



EAST ATLANTIC FLYWAY YOUTH FORUM

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East Atlantic Flyway Youth Forum Declaration - a call for action

The context

Wetlands are among the most important ecosystems on Earth owing to the myriad of functions they perform, both tangible and intangible. They provide unique natural resources which only exist within the nexus of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, while retaining features of both. Among the numerous distinctive characteristics of wetlands, the most obvious one is the presence of standing water for some time of the year, resulting in unique soil conditions, and organisms, especially vegetation, adapted to or tolerant of saturated soils. As a result, they have the ability to support distinctive flora and fauna.

Wetlands can range from ponds of a few hectares in size to large expanses covering hundreds of square kilometres. The Ramsar Convention, the intergovernmental treaty for the conservation of wetlands, defines wetlands as 'areas of marsh, fen, peat land 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'.

Wetlands have been described as the kidneys of the landscape because they collate the water and waste from both natural and human sources upstream. They mitigate both floods and drought by stabilizing water supplies much as sponges soak water. Wetlands play numerous roles in the ecosystem; including but not limited to groundwater purification, run-off water retention, flood prevention, shoreline stabilization and habitat for waterfowl and other fauna.

Along the world's eight major flyways wetlands play a critical role in providing habitat, food and shelter for migratory waterbirds. According to AEWA, the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement, the East Atlantic Flyway is used by about 90 million birds annually, passing from their breeding areas in the Arctic and northern Europe to wintering areas in western Europe and along the Atlantic coastline of Western and Southern Africa.

The problem exposed

Despite their evident importance, wetlands are one of the world's most underappreciated resources and are quickly vanishing along the Flyway, both in terms of extent and quality. As a result, the availability of wetlands' ecosystem services to society declines, posing enormous ecological, economic, and biological concerns, particularly in developing countries.

Wetlands are prone to over-exploitation due to their high productivity. Many wetlands are degraded, lost, or altered due to a variety of land-use activities. It is estimated that Europe has lost 56.3% and Africa around 45% of its wetlands (no data available specifically for the Arctic, Davidson 2014). While the decline in Europe has slowed since 1990, sufficient data from African sites are missing. Some of the factors that have contributed to the recent loss of wetlands include agricultural drainage and irrigation, overexploitation, infrastructure, oil and gas drilling, pollution, and the introduction of





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invasive species. Many reservoirs have been constructed to deliver water to irrigation schemes, frequently at the expense of wetlands downstream. Excessive exploitation of wetland resources includes, e.g. overfishing, oil extraction, mining and deforestation, and is driven by the demand for food security and rapid population growth. The resulting loss of functioning wetlands can have detrimental effects on the multitude of species that depend on these wetlands. Already 23% of the migratory waterbird populations along the East Atlantic Flyway are declining (van Roomen et al. 2017).

Traditional tenure rules, poor resource management, and weak or non-enforced national legislation are only a few reasons why wetlands are vulnerable to anthropogenic activities. In the absence of solid governance mechanisms that enforce policies, wetlands will continue to be exploited along the East Atlantic Flyway and across the world.

The rationale

Wetland habitats are increasingly disappearing, along with the services that they provide. However, many communities depend directly or indirectly on wetlands for food, shelter, livelihoods, cultural values etc; and people will become even more dependent on wetlands as the climate continues to change.

If wetland systems are not functioning properly ecologically, they will be unable to provide the services that we enjoy on a local and global scale. Locally, wetlands purify water and protect from natural hazards like storms. Globally, wetlands regulate climate and the water cycle. Many migratory organisms like birds and fish, use habitats that span across continents for different aspects of their life-histories. They may spawn/breed in one continent and have feeding grounds on another. If one part of the habitat is compromised, it would very likely affect the survival of the species. Also, human impacts on the environment such as pollution in one area may be carried by the water to a farther location, which can put the health of people and animals at risk.

As wetlands are international systems which cut across national boundaries, the management and conservation of such systems requires international cooperation. The members of the Flyway Youth Forum recognize the value of wetlands and understand that a continued use of wetlands in an unsustainable/unwise manner will quickly bring more problems, which cut across national boundaries. Thus, we consider the need to work together, across boundaries and generations, for urgent action to facilitate policy and decision-making that promote the wise use of wetlands, and the conservation of their resources, rather than underestimate or completely overlook them.

We also realize that the widespread degradation of wetlands will disproportionately affect poorer and more vulnerable communities through the adverse effects of the ongoing climate change. Thus, we value the prevention of and mitigation against further environmental injustice.

The role of youth in wetland and migratory waterbird conservation

The effects we feel today will be much more felt in the future and the people most affected will be the youth of today. Wetland degradation/loss and the decline of several populations of migratory





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waterbirds are huge problems and young people want to be part of the solution. However, youth voices are often neglected despite the many young people who actively work in wetland and waterbird conservation.

This situation needs to change in order to have a more equal participation and to increase the diversity of perspectives on solutions regarding the conservation of the flyway. Thus, it is imperative to provide a platform for young voices and to increase the intergenerational dialog, so that young people's opinions may be incorporated in the decision-making processes. They will be the ones who have to deal with the long-term effects of the decisions made today.

Youth have a lot to add to the discussion. Youth are dynamic, adaptable and creative. They have the power to influence their local and global community through a wide set of skills, their potential and their motivation. Youth can be the bridge between conservation and policy, acting as collaborative partners and presenting new and fresh ideas to common shared problems. By having different mindsets working on the same issues, the global understanding of the flyway problems and possible solutions will be advanced, and this will benefit all populations dependent on wetland habitats in their day-to-day life.

If young people's voices can be heard along the flyway, it will be possible to develop and implement a collective plan of action aiming at preserving the flyway and its network of extremely important wetland habitats. Besides bringing novelty and innovation, these collaborative efforts will empower young people, giving them the confidence needed to act as stakeholders for wetlands and birds and to have a louder voice in flyway conservation issues.





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Call for action

Call to take action to youth

We call upon the youth to tap into their talent, energy and enthusiasm to commence a transboundary conversation on the importance of wetlands and the services they provide. So, if you are a young person who values wetlands and migratory birds and who feels you could contribute to their protection, then join us. We can help you to sharpen your message and goals, and make your voice heard. Together we can host campaigns and events that generate the solutions and mitigation actions to preserve these valuable parts of the natural world. Next to that we will empower ourselves by active participation in our communities and direct interactions with decision makers.

We young people hold the key to a prosperous and sustainable future for wetlands and migratory birds. By active participation in discussions and wetland related events, we can be a crucial agent for positive change along the entire flyway.

Call for support to stakeholders

There is an urgent need to integrate inter-generational efforts in the decision-making processes, and youth are here to actively participate. For that to happen we need support and resources from flyway partners. The Flyway Youth Forum shall not be an isolated event but shall create opportunities for young people to work on flyway issues.

Thus, we call upon all relevant stakeholders operating along the East Atlantic Flyway to work with youth from local communities connected through the flyway, and emphasize the importance of their role to advocate for healthy wetlands. We ask governments, philanthropies, foundations, companies, and funding agencies to encourage and support youth-led projects and initiatives along the East Atlantic Flyway, providing tangible informational as well as financial support.

We stress the importance of making our voices heard and holding governments accountable for sustainable environmental governance. We, the young people, are the key to sustainable long-term developments. It is time to act together for the protection and conservation of wetlands and migratory birds.

