



News / Explained / India adds 3 new Ramsar sites: What are wetlands, why do they matter for the environment?

# India adds 3 new Ramsar sites: What are wetlands, why do they matter for the environment?

Ramsar sites, also known as wetlands of international importance, are vitally important for the eco-system. Here is all you need to know about them, and the threats facing them

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Tamil Nadu added Nanjarayan Bird Sanctuary and Kazhuveli Bird Sanctuary, and Madhya Pradesh added Tawa Reservoir, to the list of India's Ramsar sites. (X/@byadavbjp)

*(Written by Manasvi Kalra)*

Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav announced three new Ramsar sites in [Tamil Nadu](#) and [Madhya Pradesh](#) earlier this month, taking the total of such sites in India to 85. The new additions are the Nanjarayan Bird Sanctuary and the Kazhuveli Bird Sanctuary in Tamil Nadu, and the Tawa Reservoir in Madhya Pradesh.

**Ramsar sites** are also known as wetlands of international importance. The Ramsar convention, which led to their establishment, has been a landmark in raising awareness around this key ecosystem.

### What are wetlands, and why are they important?

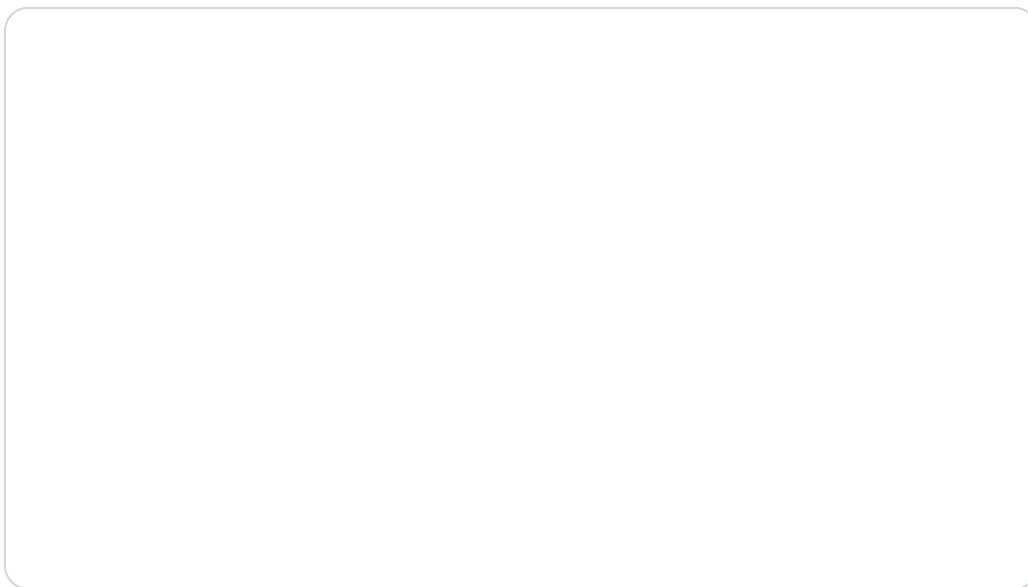
According to the convention, wetlands are defined as “areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six metres”.

**Bhupender Yadav** @byadavbjp · [Follow](#)

Triple joy!

As the Nation gears up to celebrate its Independence Day, thrilled to share that we have added three Ramsar sites to our network. This takes our tally to 85 Ramsar sites, covering an area of 1358068 ha in India.

The achievement reflects the emphasis PM Shri... [Show more](#)



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This definition includes all lakes, rivers, underground aquifers, swamps, marshes, and other major water bodies. Wetlands help regulate climate conditions through carbon sequestration, that is, carbon storage from the atmosphere. The plant communities and soil in wetlands capture carbon instead of releasing it to the atmosphere as carbon dioxide, one of the major drivers of global warming.

According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems in the world, comparable to rainforests and coral reefs. An immense variety of species of microbes, plants, insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, fish and mammals can be part of this ecosystem.



## What are Ramsar sites?

The Ramsar Convention is an intergovernmental treaty signed in 1971 in Ramsar, Iran. It encourages the protection and conservation of wetlands worldwide by designating them as such.

The selection of Ramsar sites is based on various criteria defined under the convention. For example, “A wetland should be considered internationally important if it supports plant and/or animal species at a critical stage in their life cycles, or provides refuge during adverse conditions.” It also looks at the sites’ capacity to support fishes and waterbirds.

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Organisations like the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the World Wide Fund for Nature, and other environmental agencies are associated with the treaty.

It also has 172 signatory countries. They are obligated to create wetland reserves and promote the wise use of wetland habitats. India joined it in 1982, initially designating the Chilika Lake in Orissa and Keoladeo National Park in [Rajasthan](#). Today, the country has among the highest number of Ramsar sites in Asia.

The Sundarbans is one of the most renowned wetlands in India. Cold desert ecosystems also have wetlands, like the Tso Moriri and [Pangong Tso](#) in Ladakh, which include rare and endangered species such as the black-necked crane.

## What are the new Ramsar sites?

The Nanjarayan Bird Sanctuary in Tamil Nadu is located on the banks of river Noyyal. Originally a water reservoir for irrigation use, it has since become a significant ecosystem, supporting a varied range of avifauna.

Home to species like the Eurasian coot, spot-billed duck and many types of herons, the wetland also serves various migratory birds flying along the Central Asian Highway, establishing itself as a biodiversity hotspot. It also contributes to the locals' livelihood through fishing.



The Kazhuveli Sanctuary on the Coromandel Coast is one of the largest brackish water wetlands in south India. The ecosystem's mix of salt marshes, mudflats and shallow waters make it a home to many globally endangered species, like the black-headed ibis and greater flamingo. It is also a stopover for migratory birds along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. In storing water, Kazhuveli also helps with flood control and groundwater recharge, helping maintain the region's water table.

The Tawa Reservoir in Madhya Pradesh is also integral in regional water management. Created by damming the Tawa River, the reservoir became a massive wintering ground for migratory birds. Tawa provides irrigation water to farmlands, drinking water to local communities, and sustains the nearby fisheries.

## What are the threats to wetlands?

Wetlands protect the environment from floods and storms by absorbing the excess rainfall and serving as a buffer against the impact of extreme weather events. This is all the more important, as climate change has begun impacting the severity of such incidents.

With the world in critical need of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, wetlands play a role in carbon storage. The Indian government has launched a series of policies and initiatives to protect wetlands, like the National Wetland Conservation Programme of 1986 and the 2015 National Plan for Conservation of Aquatic Wetlands. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has also identified over 2,200 wetlands for conservation schemes.

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However, wetlands continue to face major threats. According to the Ramsar Convention's Global Wetland Outlook (2018), 35% of global wetlands were lost between 1970 and 2015, with human activities contributing to their destruction.

The UK-based Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust found wetlands to be one of the world's most threatened habitats and the wildlife that call them home to be some of the most endangered. According to WWT, the main threats plaguing wetlands are:

**Unsustainable development:** an astonishing 87% of the world's wetlands have been lost in the last 300 years to provide land for housing, industry and agriculture;

**Pollution:** around 80% of global wastewater is released into wetlands untreated, with pollution from factories, fertilisers, pesticides and major spills posing serious threats to the ecosystem;

**Invasive species:** wildlife in wetlands are particularly vulnerable to invasive species, are often introduced by humans, because water provides easy pathways for them to spread and grow; and

**Climate change:** changes in rainfall patterns and temperature pose an existential threat to wetlands, and the flora and fauna that inhabit them.



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Reports published by the MoEFCC also show the degradation and shrinking of wetlands in India because of encroachment, pollution and rapid urbanisation. Agricultural and industrial run-off into water bodies significantly damages wetlands' health, worsening the water quality.

*The author is an intern with [The Indian Express](#).*

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