

## RIGHTS OF WETLANDS ON THE WORLD STAGE: RECENT ACTIVITIES

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### ABSTRACT

A Rights of Wetlands framing invites society to recognize wetlands not only as ecosystems that provide benefits, but as living systems with intrinsic value and rights, briefly summarized as the rights to exist, thrive/flourish, regenerate, and participate in Earth's ongoing processes—in other words, to sustain ecological integrity and connectedness to the greater whole of nature. Wetland science can play a key role in demonstrating fulfillment of our responsibilities to respect these rights, including identifying effective conservation, restoration, and management pathways, and providing ecological data in support of diverse ways of knowing. Many leaders in the wider Rights of Nature movement are now valuing contributions of science and scientists to Rights of Nature, and the particularly significant role of Rights of Wetlands, including identification of 181 Rights of Wetlands initiatives in 27 countries. While the first seven years of Rights of Wetlands development have largely been foundational, work in the coming decade will need to focus on supporting implementation on the ground, widening connections to broader society and the larger Rights of Nature movement (including bringing attention to the central role that Rights of Wetlands plays in the broader movement), and increasing collaboration with holders of diverse ways of knowing, including ancestral/traditional knowledges.

## SCIENCE IN SUPPORT OF RIGHTS OF NATURE/WETLANDS

The recent Rights of Nature movement has been led largely by Indigenous peoples, local communities, attorneys, and rights activists, as outlined by Biggs and Horinek (2025) and Kauffman and Martin (2021). However, as documented by *Inside Climate News* journalist Katie Surma (2025a, 2025b), a small but growing number of scientists (including Society of Wetland Scientists [SWS] Rights of Wetlands Section and the Rights of Wetlands Initiative members<sup>13</sup>) have developed approaches to Rights of Nature/ Rights of Wetlands that integrate scientific principles and data into nature rights thinking and practices. The Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (CELDF) has actively supported our efforts to promote Rights of Wetlands and has recognized the importance of the involvement of scientists ever since the 2020 publication of the proposed *Declaration of the Rights of Wetlands* (Davies et al. 2020). Over the past year, leading Rights of Nature academics such as Craig Kauffman and Pam Martin, Rights of Nature organizations such as the Earth Law Center, and various Rights of Rivers groups have joined CELDF in recognizing the value and importance of the role of science and scientists in advancing Rights of Nature. For instance, Kauffman has observed that when scientific data is presented in Rights of Nature court cases, the cases are more likely to win (personal communication 2025), and that societies that value science may understand and accept Rights of Nature as a tool for achieving greater nature conservation and restoration success when scientific principles and data support Rights of Nature (Surma 2025a, 2025b). This growing interest from the broader Rights of Nature community led to some of the key leaders giving presentations in the March 4, 2026, Advancing Rights

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13 The Rights of Wetlands Initiative is a group that includes both SWS Rights of Wetlands Section members and people with wetlands, ecological restoration, and/or Rights of Nature expertise.

of Wetlands online conference, which is available for viewing at <https://vimeo.com/1171079948?share=copy>. In other words, science and scientists can help legitimize Rights of Nature as an effective nature conservation and restoration tool.

One of the primary reasons for developing the *Declaration of the Rights of Wetlands* was to ensure that articulation of wetlands' rights is based on sound wetland science, and also that the rights are scientifically appropriate for all wetland types. If nature rights are based in sound ecological science, it stands to reason that implementation of those rights, and their defense in court, may be more successful. Also, the focus has been on clarifying the ways in which a rights-based approach complements the prevailing approaches on conserving wetlands for benefits provided to society, or for nurturing biodiversity as a web of life.

As part of the growing interest in scientists' involvement, *Inside Climate News* journalist Surma spent several months interviewing SWS members and researching Rights of Wetlands, including shadowing Gillian Davies, Matt Simpson, and Ritesh Kumar at the July 2025 Ramsar Convention on Wetlands 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe. Her article, "The Scientists Making the Case for Nature's Rights," published on October 5, 2025 (Surma 2025a), has inspired further interest in Rights of Wetlands from the broader Rights of Nature community, thus helping us to connect with others interested in advancing Rights of Wetlands. Other SWS members interviewed for this article included Nick Davidson, Max Finlayson, and Bill Moomaw, along with José Gualinga (an historic leader of the Kichwa Original People of Sarayaku, Ecuador), Manjula Amararathna (Sri Lanka's Director of Protected Area Management), Kai Huschke (Executive Director of CELDF), Chaturangi Wickramaratne (Researcher/Freshwater Ecologist, International Water Management Institute [IMWI]), and Radheeka Jirasinha (Researcher/Freshwater and Wetland Management, IMWI).



*Inside Climate News* journalist Katie Surma interviewing IMWI researchers Chaturangi Wickramaratne and Radheeka Jirasinha.

## THE GROWTH AND SCOPE OF RIGHTS OF WETLANDS GLOBALLY

As of March 2026, there were 181 initiatives worldwide to recognize Rights for Wetlands,<sup>1</sup> either generally or for particular wetland ecosystem types or areas.<sup>2</sup> These initiatives have emerged in 27 countries spanning all world regions, as well as at the international level.<sup>3</sup> Of these 181 initiatives, 95 have been approved and adopted, 31 failed (were not adopted), and 55 others are either newly drafted or submitted and awaiting a decision. Advocates are pursuing many different legal pathways for recognizing Rights of Wetlands, including state and national constitutions, legislation, administrative policy, local government resolutions, tribal law, and court rulings, as well as citizen and Indigenous declarations.

While 20 initiatives address wetlands in general, the majority focus on specific wetland ecosystem types or areas. Rivers are by far the most common focus, with 120 Rights of Rivers initiatives. The remaining initiatives include twelve addressing lakes, ten addressing lagoons or marshes, nine addressing páramos (high altitude Andean wetlands), eight addressing estuaries, and one each for reefs and glaciers. The momentum behind Rights of Wetlands

<sup>1</sup> Initiatives are counted when there is written documentation of Rights of Wetlands. They do not necessarily have a legislated base. Examples that exist in practice, unwritten custom, or as oral tradition but lack written documentation are not included.

<sup>2</sup> All data on Rights of Wetlands initiatives comes from the [Eco Jurisprudence Monitor](#) (Kauffman et al. 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Countries with Rights of Wetlands initiatives include Argentina, Austria, Australia, Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, France, Germany, India, Italy, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and United States.

has accelerated dramatically in recent years (Figure 1). Between 2006 and 2018, the number of new initiatives typically hovered around three to five each year. However, between 2019 and 2025, there were an average of 20 new initiatives each year, with 26 initiatives emerging in 2025 alone. This rapid growth reflects the increasing recognition of Rights of Wetlands as a viable approach to wetland conservation and restoration worldwide.

### IMPLEMENTING RIGHTS OF WETLANDS

Key to demonstrating the value of Rights of Wetlands in achieving improved wetland conservation and restoration outcomes has been the *Rights of Wetlands Operationalisation for Biodiversity and Community Resilience Project* (Darwin Initiative Project), a three-year (2023-2026) project funded by the government of the United Kingdom through its Darwin Initiative program and led by Matt Simpson and Wetlands International. This project is nearing completion and has explored the implementation of the Rights of Wetlands in five developing countries (Bolivia, Ecuador, Guyana, Kenya, and Sri Lanka) at the community and national levels and built support for Rights of Wetlands in the global Ramsar Convention on Wetlands community. A follow-on project is being planned.



Community workshop in Bolivia. (Photo ©Matt Simpson)

Wetlands International, an International Organization Partner of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and a key supporter of the Rights of Wetlands, has recently adopted implementation of these rights as a key pathway for the organization’s global strategy for 2026-2035. The Rights of Wetlands website now lists 29 organizations that support the Universal Declaration.

In some countries (Bolivia and Ecuador), local communities and national governments were already practitioners of Rights of Nature prior to the start of this project. In these countries, the project’s aim is to support their ongoing efforts and to share their experiences and expertise with other countries and communities who are newer to Rights of Nature.

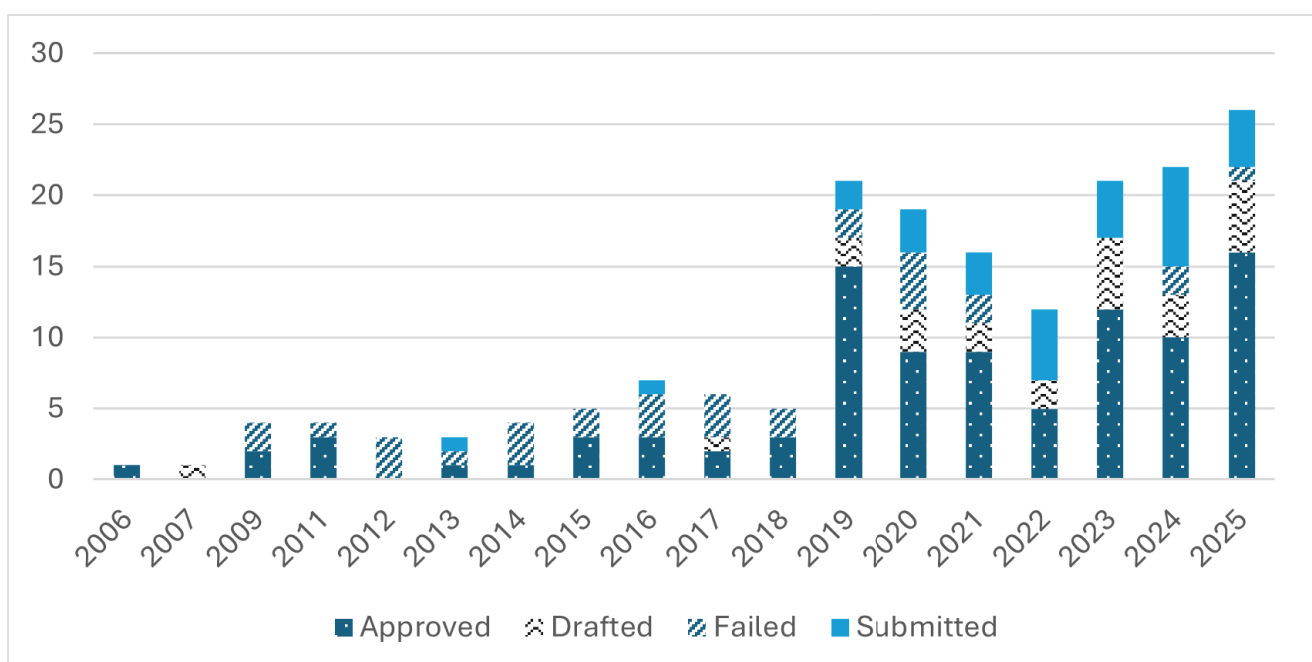


Figure 1: Number of Rights of Wetlands Initiatives Per Year

In other countries (Guyana, Kenya, and Sri Lanka), Rights of Nature has been a newer concept, with the project introducing or supporting early interest in implementing Rights of Wetlands in specific contexts. In Sri Lanka in 2023, a new president wished to initiate a national *Living Entities Policy*, one that recognizes Rights of Nature, just as the Darwin Initiative project was starting. The project team, with Matt Simpson leading, along with Sri Lankan project team members Chaturangi Wickramaratne and Priyanie Amerasinghe from the International Water Management Institute and others, was asked to advise the Sri Lankan attorney charged with drafting the *Living Entities Policy*. This policy is now being reviewed by the Sri Lankan Cabinet.

A further result of Darwin Initiative project team collaboration with members of the Sri Lankan government was the development and presentation of a *Draft Resolution on Rights of Nature in Wetlands* to the Ramsar Convention on Wetland's Standing Committee in early 2025. Many members of the Standing Committee responded favorably, but a few had questions or were opposed, so the Sri Lankans withdrew the Draft Resolution for modification and resubmission for the 2028 COP16 in Panama. At the 2025 COP15, project team members presented a side event on Rights of Nature in Wetlands for representatives of Ramsar Convention on Wetlands Contracting Party governments and others, with approximately 75 people attending, and also engaged in individual discussions to address questions.



COP15 Rights of Wetlands Side Event presenters (left to right): Manjula Amaratna, Gillian Davies, Matt Simpson, Suelma Ribeiro Silva, Julie Mulonga, Ritesh Kumar, and Chaturangi Wickramaratne

Other products from the project include extensive Rights of Wetlands educational and training materials, including infographics/quick guides, training courses, policy briefs, and community-produced videos about Rights of Wetlands. These materials can be accessed at [www.rightsofwetlands.org](http://www.rightsofwetlands.org).

Another 2025 advance for Rights of Wetlands was the development of the Rights of Wetlands Initiative logo:



### Recent Rights of Wetlands activities

Besides presenting at the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands COP15 side event, members of the Rights of Wetlands Section, along with others, have given a number of presentations and symposia at recent conferences, including:

- SWS Annual Meeting in Taipei, Taiwan, November 11–16, 2024: Rights of Wetlands & Ramsar Sections' symposium (presenters: Gillian Davies, Max Finlayson, Dan Larkin, Marinus Otte, Matt Simpson).



Rights of Wetlands Taiwan symposium presenters and attendees (left to right): Matt Simpson, Gavin Parisien, Rob McInnes, Bramley Lemine, Gillian Davies, Max Finlayson

- Rights of Wetlands Writeshop, held at Wetlands International HQ, Ede, Netherlands, March 10–13, 2025: Drafting of journal article which elaborates the rights and also the responsibilities that underpin the implementation of these rights.



*Rights of Wetlands Writeshop at Wetlands International HQ, Ede, Netherlands. Participants (left to right): Matt Simpson, Nick Davidson, Dave Pritchard, Gillian Davies, Ritesh Kumar, Kai Huschke*

- INTECOL International Wetlands Conference, Tartu, Estonia, June 29–July 4, 2025: Rights of Wetlands plenary presentation – Matt Simpson, and Rights of Wetlands symposium (presenters: Gillian Davies, Ritesh Kumar, Shona Myers, Marinus Otte, Matt Simpson).



*Matt Simpson giving plenary presentation on Rights of Wetlands at INTECOL International Wetlands Conference, Tartu, Estonia*

- SWS Annual Meeting in Providence, RI, USA, July 15–18, 2025: Rights of Wetlands plenary presentation – Gillian Davies, and Rights of Wetlands & Ramsar Sections’ symposium (presenters: Gillian Davies, Siobhan Fennessy, Bill Moomaw, Marinus Otte).

- SER World Conference in Denver, CO, USA, September 29–October 4, 2025: Rights of Wetlands presentation (presenter: Gillian Davies).
- Rights of Wetlands virtual presentation for Earth Law Center on how to integrate science into Rights of Nature, October 23, 2025 (presenter: Gillian Davies).
- Ramsar Convention on Wetlands Scientific & Technical Review Panel (STRP) meeting, November 24–27, 2025: Rights of Wetlands Section members Matt Simpson, Siobhan Fennessy, Ritesh Kumar, Max Finlayson, and Gillian Davies, along with other Rights of Wetlands partners, including Chaturangi Wickramaratne from IWMI and Sevvandi Jayakody from Wayamba University of Sri Lanka, attended the meeting and are working to advance Rights of Wetlands in the current triennium’s work plan, including in the next Global Wetland Outlook publication.



*Ramsar Convention on Wetlands Scientific & Technical Review Panel meeting participants (left to right): Gillian Davies, Siobhan Fennessy, and Matt Simpson, Gland, Switzerland*

- Advancing Rights of Wetlands International Online Meeting, March 4, 2026 with the following speakers: Katie Surma, *Inside Climate News*; Louisa Chinyavu, Wetlands International Kenya; Manjula Amararathna, Department of Wildlife Conservation, Sri Lankan Government; Patricia Gualinga, Sarayaku, Ecuador; Craig Kauffman, University of Oregon, USA; Paul

Powlesland, Lawyers for Nature, UK; and Yolanda Nogales, Practical Action, Bolivia, as well as SWS and Rights of Wetlands Initiative members Matt Simpson, Gillian Davies, and Ritesh Kumar. A recording of this online meeting is available at <https://vimeo.com/1171079948?share=copy>.

### Upcoming Rights of Wetlands activities

- MOTH (more-than-human) Festival of Ideas, London, England, May 14–16, 2026: Along with José Gualinga, Carlos Fontes, and Dave Pritchard, SWS members Matt Simpson and Gillian Davies will be presenting a paper on Rights of Wetlands and the Darwin Initiative project at this annual international event focusing on “Interdisciplinary exploration of ideas and practices for earthly flourishing” (<https://mothfestival.org/>).
- Rights of Wetlands & Ramsar Sections’ symposium at SWS Annual Meeting in New Orleans, LA, June 15–19, 2026 (presenters: Gillian Davies, Ritesh Kumar, Gavin Parisien, Matt Simpson).
- SWS Europe Chapter Annual Meeting, University of South Bohemia, České Budějovice, Czech Republic, June 29–July 2, 2026: Rights of Wetlands plenary presentation – Gillian Davies.
- Ramsar Convention on Wetlands STRP meeting, October 2026.
- Drafting and publication of several additional journal articles, including one co-authored with the Kichwa Original Peoples of Sarayaku, Ecuador.

In addition to the above-mentioned activities, SWS Rights of Wetlands Section and Rights of Wetlands Initiative members have updated the Rights of Wetlands implementation guide, created Rights of Wetlands quick guides in 10 languages, and have been drafting a few journal articles, with one submitted thus far.

### CONCLUSION

Discourse and deliberation are fundamental to growth and maturation of any concept, including

the Rights of Wetlands. Since the publication of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Wetlands in 2020, efforts have been made to not only clarify the concepts, but also to enable implementation through a dedicated project and to create a discourse on the topic by reaching out to a wider set of actors and audiences. While the first seven years have largely been foundational, work in the coming decade will need to focus on supporting implementation on ground, widening connections to broader society and the larger Rights of Nature movement, and bringing attention to the central role that Rights of Wetlands plays in the broader movement.

By grounding the Rights of Wetlands in well-established principles of wetland ecology, science can help ensure that articulated rights—such as the right to maintain ecological character, the right to natural hydrologic regimes, and the right to characteristic biodiversity—are ecologically meaningful and can be applied across diverse wetland types. This scientific grounding increases the likelihood that Rights of Wetlands will be clearly interpreted and monitored, and is more than symbolic. Using contexts based on Western law to advance rights, they must be quantifiable, able to be implemented, and defensible. Ecological science provides the tools to do this.

Looking forward, we see science supporting the Rights of Wetlands in several ways. First is continuing development of indicators and monitoring frameworks that are critical to translating rights into measurable outcomes. This could, for example, link Rights of Wetlands to national wetlands condition assessments, restoration targets, and biodiversity reporting. Second, stronger collaboration between scientists, Indigenous leaders, and legal scholars will further explore and build upon partnerships that find synergies between ancestral/traditional knowledges and science and help ensure that scientific rigor is integrated into Rights of Wetlands approaches. The holistic perspective of ecological science can help non-Indigenous audiences understand the interconnected worldview embedded in many Indigenous knowledge systems that have informed the Rights of Nature movement. Third, comparative case studies that evaluate where Rights of Wetlands are

successfully implemented will be essential to show its effectiveness.

Finally, Rights of Wetlands have not been developed to replace existing conservation tools and approaches, but to complement and broaden the overall toolkit for wetlands conservation. The rights framing invites society to recognize wetlands not only as ecosystems that provide benefits, but as living systems with intrinsic value and ecological integrity that must be maintained. Neither science nor people in general confer rights, as rights are inherent. But science can demonstrate what wetlands need to flourish and regenerate, clarify when wetland systems are disturbed, help identify pathways for restoration and effective management, and provide ecological data in support of diverse ways of knowing particularly.

SWS members interested in Rights of Wetlands are encouraged to join the Rights of Wetlands Section. To join the Rights of Wetlands Section, please contact SWS staff Justin McCarthy at [justin.mccarthy@wearemci.com](mailto:justin.mccarthy@wearemci.com). The Rights of Wetlands website <https://www.rightsofwetlands.org/> is a repository of information on the rights and materials to support implementation, including an implementation guide, and training resources.

#### **DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY**

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