



FACT SHEET

WETLANDS

Factsheet No.8

WHAT IS A WETLAND?



The term 'wetland', covers many inland, coastal and marine habitats, which share common features. They are places where land meets water, supporting specially adapted plants and animals. They are not deeper than six metres at low tide. Wetlands may be natural, e.g. lakes, rivers, mudflats, mangrove and reedbeds, or man-made, e.g. reservoirs, fishponds and rice fields.

WHY ARE WETLANDS IMPORTANT?

Wetlands make up 6% of the world's land surface and they have supported human civilisations throughout history. They provide water for drinking and irrigating crops, as well as supporting a diversity of animals, some of which can be eaten, e.g. fish, shrimps and crabs. Scientists estimated that one hectare of mangrove can support as much as 450 kilograms of prawns per year, and 700 kilograms of offshore fish. The plants growing around wetlands, such as mangrove trees and reeds, provide materials for fuel, building and even clothing.

Storm damage can also be reduced by wetlands. Lakes, marshes and even fishponds, act as temporary reservoirs for rainwater so reducing the risk of flooding, while coastal salt marshes and mangrove forests act as buffers against strong waves.

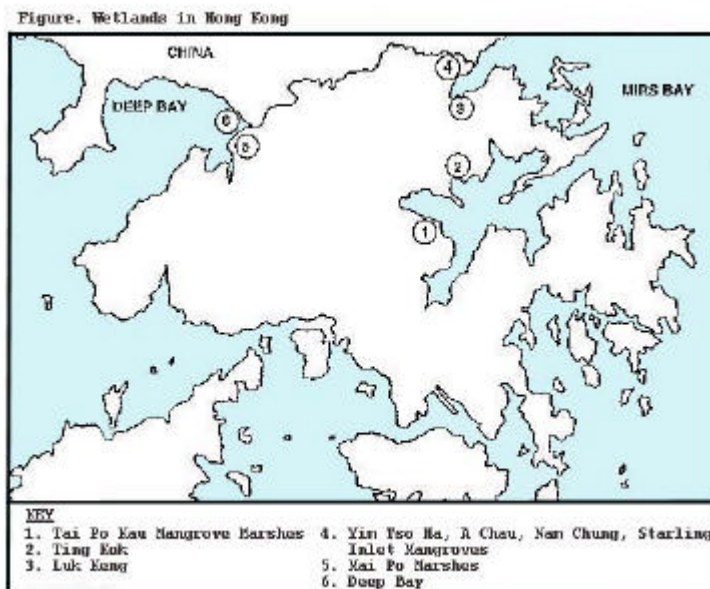
Wetlands can even treat organically polluted water. In India, 680 million litres of Calcutta's sewage is treated by pouring it into a large wetland area each year, which also produces fish for consumption.

WHERE ARE THE WETLANDS FOUND IN HONG KONG?

Today there are few natural and man-made wetlands in Hong Kong. Freshwater streams flow down from the mountains, and these may hold rare animals such as the Hong Kong Newt *Paramesotriton hongkongensis*, the Hong Kong Cascade Frog *Amolops hongkongensis* and the minnow *Aphyocypris lini*. These streams eventually run into reservoirs, or marshes, before going out to sea. Important marshes include the freshwater marsh at Luk Keng and the brackish water marsh at Ting Kok.



There are few wetlands along the Hong Kong coastline. The most famous are the mudflats and mangrove forests surrounding Inner Deep Bay and Mai Po. Around Mai Po, is also the largest man-made wetland remaining in Hong Kong, made up of fish and shrimp ponds (*gei wa*).



WHY ARE WETLANDS THREATENED?

Many wetlands around the world are threatened due to development. Lakes and streams are being polluted by household, agricultural and industrial wastes, which eventually travel down to estuaries and coastlines, so affecting living organisms there. Coastal wetlands have also been reclaimed, such as the mangrove forests, which used to exist before the new towns of Sha Tin and Tai Po were constructed. With the threat of sea levels rising due to global warming, there is worry that many coastal wetlands, e.g. mangrove forests, will be drowned.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO PROTECT WETLANDS?

The full value of wetlands, to society, must first be recognised, and then the most important ones conserved to benefit future generations.

Wetlands are the only ecosystem which have their own international convention to protect them - the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat. Signatory countries are committed to promote the wise use of wetlands, and are required to identify internationally important wetlands in their own country, which are then designated as



'Ramsar sites'. Presently, there are 118 Ramsar countries (including China), which hold 630 sites between them, covering an area of 40 million hectares. The Inner Deep Bay and the Mai Po Marshes were declared Hong Kong's first Ramsar site in September 1995 and were added as China.

Further reading:

1. *Atlas of the Environment* by G. Lean, D. Hinrichsen and A. Markham. 1990. WWF.
 2. *Atlas of the World Today* by Neil Grant and Nick Middleton. 1987. Harper & Row Publishers Inc.
 3. *GAIA: An Atlas of Planet Management* by N. Myers. 1988. Anchor Press Book.
 4. *Wetlands Conservation and the Ramsar Convention*, WWF Position Paper Spring 1987.
 5. *Waterlogged Wealth* by E. Maltby. 1986. Earthscan.
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Photo by Lew Young

Published in Spring 1994