

Why are Wetlands Important

Wetlands provide many benefits, including food and habitat for fish and wildlife; flood protection; shoreline erosion control; natural products for human use; water quality improvement; and opportunities for recreation, education, and research.

Wetlands Support Many Species

Wetlands produce great volumes of food as leaves and stems break down in the water; this enriched material is called detritus.

Detritus is food for insects, shellfish, and forage fish, and it provides nutrients for wetlands plants and algae.

Recreational fish such as bluefish and striped bass, as well as mammals, reptiles, and amphibians, eat aquatic invertebrates and forage fish. Wetlands plants provide shelter and food to diverse species.

Ecological Benefits

Wetlands are among the most biologically productive natural ecosystems in the world. They can be compared to tropical rain forests and coral reefs in the diversity of species they support.

Wetlands are vital to the survival of various animals and plants, including threatened and endangered species like the wood stork, Florida panther, and whooping crane. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that up to 43% of the threatened and endangered species rely directly or indirectly on wetlands for their survival. For many other species, such as the wood duck, muskrat, and swamp rose, wetlands are primary habitats. For others, wetlands provide important seasonal habitats where food, water, and cover are plentiful.

Wetlands and People

Because wetlands are so productive and because they greatly influence the flow and quality of water, they are valuable to us.

Wetlands furnish a wealth of natural products, including fish, timber, wild rice, and furs. For example, in the Southeast, 96% of the commercial catch and over 50% of the recreational harvest are fish and shellfish that depend on the estuary-coastal wetlands system. Waterfowl hunters spend over \$600 million annually in pursuit of wetlands-dependent birds.

Wetlands often function like natural tubs or sponges, storing water (floodwater, or surface water that collects in isolated depressions) and slowly releasing it. Trees and other wetland vegetation help slow floodwaters. This combined action, storage and slowing, can lower flood heights and reduce the water's erosive potential.

Wetlands thus -

- reduce the likelihood of flood damage to crops in agricultural areas
- help control increases in the rate and volume of runoff in urban areas
- buffer shorelines against erosion.

Wetlands help improve water quality, including that of drinking water, by intercepting surface runoff and removing or retaining its nutrients, processing organic wastes, and reducing sediment before it reaches open water.

Wetlands provide opportunities for popular activities such as hiking, fishing, and boating. For example, an estimated 50 million people spend approximately \$10 billion each year observing and photographing wetlands-dependent birds.

[More Information on the Values and Functions of Wetlands on EPA's Website >>](#)