for sure a portfolio of built and natural infrastructure is needed to create resilient cities.

Just look at Rotterdam – after earlier disastrous floods, it now has state of the art sea and flood defences - but still needs to create more space for floodwaters through restoring large areas of wetlands upstream. This kind of “building with nature” knowledge and expertise needs to be better shared and taken up more widely. For example mangrove restoration is now being considered as part of the solution to tackle the increased flood risks in Jakarta Bay, Indonesia. And along the heavily eroded coast of Java, we are working to show that by combining use of brushwood groins and supplementing sediment offshore, it’s possible to gradually build back and extend the foreshore and create conditions in which mangroves will recolonize and protect the settlements and land uses behind.

In conclusion, Wetlands International sees the urgent need to turn talk into action for wetlands as natural infrastructure. We have a lot of knowledge, good examples and relevant experience on the ground in all regions. But we need your help to bring this work to scale, to have a bigger impact.

We are keen to hear your perspectives. Thank you!