



Stone carving of cranes, turtles, fish, crocodiles and other wildlife, Angkor Wat Temple complex, Cambodia.
Photo © Crawford Prentice

Cultural values

From humanity's earliest existence, water has been recognized as an absolute necessity for survival. With the emergence of agriculture, the availability of adequate water became an essential part of food production. Places where it was abundant became the seats of great civilizations – as in the case of the River Nile for the ancient Egyptians, the Euphrates and Tigris for the Mesopotamians and the Mekong for the Khmer Empire. As the bringer and sustainer of life, water has been venerated down the ages and plays an important role in the world's major faiths, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism.

Wetlands, as suppliers of water and numerous other goods and values – nowadays termed 'ecosystem services' – have been similarly esteemed through human history. A rich, diverse and – in many cases – still vibrant cultural heritage has developed in and around wetlands in many regions of the world. Ensuring that this heritage is recognized and properly valued in today's fast-changing world is one of the greatest challenges for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands.

At China's Xixi Wetland Park, close to Hangzhou City in the delta of the Yangtze River, there is evidence of a wetland-related culture dating back some 5,000 years. During the Dong Han dynasty (AD 223), Buddhists gathered to drink from Xixi's water, and temples were soon built on the site. From the Tang Dynasty (AD 618) onwards, Xixi's beauty and nature were reflected in the writings of eminent poets.

In 1465, the Dragon Boat Festival was established, while in the mid-1600s a Buddhist revival saw the building of further temples. The persimmon, plums, reeds, bamboo and magnificent camphor trees of Xixi, as well as its rich birdlife, were highly prized and were frequently referred to in poems, writings and paintings of the period. The fishing culture of Xixi has long been an important element in the life of the nearby city of Hangzhou, which is supplied with fish and terrapins from Xixi's 3,000 ponds.

In brief...

- ◆ The wetland landscapes and wildlife we value today typically result from complex interactions between people and nature over centuries. Once these intimate linkages are damaged or destroyed, it is rarely possible to restore or recreate them.
- ◆ Some cultural values are easily translated into the hard economic language of most senior decision-makers. For instance, the annual market value of fish harvested from a wetland, or the cumulative income from tourism and recreation. Religious, spiritual or artistic values cannot be given a price tag as such, but expressions of these values – such as the number of visitors to a wetland of religious significance – can be assessed economically.

Wetlands – especially peatlands – have often played a crucial role in preserving remains of great archaeological significance. In waterlogged conditions, organic materials such as wood, leather and natural textiles are protected from decomposing rapidly, as they would do when exposed to air. 'Tollund Man' is the name given to a human body from the early Iron Age period, some 2,400 years ago, discovered in a Danish peatbog in 1950. The study of pollen grains and other plant remains preserved in the same peatland has enabled scientists to build up a detailed picture of the vegetation and climate at the time Tollund Man was alive.

Cultural values...

At El Rocío, a small town on the edge of the internationally important Doñana wetlands of Andalusia, south-west Spain, traditional religious celebrations held annually include a procession through the wetlands that now constitute Doñana National Park.

The world-famous Kakadu National Park and Ramsar Site in Australia's Northern Territory has been home to Aboriginal people for some 50,000 years, during which land and culture have become inextricably intertwined. In recent years, closer collaboration between traditional land-management techniques and western science have seen traditional burning practices used to restore a more mixed vegetation structure – and hence greater biodiversity – to the Boggy Plain wetlands of Kakadu, providing valuable insights for application elsewhere in the park.

The Ramsar Convention's Culture & Wetlands Working Group has described four main components of the overall cultural values of wetlands, some or all of which may be applicable to any individual wetland site:

- **Habitation** – cultural landscapes, cultural heritage sites, archaeological importance, contemporary settlements and infrastructure;
- **Primary uses of wetland resources** – agriculture, livestock rearing, fishing and aquaculture, harvesting of wood, water use, mining/extraction of minerals and aggregates, harvesting of medicinal plants;
- **Secondary uses of wetland resources** – culinary use of wetland plants and animals, crafting of products and tools, construction of traditional buildings, tourism and recreation;
- **Knowledge, belief systems and social practices** – scientific research, education, and traditional knowledge – including languages/dialects and oral traditions, spirituality and belief systems, artistic expression.

“Humanity’s relationship to the natural environment has so far been seen predominantly in biophysical terms; but there is now a growing recognition that societies themselves have created elaborate processes for protecting and managing their resources.”

Ramsar guidance document on Culture and Wetlands

For many indigenous cultures in South Africa, wetland areas represent a transition between the material and the spiritual world and are of great significance as ancestral sites. Health and well-being traditionally depend strongly on respect for one's ancestors, who can bestow both good and bad fortune. At Mbongolwane wetland, about 80 km north of Durban in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, the local people speak with respect of *Nkanyamba*, the many-headed serpent who is the ancestral guardian of their wetland. Failure to respect the wetland and the serpent is said to result in a catastrophic storm. This mythical serpent appears in many southern African cultures and beautiful representations may be seen in San rock art.

It is next to impossible to assign directly a conventional ‘price tag’ to some of the cultural values of wetlands, particularly those of intrinsic spiritual, religious or artistic importance. In such cases, secondary indicators can be helpful – for example, 230,000 visitors per year spent nearly 800,000 nights annually (2005–2007 averages) in the Kakadu and Arnhem Land region of Australia's Northern Territory. Most of these visitors are drawn in large part by the region's spiritual and religious significance in Aboriginal culture.

Other cultural values lend themselves more readily to classical economic assessment. Particular among them are wetland-based recreation and tourism. Though ‘cultural values’ in a broad sense, recreation and tourism are treated separately in Factsheet 9, which covers activities such as sport fishing and shooting.



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