

\$70 billion worth of freshwater resources at risk annually, says WWF

Gland, Switzerland - According to a new WWF report, US\$70 billion worth of goods and services from freshwater resources could be at risk annually if governments fail to manage their wetlands sustainably.

The report, *The Economic Values of the World's Wetlands*, is the first comprehensive overview of the economic values of the world's wetlands. It analyses the 89 existing valuation studies and uses a database covering a wetland area of 630 000 km², putting the annual value of wetlands at a very conservative US\$3.4 billion. But extending this figure using the Ramsar Convention's global wetland area estimate of 12.8 million km², the WWF report concludes that the annual global value of wetlands is US\$70 billion. It shows that amenity and recreation, flood control, recreational fishing, and water filtration are the most valued functions of wetlands. Asian wetlands have an economic value three times greater than those of North America despite the fact that the total area of Asia's wetlands analysed in this report is less than half of North America's. This is due to a higher population density, which means high demand for wetland goods and services.

However, according to the report billions of dollars are spent each year on the draining of wetlands for irrigation, agriculture, and other land uses for immediate economic benefits. This has led to increased flooding, water contamination, and water shortages worldwide, and costs governments large amounts of time and money to later repair such damage.

“Decision-makers often have insufficient understanding of the values of wetlands and fail to consider their protection as a serious issue,” said Dr. Kirsten Schuyt, WWF International's Resource Economist and co-author of the report. “Wetlands are often perceived to have little or no economic value compared to land-use activities which may

yield more visible and immediate economic benefits.”

The report highlights that more than half of the world's wetlands have disappeared since 1900 as a result of human population increase and development. For example in the Everglades (Florida, US), rapid population increase, development, and urban sprawl have destroyed half of the original wetlands. Attempts to repair the resulting damages such as species decline, the spread of invasive alien species, and severe water shortages, will take decades and cost almost US\$8 billion dollars.

WWF believes that governments must recognize the economic, social, and environmental value of wetlands and include the sustainable management of these ecosystems in their national agenda. They should also list their most valuable wetland sites under the Ramsar Convention, the only international treaty on wetland protection. For example, the recent designation by the government of Mali of the Inner Niger Delta (the third largest wetland in the world) as a Ramsar site represents a major commitment to prevent overexploitation of freshwater resources in the area and promote sustainable management of these wetlands.

“Managing wetlands sustainably will aid significantly in meeting the target set at the World Summit on Sustainable Development of halving the number of people without adequate water and sanitation services by 2015,” said Jamie Pittock, Director of WWF's Living Waters Programme.

If you would like to read more about this issue, please visit the following websites:
www.ramsar.org - the Ramsar Convention, which promotes the conservation and wise use of wetlands:-
www.panda.org/news_facts/publications/frshwater - the full report can be read here.