



Rights of Wetlands Toolkit

A guide for communities 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 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.



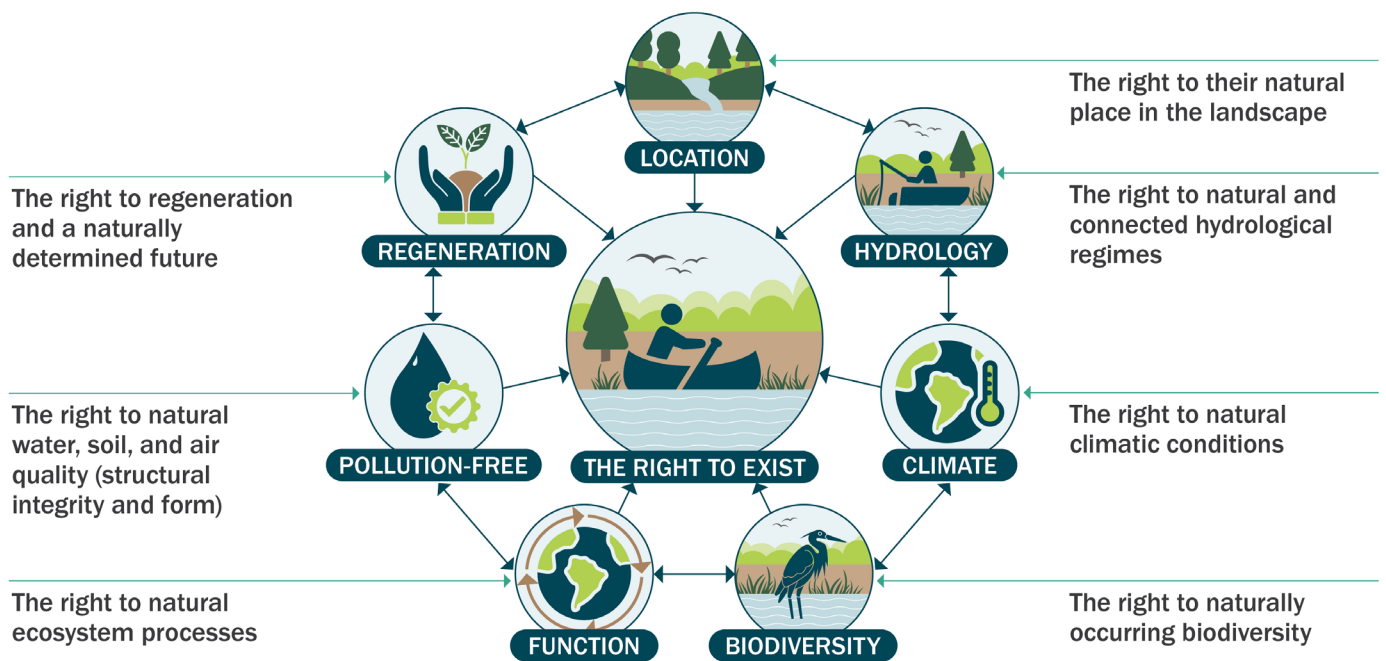
To learn more: www.rightsofwetlands.org

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). 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.

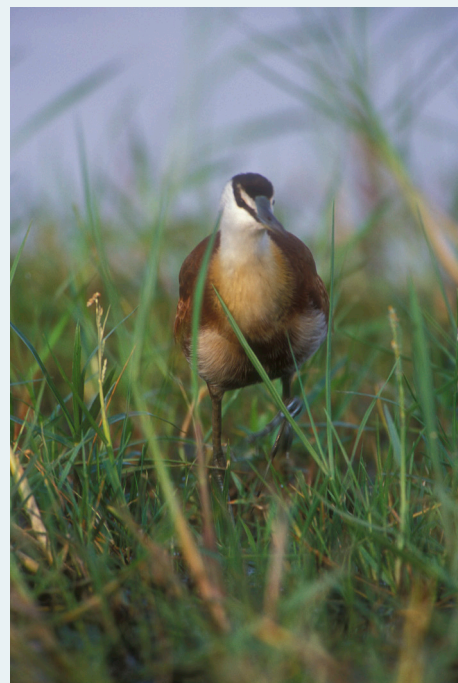
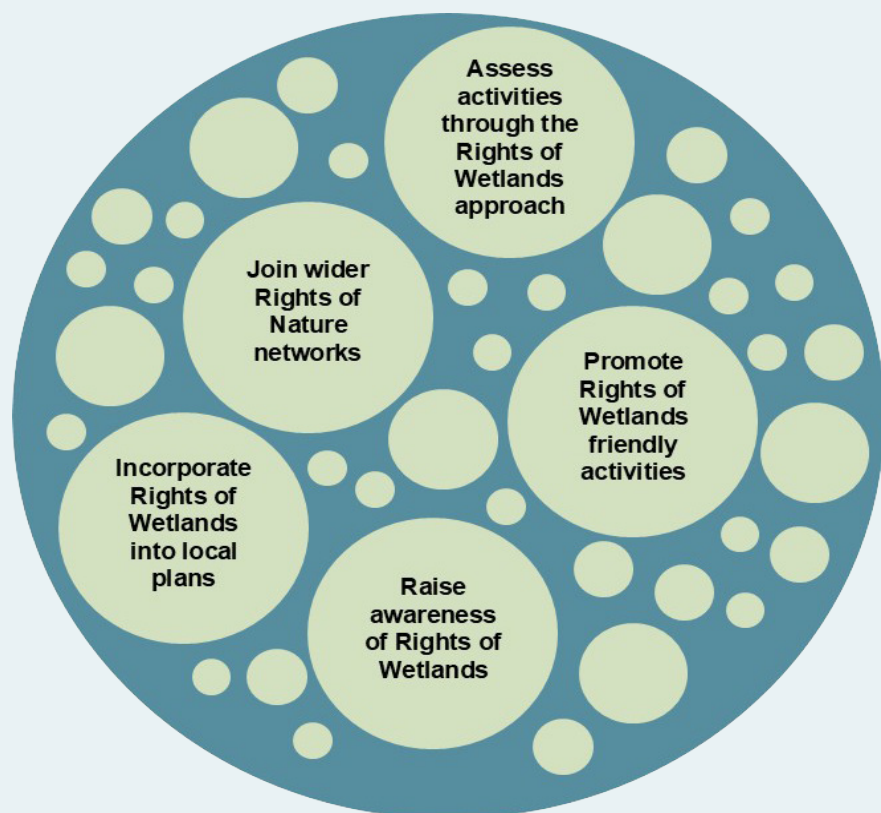
Communities in Pampas del Yacuma, Bolivia, identified water management as the key activity that should respect the Rights of Wetlands whilst balancing the needs of communities and agriculture. The approach helped communities frame water management not only as a technical or agricultural issue, but as 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

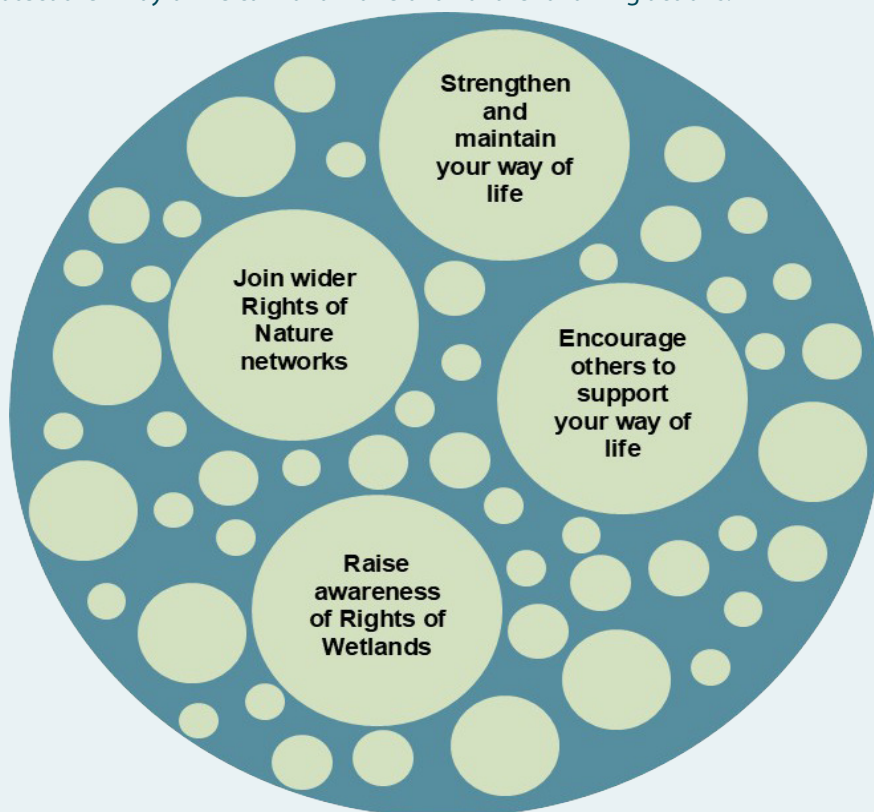
A Rights of Wetlands approach allows communities to safeguard the future for all nature including people

What actions can communities take?

Communities and individuals who want to live as nature can follow one or all of these actions.



Communities living as nature and who want to protect their way of life can follow one or all of the following actions.



A Rights of Wetlands assessment helps communities understand how their activities can impact a wetland

Assess activities through a Rights of Wetlands approach

You can use the following steps to assess whether an activity, initiative or project is good for the community, a wetland and its species, including humans.

Step 1 - Do the Rights of Wetlands online training course at www.rightsofwetlands.org so you can facilitate discussions within your community.

Step 2 - Discuss in your community about the elements of your wetland in terms of:

- Landform - lake, river, pond, coast, estuary or peatland
- Water connections and natural water fluctuations
- Habitats and land uses - grassland, marsh, wet woodland, grazing fields, crops etc.
- Typical native animals and plants

It is useful to draw a map of your wetland and community and identify where different elements are. For example, your wetland may have different major landforms such as a river and ponds and within those there might be different habitats and land uses such as grasslands, wet woodlands, marsh areas and rice fields. Once you have the major landforms and habitats drawn then you can identify how water moves in and out of the different landforms and the typical animals and plants found there.

Step 3 - Identify the challenges facing your community and wetland. These can be internal challenges such as lack of livelihoods, water availability, overfishing or agricultural pollution within the community or external challenges such as increased flooding, catchment agricultural expansion, invasive species and mining.



Step 4 - List the activities, initiatives or projects your community are involved in or plan to do that are designed to address those challenges.

Step 5 - Assess each activity, initiative or project using the list of questions below:

1. Does the community need it?
2. Does the community do it?
3. Does the community control decision-making about the activity?
4. Do the community and nature both benefit from it?
5. Is the activity fair to all native species including humans?
6. Is the activity one that does not depend on external support over the longer term?
7. Is the activity capable of maintaining the existence of the wetland?
8. Is the activity capable of maintaining the landform of the wetland?
9. Is the activity capable of maintaining the natural water movement and connections of the wetland?
10. Does the activity avoid an adverse effect on the climate (e.g. local microclimates) of the wetland?
11. Is the activity capable of maintaining all native species including humans?
12. Is the activity capable of maintaining all natural processes?
13. Is the activity capable of maintaining the natural water, air and soil quality?
14. Does the activity allow natural wetland regeneration?

For some activities, the answer to one of these questions is likely to be no. However, the best activities for a community and nature 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 community and nature and follows a Rights of Wetlands approach to living in harmony with nature.

Promote and raise awareness of Rights of Wetlands to influence local plans and decisions

Promote Rights of Wetlands friendly activities

Community activities that follow a Rights of Wetlands approach should be promoted to the wider community and prioritised in terms of funding and resourcing above activities that do not.

Activities that do not follow a Rights of Wetlands approach should be changed to follow one. For example, rice cultivation that uses fertilisers and pesticides which alter the natural water quality of the wetland and cause unsustainable water abstraction that alters the natural water movement and connections of the wetland should be changed. Adopting an organic farming approach so the wetland's natural water quality is maintained and adopting water management that works with natural flooding and drought cycles so that natural water movement and connections of the wetland are maintained would result in the activity following a Rights of Wetlands approach.

Incorporate Rights of Wetlands in local plans

If your community is developing or has developed a local plan, then advocate to include Rights of Wetlands within it. Rights of Wetlands assessments can be used as part of planning reviews and can be incorporated into planning principles.

If your local plan is controlled by local or national government, then connect and engage with local authorities and decision-makers who could promote the Rights of Wetlands in government decision-making processes.

Rights of Wetlands assessments can also help communities and decision-makers understand how local planning choices related to water use, productive activities, landscape management, restoration and biodiversity conservation are interconnected. This can support more balanced planning that considers both community needs and the long-term wetland health.

Join wider Rights of Nature networks

Rights of Nature is a growing movement around the world with many communities and local and national governments embedding Rights of Nature into legislation, policies and plans. Connecting with other communities will provide inspiration for your activities and will help others through the sharing of your experiences.



Raise awareness of Rights of Wetlands

Using the resources available at www.rightsofwetlands.org, build capacity and awareness about Rights of Wetlands in your community. Resources available 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

Document and share best practice in terms of Rights of Wetlands and the activities of your community through storytelling and participatory video and inspire other communities to adopt a Rights of Wetlands approach. More information and a training course on participatory techniques can be found here: www.rightsofwetlands.org

Connect with local decision-makers and make them aware of Rights of Wetlands and build their capacity to integrate Rights of Wetlands into decision-making.

Take action to strengthen and maintain ways of life that respect Rights of Wetlands

Strengthen and maintain your way of life

Document your way of life, how your worldview and belief system is connected to nature and how decision-making within your community respects the Rights of Wetlands. Share this widely within, particularly with the youth, and external to your community.

If they are not in place then advocate to the government for land and resource rights for your territory so your community can shape your future.

Use traditional ecological knowledge and science to document and monitor the water, soil, landforms, habitats, ecosystem processes and species within your territory so that the eight Rights of Wetlands can be maintained. This information can also be used in court cases to help defend your territory from exploitation.

Encourage others to support your way of life

Develop a model that demonstrates your way of life that can be shared with other communities to help them live as nature and to encourage them to support your way of life within government decision-making.

Use techniques, such as participatory video, to record and share your way of life, the governance within your community and how you respect the Rights of Wetlands. By sharing your experience, advocate for others to respect and support your way of life.

Connect and engage with local decision-makers to promote your way of life and identify advocates that will support you.



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

To learn more: www.rightsofwetlands.org

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