

Protecting Wetlands for our Common Future: Aspirations and Insights from Two Key Countries of the Global South

Proteger los humedales para nuestro futuro común: Aspiraciones y perspectivas desde dos países clave del sur global

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Peru and South Africa are signatories to the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (established in 1971 and commonly known as the Ramsar Convention). A primary goal of this convention is «to stem the progressive loss of wetlands now and in the future». It is noteworthy that in every reading of this text, the emphasis is firmly on the «now,» while the future seems to remain forever distant. Ironically, the theme for World Wetlands Day 2025 —«Protecting Wetlands for our Common Future»— focuses on an uncertain outlook marked by degradation, in a future defined by a shared vision for wetlands. As part of an international exchange conducted in November 2024, a rapid analysis was performed regarding the status of wetlands in Peru and South Africa, focusing particularly on the legal measures implemented to safeguard these ecosystems. In this editorial, our aim is to present an overview of the actions taken by these two signatories in their pursuit of the Ramsar Convention's objectives, in the face of the ongoing global decline of wetlands.

The Peruvian case

In Peru, wetlands can be found across the country's different regions, including the Amazon region (most notably *aguajales*, or palm wetlands), the Andean region (in the form of *oconales*, or wetlands found on high plains above 3800 meters), and the coastal region (which hosts mangroves, coastal lagoons and estuaries). As a country with an abundance of mining activities and natural resource exploitation, in all of these regions Peru experiences marked conflicts between the interests of extractive industries and ecological interests, which affect wetland conservation (Soto-Ceferino *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, many wetlands are situated near urban areas, making them vulnerable to several drivers of change, such as sewage pollution, the introduction of invasive species and fire incidents (Gomez *et al.*, 2023). Despite these challenges, research indicates that these wetlands offer the potential for significant and economically valuable ecosystem services, including carbon sequestration and opportunities for tourism and recreation (Aponte, 2017, 2015; Pérez *et al.*, 2020).

The Peruvian government has made significant strides in safeguarding the nation's invaluable wetlands, recognizing their crucial role in providing essential ecosystem services. Over the past sixty years, a comprehensive legal framework has been established, consisting of laws, decrees, resolutions and strategies designed to preserve these ecosystems; as part of this effort, Peru boasts 14 Ramsar sites, ten of which are situated within protected natural areas (Toledo *et al.*, 2023). Recently, the government has issued resolutions that promote the



protection of wetlands and mandate the implementation of management plans at both local and regional levels.

In January of this year, the Peruvian government unveiled the regulations contained in Law N°32099, which focuses on the protection, conservation, and sustainable use of wetlands across the national territory. The aim of these regulations is to ensure comprehensive management of these vital ecosystems, while promoting their recovery and preservation. Additionally, they call for the establishment of a national wetlands inventory and the precise delimitation of their areas. Through these initiatives, the government hopes to address biodiversity loss and contribute to climate change adaptation and mitigation. Reflecting the ongoing efforts of the Peruvian government to protect these vital ecosystems, the success of this initiative will largely depend upon collaboration between national, regional and local authorities.

Peruvian wetland conservation faces several major challenges. Firstly, research is often focused on specific wetlands, overlooking areas that serve as essential biodiversity corridors (for example, on the Peruvian coast) (Gómez-Sánchez *et al.*, 2022), highlighting the need to decentralize information and expand research efforts to encompass these crucial coastal zones. Secondly, there are challenges to achieving cohesive decision-making across different institutions, with the potential for conflicting decisions that undermine wetland protection (for example, León Sulca, 2020). In this context, the promotion of collaborative decision-making processes for effective conservation initiatives is a vital factor. Lastly, while Peru has established a favorable legal framework for the management of wetland ecosystems, the challenge remains of ensuring that politicians engage responsibly with this framework. It is imperative that these laws are not treated as mere formalities, but rather approached with a spirit of genuine commitment. Only through comprehensive and coordinated actions can we effectively achieve the conservation of Peru's wetlands.

The South African case

South Africa is a water-scarce country with diverse climatic conditions (Ollis *et al.*, 2016). Due to its topography and geomorphology, it is home to over 300,000 wetlands of varying size, which cover only about 2.4% of the country's total area (NBA, 2018; DEFF, 2021). Despite their limited surface area, less than 20% of these wetlands are formally protected (DEFF, 2021). Both people and the environment rely on these wetlands for the ecosystem services and functions they provide (Republic of South Africa, 1998; MEA, 2005).

Despite the acknowledged need to protect and conserve wetland systems, over 50% of wetlands in South Africa have been lost (Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, 2015; DEFF, 2021). This decline is attributed to a variety of threats, including the diversion of surface and

groundwater flows, increasing urban development and unlawful settlements, agricultural practices, excessive nutrient enrichment from point sources and diffuse pollution, mining activities, and the encroachment of alien vegetation (Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, 2015; Mlambo, 2018; DEFF, 2021). Despite the decline of these wetlands, there is growing recognition of their value, particularly given the increasing number of designated international wetland sites in South Africa. This reflects a commitment to preserving these important ecosystems for their unique contributions to ecological functionality. As of 2024, a total of 30 sites have been designated (Available at <https://www.ramsar.org/country-profile/south-africa>).

South Africa follows a legal framework set by its Constitution, which outlines mechanisms for environmental protection and calls for laws and actions to align with this objective, as specified in Section 24 (South Africa, 1996). In this context, a legal structure exists which is designed to safeguard wetlands now and for the future; however, experts have suggested the need for streamlining these regulations into a more cohesive framework (Glazewski, 2023; Elliot and Blackmore, 2019; Lemine, 2018). Efforts are not concentrated solely within environmental and related governmental departments, but also involve interdisciplinary societal groups (Lemine *et al.*, 2022). For instance, the South African Wetlands Society serves as a voluntary organization providing a collaborative platform for wetland practitioners and related communities within the country. The Society works collaboratively with several governmental departments, non-profit organizations and higher education institutions. Its goals include: (1) raising awareness; (2) promoting excellence, professionalism and ethics within the community of practice; and (3) developing and maintaining professional standards and best management practices for wetland practitioners, in order to ensure effective wetland management in South Africa (www.sawetlandsociety.org). As well as serving to implement constitutional provisions, these initiatives are also aligned with the goals of the Ramsar Convention.

Several challenges exist within the South African context regarding compliance and enforcement processes (DWS, 2022). One major issue is the lack of readily available resources, such as adequate staffing and financial budgets. Wetland management is mandated by the National Water Act (Act 36, 1998), which is aligned with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. In addition, wetland management is addressed in other laws, each with their own mandates. Consequently, the implementation of these regulations tends to be imprecise and, as a result, not fully effective.

Other challenges include a lack of societal responsibility and ownership when it comes to the preservation of ecosystems (Adeeyo *et al.*, 2022). In addition, changes

in land use for agriculture, grazing and water extraction are major issues in South Africa (Phethi and Gumbo, 2019). Drivers of this trend include population growth and increasing demand for socioeconomic development to support human activities, even as the environment continues to suffer.

Finding a common future

Peru and South Africa provide valuable insights into wetland conservation through their established legal frameworks, in their recognition of ecosystem services, and their common challenges in the context of wetland conservation. These similarities offer a foundation for global recommendations aimed at protecting wetlands. Both Peru and South Africa have developed comprehensive legal frameworks that include laws, decrees and strategies for wetland protection. Other countries around the world should prioritize the creation and enforcement of robust legal frameworks tailored to their own unique ecological and socioeconomic contexts. These frameworks should feature clear guidelines for wetland management, protection and restoration, ensuring accountability for all the stakeholders involved. In addition, individual countries should implement comprehensive land-use planning, enforce pollution control measures, and develop strategies to manage invasive species. Public awareness campaigns and community engagement are essential, in order to foster a sense of responsibility and stewardship within local populations.

The global nature of wetland ecosystems calls for international collaboration. Countries must share best practices, research findings and technological innovations, in order to improve wetland conservation efforts worldwide. Engagement in international agreements, such as the Ramsar Convention, offers a platform for cooperation and collective action, as mandated by Article 5 of the Convention.

Wetlands offer substantial and economically valuable ecosystem services, including carbon sequestration, water purification and opportunities for tourism and recreation. Countries must continue to invest in research that quantifies these services and effectively communicates their value to policymakers, businesses and the general

public. By emphasizing the economic advantages that can be gained from wetland conservation, nations will be able to garner wider support for conservation initiatives and incorporate wetland protection into their national development strategies. By adopting these recommendations, countries will be able to work together to protect and restore wetlands, thereby ensuring that the vital ecosystem services they provide are preserved for future generations.

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Conflicts of interest

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Supplementary material

The Spanish translation of this manuscript is available as supplementary material via the following link: <https://revistas.cientifica.edu.pe/index.php/southsustainability/article/view/2191>

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