People are naturally attracted to water, to coastal wetlands such as coral reefs and beaches, and to inland wetlands such as lakes and rivers. This reflects the strong bond between people and nature, as well as the unique aesthetic appeal of wetlands.

Wetlands are broadly defined under the Ramsar Convention (1971) and include rivers, lakes, ponds, mangroves, coral reefs, reservoirs, mudflats, sandy beaches, and salt pans. They include areas that can be coastal or inland, natural or artificial. A recent addition is the rice paddies in tropical areas (Ramsar Convention 2008). Wetlands provide essential services for people such as water, food, construction materials, transport, coastline protection, as well as sites for tourism and recreation (Ramsar Convention; UNWTO 2012).

In July 2012, Wetlands, Tourism and Recreation became the theme of the Ramsar Convention’s 11th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP11) held in Bucharest, Romania. COP11 identified what countries need to do to ensure that wetland tourism is sustainable and consistent with the Convention’s ‘wise use’ principle.

In considering tourism as a tool for alleviating poverty, the UN World Tourism Organization (2004) has identified seven mechanisms through which the poor can benefit from tourism:

1. Employment in tourism enterprises
2. Supply of goods and services to tourism enterprises
3. Direct sales of goods and services (informal economy)
4. Establishment and running of small, micro or community-based tourism enterprises or joint ventures (formal economy)
5. Redistribution of proceeds from taxes or charges on tourists or tourism enterprises
6. Voluntary giving and support by tourists and tourism enterprises
7. Investment in infrastructure stimulated by tourism also benefitting the poor in the locality, directly or through support to other sectors.


Challenges in managing tourism in and around wetlands

Tourism must be managed as a business if it is to be successful, whether it is run by private, public or voluntary organizations. Managing tourism as a business does not mean that tourism should take precedence over the wetlands’ environmental or social objectives (Ramsar Convention; UNWTO 2012).

In cases where tourism provides few real benefits for a site, minimizing threats and adverse effects from tourism still contributes to site protection and keeps open future possibilities of benefits and site restoration. In cases where tourism is simply not compatible with conservation and wise use objectives, controls may be imposed by zoning the area to define a variety of uses and access to different parts of wetland sites, or by attracting tourists into areas that can accommodate them with fewer adverse effects (Ramsar Convention; UNWTO 2012).

Tourists are looking for destinations that combine local distinctiveness with global standards and value-for-money, thus a need for balance. To be successful, tourism must offer tourists something special delivered with the efficiency and standards similar to their home countries (Ramsar Convention; UNWTO 2012).

In popular destinations, the number of tourists can have significant effects on local communities, making it more difficult for residents to access key livelihood resources, driving up prices and living costs, and crowding them out of the places where they live.

Planning and management for wetlands and tourism

Wetland management plans are essential for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and should be designed to ensure that wetlands maintain their ecological character and continue to provide key ecosystem services.

Tourism planning and development must ensure that there is sufficient market demand to attract enough tourists to make tourism commercially viable in wetland sites. This underlines the importance of rigorous market assessment and business planning when considering the tourism potential of any wetland site – including taking into account any other ‘competing’ wetlands in the area.

The success of tourism depends on protecting and enhancing the natural, historic and cultural characteristics of a destination, and avoiding any adverse impacts from tourism activities. These include measures in controlling pollution and generation of wastes and promoting sustainable use of water and energy and the conservation of biodiversity.

Successful tourism depends on getting the right balance between visitors, businesses, local communities, the destination, and what the environment can support. Such balance can be achieved through dialogue among the stakeholders to determine what the destination can offer sustainably, what its communities will accept, and what its businesses can offer to meet demands for visitor satisfaction. Out of such dialogue, tourism managers can create an overall vision and strategy for tourism, defining the allowable number of tourists and types of tourism activities that are acceptable and sustainable within the destination.
Threats and impacts

Even though many benefits are gained from wetlands, we are losing and degrading wetland ecosystems at an alarming rate. Increased human pressures contribute directly to the degradation and loss of wetlands. Such pressures include habitat loss due to wetlands claimed for agriculture, urban and industrial development; introduction of ‘alien’ species disrupting the abundance and survival of native species; pollution through agricultural runoff, toxic industrial wastes flowing into waterways, and untreated or partially treated human wastes; siltation; overexploitation through unsustainable harvesting of fish, shellfish and prawns, seaweeds, and wetland timber; excessive freshwater withdrawals; nutrient loading; and climate change. The loss and degradation of wetlands have a huge impact on humans (e.g. increased risk of floods, decreased water quality, and on livelihood).

The future

Businesses that make up the tourism sector determine the level, types and economic value of tourism at any location. It is important for wetland management authorities to understand the way the tourism sector works in order to help minimize adverse impacts from tourism and to maximize benefits. The types of tourism could range from mass tourism to specialist wildlife watching, or could cover several types of tourism that are compatible with one another.

It has been forecasted that, in coming years, more people will be travelling to more places – many of them wetlands (Ramsar Convention; UNWTO 2012). This could lead to more impacts on the global environment from the tourism sector, with increases in greenhouse gas emissions, waste generation, resource use, and land used for tourism. The challenge for wetland managers is to be prepared (Ramsar Convention; UNWTO 2012) to manage all types of tourism that may affect wetland sites; maximize the benefits from tourism to contribute to conservation; minimize adverse environmental effects; and direct tourism away from the most fragile and sensitive sites.

Recommendations

1. For management authorities, understand the way the tourism sector works in order to help minimize adverse impacts from tourism and maximize benefits.
2. Use communication, education and public awareness tools for the marketing, branding and promotion of wetland locations for tourism.
3. Manage impacts brought about by tourism.
4. Push for certification schemes for tourism accreditation as they can assist wetland authorities in implementing high standards in their management of sustainable tourism and in consolidating their interactions with the tourism sector, leading to a ‘reliable’ tourism product and improved visitor experience.
5. Prohibit tourism activities that are not compatible with conservation and wise use objectives; or institute controls to accommodate tourism activities with fewer adverse effects.
6. Integrate tourism plans with site conservation plans, defining the purpose of tourism, what types and scale of tourism are acceptable, and where and how it should take place within the site.
7. Encourage dialogue among relevant stakeholders to achieve the right balance between visitors, businesses, local communities, the destination, and what the environment can support.
8. Control pollution and generation of wastes, including solid wastes and sewage, to promote the sustainable use of energy and water and the conservation of biodiversity.
9. Give conservation status to rice fields that border mangrove sites as they are valuable to a number of waterbird species.
10. Establish continuous capacity building or ‘monitoring’ programmes for conservation and birdwatching to maintain interest groups with experience and skills in wetland and waterbird survey and monitoring.

References:

National government ministries/agencies, local governments, non-government organizations, and the private sector may wish to contact the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity for technical assistance and advice in crafting policies and laws that will promote biodiversity conservation as a tool for protection against natural calamities. Contact: Dr. Roberto V. Oliva, Executive Director, E-mail: rvoliva@aseanbiodiversity.org.

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