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Introductory Chapter: Wetlands – Characteristics, Functions, and Values

Murat Eyvaz and Ahmed Albahnasawi

1. Introduction

Wetlands are among the most productive and diverse ecosystems on Earth, supplying a wide range of ecological, social, and economic benefits to humanity [1, 2]. They are defined as areas where the water table is at or near the surface or where the land is covered by water for at least part of the year, resulting in unique hydrological, biogeochemical, and ecological processes [3]. In this chapter, we will provide an overview of the key characteristics, functions, and values of wetlands, as well as their global distribution, threats, and conservation and management challenges.

This book provides a comprehensive overview of wetlands, covering their characteristics, functions, values, threats, and management. It is intended for a broad audience, including students, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, who are interested in understanding and addressing the challenges and opportunities associated with wetlands. The book is organized into several parts, each of which focuses on a specific aspect of wetlands, such as their physical and biotic components, their role in global and local environmental issues, and their management and restoration strategies.

2. Characteristics of wetlands

Wetlands can be found in a variety of settings, including rivers and lakes, coastal areas, and inland depressions [2]. They are characterized by the presence of water-loving plants or hydrophytes, which have adapted to the wetland environment by developing specialized features, such as floating leaves, waterlogged stems, and oxygen transport systems [3]. These plants supply a variety of ecosystem services, such as nutrient cycling, carbon sequestration, and habitat for wildlife [1].

Wetlands are also distinguished by their hydric soils, which are characterized by saturation or flooding for extended periods and the development of anaerobic conditions that favor the growth of microorganisms, such as bacteria and fungi, that are responsible for decomposing organic matter [2]. These soils are important for regulating the water balance of wetlands, as they can store and release water over time, and also for supporting the growth of wetland vegetation [3].

Another important characteristic of wetlands is their high biodiversity, as they provide habitat for a wide range of plant and animal species, many of which are adapted to the unique wetland environment [4]. Wetlands also serve as important

stopovers and breeding sites for migratory birds, such as ducks, geese, and shorebirds, which rely on wetland habitats for food and shelter during their journeys [1].

3. Functions and values of wetlands

Wetlands provide a range of important functions and values to society, including water purification, flood control, carbon sequestration, and recreation [1, 2]. These ecosystem services are essential for human well-being and are often undervalued or overlooked in decision-making processes [4].

Water purification is one of the most important functions of wetlands, as they are able to remove pollutants from water through a variety of physical, chemical, and biological processes [2]. Wetlands act as natural filters, removing sediments, nutrients, and contaminants from water as it flows through them, and also provide a habitat for microorganisms that break down pollutants and improve water quality [3].

Flood control is another important function of wetlands, as they can store and release water over time, reducing the risk of floods downstream. Wetlands act as natural sponges, absorbing excess water during storms and releasing it slowly over time, thereby reducing peak flows and mitigating flood damage [2].

Carbon sequestration is also a vital function of wetlands, as they can store large amounts of carbon in their soils and vegetation [1]. Wetlands are among the most efficient natural carbon sinks, storing up to 30% of the world's soil carbon, despite covering only about 6% of the Earth's land surface [2]. The carbon stored in wetlands is not only important for mitigating climate change but also for maintaining the health and productivity of wetland ecosystems.

In addition to their ecological functions, wetlands also provide a range of social and economic values to society. For example, wetlands are important for recreational activities, such as birdwatching, fishing, and hunting, which generate significant economic benefits for local communities [1]. Wetlands also provide important cultural and spiritual values to indigenous and local communities, who rely on wetlands for subsistence, medicine, and cultural practices [2].

4. Global distribution of wetlands

Wetlands are found all over the world, from the Arctic tundra to the tropics, and from the coasts to the inland areas [3]. However, the distribution of wetlands varies depending on climate, topography, and other environmental factors [4]. The largest wetland complexes are found in the tropics and subtropics, where high rainfall and seasonal flooding create ideal conditions for wetland formation [2].

According to the Ramsar Convention, an international treaty for the conservation and wise use of wetlands, there are over 2300 designated wetland sites around the world, covering an area of over 2.5 million square kilometers (Ramsar [5]). These sites are recognized for their ecological importance and are protected under the convention.

5. Threats to wetlands

Despite their ecological, social, and economic values, wetlands are under threat from a range of human activities, such as land conversion, drainage, pollution, and

climate change [1]. Wetland loss and degradation are particularly acute in developing countries, where population growth, poverty, and agricultural expansion are driving the conversion of wetlands for other uses [2].

According to a report by the Ramsar Convention, the world has lost over 35% of its wetlands since the 1970s, with some regions, such as Asia and Europe, experiencing even higher rates of loss (Ramsar [5]). The loss of wetlands has significant ecological and socioeconomic consequences, such as the loss of habitat for wildlife, the reduction of water quality and availability, and the loss of cultural and spiritual values.

6. Conservation and management of wetlands

Conserving and managing wetlands is essential for ensuring their continued provision of ecosystem services and benefits to humanity. There is a range of approaches and tools for wetland conservation and management, including protected areas, restoration, and sustainable use [3].

Protected areas, such as national parks and wildlife reserves, are important for safeguarding wetland ecosystems and their biodiversity. These areas provide legal protection and management frameworks that help prevent the conversion and degradation of wetlands [2].

Wetland restoration is also an important strategy for reversing wetland loss and degradation. Restoration involves the rehabilitation of degraded or destroyed wetlands, through measures such as revegetation, reintroduction of native species, and removal of invasive species [1]. Restoration can help to increase the ecological functioning of wetlands, such as their ability to purify water, store carbon, and provide habitat for wildlife.

Sustainable use of wetlands is another important approach to their conservation and management. This involves balancing the needs of wetland-dependent communities and economic activities with the need to protect the ecological integrity of wetlands [2]. Examples of sustainable use include traditional fishing practices, ecotourism, and sustainable agriculture practices.

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the importance of integrating traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) into wetland conservation and management [6]. TEK refers to the knowledge, practices, and beliefs of indigenous and local communities about their environment and natural resources. Integrating TEK can help to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of wetland conservation and management by promoting community participation, enhancing the cultural and spiritual values of wetlands, and improving the management of natural resources [6].

7. Conclusion

Wetlands are unique and valuable ecosystems that provide a wide range of ecological, social, and economic services and benefits to humanity. However, wetlands are under threat from a range of human activities, such as land conversion, pollution, and climate change, which are leading to their loss and degradation. Conserving and managing wetlands is essential for ensuring their continued provision of ecosystem services and benefits to humanity. There is a range of approaches and tools for wetland conservation and management, including protected areas, restoration, sustainable use, and integration of traditional ecological knowledge.

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Author details

Murat Eyvaz* and Ahmed Albahnasawi
Department of Environmental Engineering, Gebze Technical University, Kocaeli,
Turkey

*Address all correspondence to: meyvaz@gtu.edu.tr

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