



Rights of Wetlands Toolkit

A guide for local and national government to recognise a wetland's rights

Why do we need a new way to protect wetlands?

Wetlands are vital for life.

Wetlands cover around 13% of the Earth's land surface, but they play a crucial role for life on Earth by providing habitat, water, and food to many species.

40% of all known plant and animal species live or breed in wetlands, which is a significant proportion of global biodiversity, with freshwater wetlands alone providing habitat for an estimated 12% of all vertebrate and invertebrate species.



Through the [Ramsar Convention on Wetlands](#), 172 countries recognise the key importance of wetlands and have committed themselves to their conservation and restoration. Community local action to conserve wetlands has also been undertaken in many parts of the world. Although the Convention was signed in the early 1970s and much has been achieved through wetland conservation at global, national, and local levels, it has not been enough.

At least 22% of all wetlands have been lost since 1970, and of the remaining wetlands, more than one-fifth are in poor condition. This has resulted in a catastrophic loss in biodiversity. For example, 83% of populations of freshwater vertebrate wetland species have declined since 1970, with 25% of wetland species facing extinction.

Wetlands store around 30% of the world's soil carbon, but if degraded, can release a disproportionate amount of carbon to the atmosphere, adding to global heating.

What are Wetlands?

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (Article 1.1) defines wetlands as

“areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six metres.”

This definition includes rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, vegetated wetlands, peatlands, forested wetlands/swamps including mangroves, marshes (both salt and fresh), permafrost wetlands, underground areas, sea grass beds, coral reefs, and human-made wetlands.

Despite this knowledge, wetlands continue to be destroyed and degraded, contributing to the ongoing acceleration of climate change and biodiversity declines. Existing conservation approaches are not enough; transformative change is needed.

A deeper shift in thinking and practice is required to break the ongoing wetland loss and degradation.



To learn more: www.rightsofwetlands.org

Rights of Nature is transformative as it embeds human societies within ecosystems

What are Rights of Wetlands?

Rights of Nature is a transformative approach that recognises the inherent rights of nature to exist and flourish rather than viewing nature as property. It recognizes that people are part of nature, not separate and superior, and that all living beings are interconnected. It shifts the recognition of rights from a human-centric one to an eco-centric one. Rights are recognised legally through national or local laws, but also through community and individual action.

Many Rights of Nature declarations have been developed to recognise the key characteristics of specific ecosystems or species. Rights of Wetlands recognises traditional ecological (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous), scientific, and legal knowledge to articulate the inherent characteristics of what makes a healthy wetland. These eight rights are shown below. All eight rights are necessary and are interconnected. Seven of the rights support the fundamental right to exist.



Rights of Wetlands moves us away from a world view that places people outside of and above Nature

How can Rights of Wetlands be implemented?

Over 200 initiatives worldwide recognise the rights of specific wetland types and/or their species ([ecojurisprudence.org](https://www.ecojurisprudence.org)). Broadly, there are three different pathways for the implementation of Rights of Wetlands.

Pathway 1 – Legal

Rights of Wetlands can be recognised through intergovernmental agreements, national and local laws, policies, and guidelines.

Intergovernmental agreements

This can be through the adoption of a resolution by intergovernmental conventions such as the Convention on Wetlands and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

In 2024, Sri Lanka raised the issue of Rights of Nature in Wetlands with the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands Standing Committee, calling on Contracting Parties to recognise wetland rights and promote innovative practices that recognise the intrinsic value of living ecosystems.

In 2025, at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, a motion explicitly mentioning rights of wetlands was adopted as IUCN Resolution 8.066: Living in harmony with rivers through the rights of nature and ecocentric law (<https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/52716>).

National and local law

Rights of Nature has been included at the constitutional level by Ecuador in 2008, in the Mother Earth and Integral Development to Live Well Law in 2012 in Bolivia and in the Rights of Nature Law 287 in 2022 in Panama.

There are also many examples of wetlands being included in local laws and guidance such as the 'District Council Charter: Rights of the River Ouse' approved in Lewes, UK in 2025 and the Mar Manor Lagoon Act in Spain in 2024.



Pathway 2 – Communities that want to live as nature

Living as nature is when humans recognise they are not separate from nature but are an interconnected part of nature.

Communities and individuals can adopt approaches and actions that allow them to live as nature and align their actions with Rights of Wetlands.

In the Tana River and Lamu Counties, Kenya, communities assessed their current activities against a Rights of Wetlands approach and identified their mangrove restoration activities as those that support the Rights of Wetlands.

In Colombo, Sri Lanka, communities recognised that waste collection and invasive species control would allow their communities to respect the Rights of Wetlands.

Communities in Pampas del Yacuma, Bolivia, identified water management as the key activity that should respect the Rights of Wetlands whilst balancing the needs of communities and agriculture. The approach helped communities frame water management not only as a technical or agricultural issue, but as a shared governance concern linked to wetland health, livelihoods, biodiversity and long-term resilience.

In the Rupununi Wetlands of Guyana, fire management and sustainable local plans are allowing communities to respect the Rights of Wetlands

A Rights of Wetlands approach is concerned with legal recognition, management, and practical action

How can Rights of Wetlands be implemented?

Pathway 3 – Communities living as nature

The worldviews of many Indigenous peoples and local communities already recognise the interconnections and familial bonds between humans, non-humans, and the spiritual, and as a result, their governance, local plans and actions align with the Rights of Wetlands. In many cases, these communities are calling for others to recognise that they live as nature and support them in protecting their way of life and therefore nature.

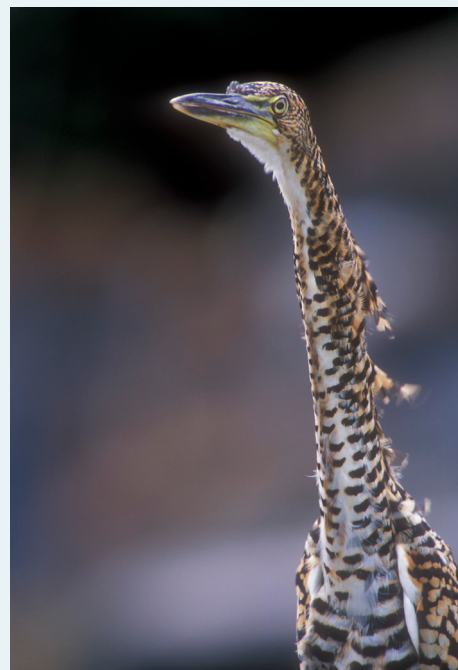
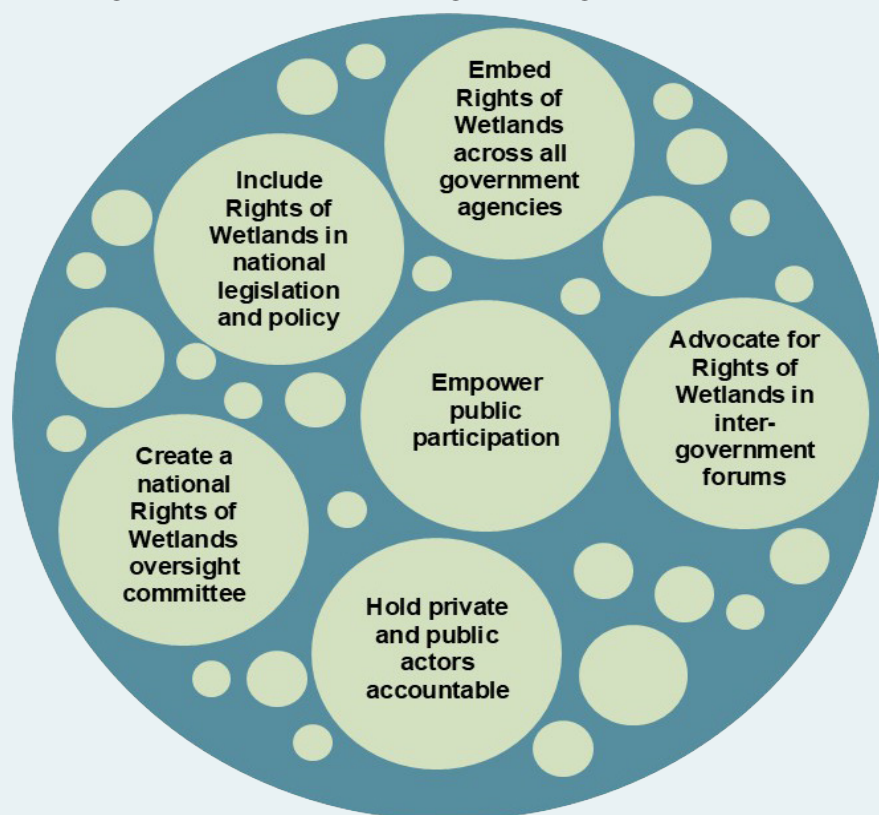
For example, the Kichwa Original People of Sarayaku, Ecuador, have developed the 'Kawsak Sacha Declaration – Living Forest Living Being and Conscious Subject of Law' which sets out their biocultural /social-ecological rights and cosmivision of themselves and the living forest within their territory in the Ecuadorian Amazon. They have reached out to collaborate with others to support their way of life, which is expressed through a declaration they have signed with scientists entitled ['Transforming perspectives on living beings – a convergence of Kawsak Sacha and contemporary science'](#).



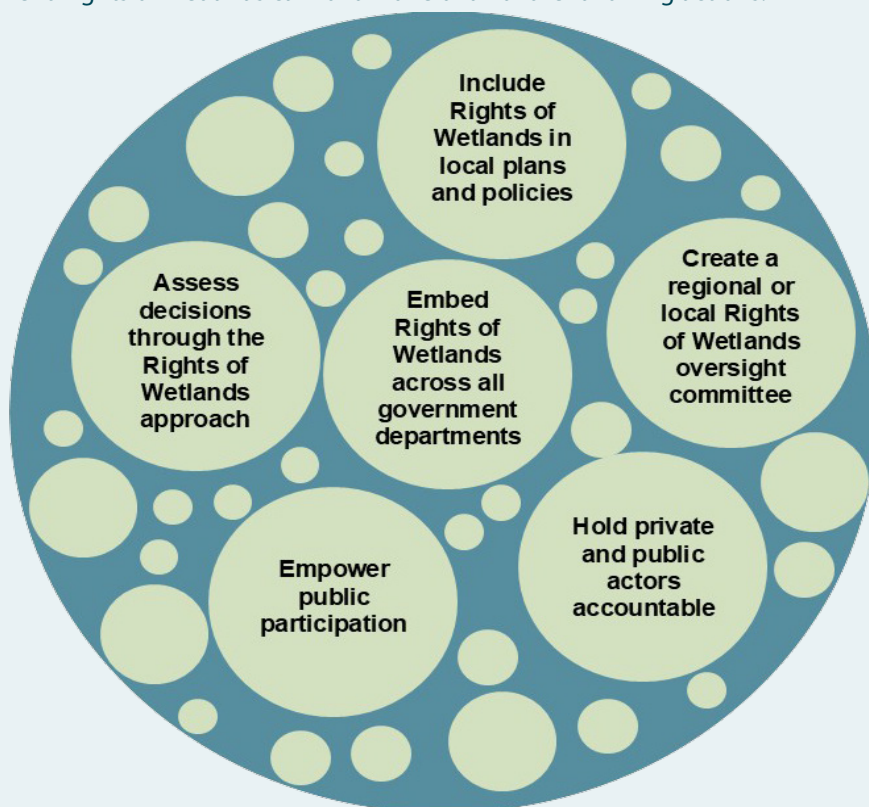
A Rights of Wetlands approach allows governments to safeguard the future for all nature including people

What actions can governments take?

National governments that wish to recognise the Rights of Wetlands can follow one or all of these actions.



Regional or local governments that wish to implement Rights of Wetlands can follow one or all of the following actions.



Promote local, national and intergovernmental recognition of Rights of Wetlands

Include Rights of Wetlands in national legislation and policy

Embed Rights of Wetlands across law, policy and regulation by developing new specific Rights of Nature and Rights of Wetlands legislation and amending existing legislation to include Rights of Wetlands terms. Examples of legislation that has included Rights of Nature are as follows:

- Constitution - in 2008 Ecuador recognised the Rights of Nature in its national constitution which has enabled the defence of nature's rights in multiple court cases involving specific river and forest ecosystems.
- National law – in 2010 Bolivia passed a national law that recognised the rights of Mother Earth (and all its components, including human communities) and in 2022 Panama passed a national law, Rights of Nature Law (Law 287), that recognizes ecosystems as subjects of legal rights—granting nature the right to exist, persist, regenerate, and be restored, and granting any Panamanian citizen the legal standing to defend these rights in court.
- Specific acts – in 2017 the Aotearoa/New Zealand government gave legal rights of personhood to the Whanganui River in an agreement with the Māori iwi and in 2022 Spain granted legal personhood to the Mar Menor lagoon and its watershed establishing its right to exist, protection from pollution and degradation, right to conservation of its native biodiversity and right to restoration of its ecosystem.

Hold private and public actors accountable for wetland damage

Strengthen and implement existing environmental and Rights of Nature legislation to ensure that damage to any wetland, by private or public actors, is strictly enforced and prosecuted. Acting immediately protects local ecosystems from further degradation and encourages others to avoid harm.



Advocate for Rights of Wetlands in intergovernmental forums

Rights Promote Rights of Nature and a Rights of Wetlands approach at intergovernmental forums through:

- Production of Rights of Wetlands policy papers
- Holding side events and parallel forums on Rights of Wetlands
- Promotion of Rights of Wetlands at regional platforms
- Building state coalitions around Rights of Nature
- Submission of Rights of Nature / Rights of Wetlands resolutions and declarations or inclusion of supportive statements within other resolutions to conventions such as:
 - Convention on Wetlands
 - United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
 - Convention on Biological Diversity
 - The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species
 - The Convention on Migratory Species

Create Rights of Wetlands oversight committees

Establish a national Rights of Wetlands oversight committee either alongside or incorporated as a function within the National Wetland Committee. At a local level, oversight committees should also be established to examine all local decisions that may relate to wetland rights. Committees should be independent of government so they can evaluate both policy development and implementation to ensure accountability, enforce compliance and protect the interests and rights of wetlands.

Take action to embed and implement Rights of Wetlands across government

Embed Rights of Wetlands across all government departments

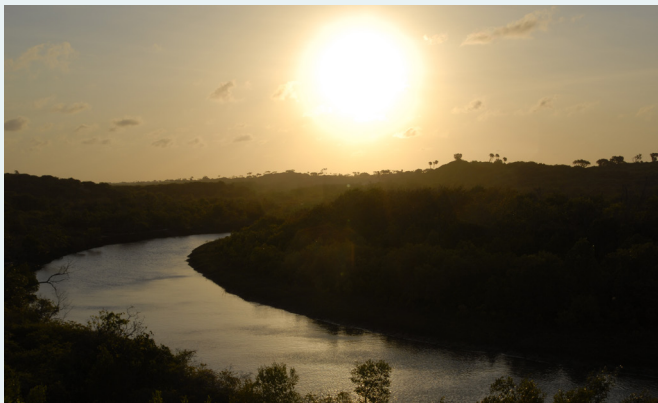
Embed Rights of Wetlands across law, policy, regulation, public administration, public and private decision-making, and economic and financial systems so all government departments are included. This could include reviewing and amending:

- Planning and development
- Environmental regulation and permitting
- Water resource management
- Wetland governance
- Agricultural, fisheries, forestry and land management
- Energy, transport, infrastructure and industrial development
- Any other matter that may affect wetlands

Include Rights of Wetlands in local policies and plans

At a local level Rights of Wetlands can be included within policies and plans delivered by local authorities. Declarations and charters can be developed to recognise the rights of specific wetland ecosystems. However, national policy can often override any local declarations, charters and plans. To ensure maximum impact, local governments should examine where they can intervene to respect the Rights of Wetlands. This may be through some of the following:

- Planning decisions
- Waste management
- Transport
- Education
- Health and social care
- Local conservation areas



Empower public participation

Public awareness raising and participation in decision-making are essential components of embedding and delivering Rights of Wetlands. This can be achieved through:

- Publishing wetland information and data in accessible forms
- Undertaking engagement activities related to Rights of Wetlands
- Reduce barriers to participation and ensure marginalised and underrepresented people and communities are supported to actively participate in decision-making
- Promote education, training and capacity building using the resources available at www.rightsofwetlands.org

Resources include:

- Training courses on:
 1. Introduction to Wetlands
 2. Wetland Solutions
 3. Rights of Nature and Rights of Wetlands
 4. Wetland Management Planning
 5. Social & Environmental Rights
 6. Traditional Knowledge and Conservation
- Rights of Wetlands Guide
- Quick Guides (in multiple languages)
- Rights of Wetlands Animation
- Rights of Wetlands Publications

A Rights of Wetlands assessment helps governments understand how their decisions can impact wetlands

Assess decisions through a Rights of Wetlands approach

You can use the following steps to assess whether proposed developments, decisions related to transport, waste management, health, agriculture, forestry etc. will have a negative impact on a wetland or not and ultimately impact the wetland's right to exist.

Step 1 - Determine which wetlands will be impacted by a proposed development, infrastructure, land use or planning decision. It is important to determine the hydrological catchment of the wetland as the proposed impact might not be occurring actually in the wetland but upstream of the wetland.

Step 2 - Assess each proposed intervention using the list of questions below:

1. Is the proposed intervention capable of maintaining the existence of the wetland?
2. Is the proposed intervention capable of maintaining the landform of the wetland?
3. Is the proposed intervention capable of maintaining the natural water movement and connections of the wetland?
4. Does the proposed intervention avoid an adverse effect on the climate (e.g. local microclimates) of the wetland?
5. Is the proposed intervention capable of maintaining all native species including humans?
6. Is the proposed intervention capable of maintaining all natural processes?
7. Is the proposed intervention capable of maintaining the natural water, air and soil quality?
8. Does the proposed intervention allow natural wetland regeneration?



To learn more: www.rightsofwetlands.org



For some activities, the answer to one of these questions is likely to be no. However, the best developments, land use activities, planning decisions or government interventions are those where the majority of answers to these questions are yes. If all questions are answered yes, then the activity is good for the local population and nature, and follows a Rights of Wetlands approach to living in harmony with nature.

If the answer to any of these questions is no then can the proposed intervention be adjusted so that the answer then becomes yes.

Step 3 - Share the results of the assessment with the local community and discuss the potential impact on the wetland.

Step 4 - Work with the organisations proposing the intervention, other government departments and the local community to ensure any proposed intervention respects the inherent rights of the wetland.

Where to get help

Rights of Wetlands Website (www.rightsofwetlands.org): Short animation explaining Rights of Wetlands, downloadable Rights of Wetlands Quick Guides, full-length Guide, Questions about Rights of Wetlands, Universal Declaration of the Rights of Wetlands, community participatory videos about Rights of Wetlands, journal articles, and more.

Ecojurisprudence Monitor (<https://ecojurisprudence.org/?map-style=political>): Website that tracks Rights of Nature globally

United Nations Dept. of Economic & Social Affairs Sustainable Development (<https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/operationalization-universal-declaration-rights-wetlands>) statement about operationalization of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Wetlands

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