

Recreation & tourism



A tourist boat on the Danube Delta in Romania. Photo © Tobias Salathé

The natural beauty as well as the diversity of animal and plant life in many wetlands makes them ideal locations for recreational activities and, in the best-known places, (eco)tourism. Many of the finest sites are protected as National Parks or World Heritage Sites and are able to generate considerable income from tourism and the array of activities available. In some countries the resulting revenue is a significant component of the national economy.

Caribbean countries rely on their beaches and reefs to attract millions of visitors each year; total tourism-related income was valued at US\$27.1 billion in 2008, around two-thirds of the region's gross domestic product (GDP). Estimates of the total annual economic benefits derived from coral reefs in the Caribbean region have ranged from roughly US\$100,000 to US\$600,000 per square kilometre of coral reef, the largest share of which was associated with tourism and recreation.

Within Bonaire National Marine Park in the Netherlands Antilles, scuba-divers pay a US\$25 fee each year, which covers the operational costs of the park and are estimated to contribute over US\$30 million per year to the island's wider economy. Similarly in the Cayman Islands, the dive

market represents a significant part of the thriving tourism industry, with about a third of all staying visitors diving at least once during their trip. In the Florida Keys region, diving is estimated to generate over US\$75 million per year.

In Australia, the 1.6 million tourists that visit the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park every year generate direct income of more than AU\$1 billion. Commercial tourism operators within the Marine Park (parts of which are listed as Ramsar Sites) are required to pay an Environmental Management Charge (EMC), which for most activities is AU\$4.50 per day for each tourist carried. In 2002/03, total EMC revenue was AU\$6.7 million, or a fifth of the Marine Park Authority's entire annual budget. In the 'Top End' of Australia's Northern Territory, an average of just over 165,000 visitors per year stayed overnight in Kakadu National Park (also a Ramsar Site) in the period 1995–2004, generating annual direct income of AU\$58.1 million.

In brief...

- Wetlands attract diverse recreational uses, generating significant income that benefits local communities and helps promote the sustainable management of the wetlands concerned.
- Recreational diving on coral reefs in Bonaire National Marine Park (Netherlands Antilles) contributes US\$30 million to the island's economy every year.
- 1.6 million tourists visit the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park every year, generating more than AU\$1 billion.
- Tourism to the Moremi Game Reserve in the Okavango Delta (Botswana) generated US\$16 million in 2003.
- Half-a-million tourists per year visit the water gardens in France that inspired Monet's series of paintings of water-lilies.
- In the USA, recreational hunters have financially supported the conservation of more than five million hectares of wetlands.
- Income from tourism in The Broads Ramsar Site in the UK supports the equivalent of 3,000 full-time jobs.
- Unsustainable tourism and recreation developments are a significant cause of wetland loss and degradation in many countries.

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In Botswana's Okavango Delta, in southern Africa, direct non-consumptive use of the Moremi Game Reserve by tourists was estimated as being worth up to US\$16 million in 2003.

There are, of course, a whole range of recreational activities associated with wetlands that generate income locally and nationally, from boating and other water sports to hunting, watching wildlife and even art and literature. For example, Monet's impressionistic paintings of water-lilies have moved and inspired millions of people worldwide, such that some half-a-million visitors pay homage to the ornamental wetlands at his garden in Giverny, France, every year.

More than 71 million people aged 16 years and older (31% of all Americans) fed, photographed and observed wildlife in 2006 and spent nearly US\$45 billion on their activities. In addition to supporting a multi-billion dollar industry, the United States' 1.5 million waterfowl hunters have funded the conservation management of five million hectares of wetlands through taxes, licence fees and donations, generating US\$50 billion annually in economic activity. In addition, more than 35 million Americans take part in recreational fishing, in both freshwater and sea fisheries, spending more than US\$37 billion each year on their hobby.

There are many wetlands with great recreational value for which a monetary figure cannot easily be given because many visitors may use the area without direct payment. Employing economic valuation techniques to investigate how members of the public use a wetland can be revealing. For example, tourism drives the economy of the Broads National Park and Ramsar Site in eastern England, benefiting boat-rental operators, shops, restaurants, hotels, cafes and other visitor attractions. A study using economic valuation techniques showed that the overall value of tourism to the Broads in 1998 was over US\$225 million, of which 82% was generated by staying visitors and 18% by day visitors. This level of expenditure supported the equivalent of 3,107 full-time jobs.

Closely allied to the benefits of wetlands for recreation and well-being is their educational value. Catering for all needs, from conventional school-group visits to engagement of the wider community, there is a large and expanding network of wetland education centres around the world.

Waterwatch Australia is a nationwide community-based programme with 3,000 volunteer groups that monitor water quality at over 7,000 sites in 200 river basins. Using simple but effective water monitoring kits, the general public and schoolchildren are better able to understand environmental concepts through hands-on activities and at the same time contribute significantly to the conservation of their local watershed.

Some 200,000 visitors per year enjoy the 40-hectare London Wetland Centre alongside the River Thames, right in the heart of one of the world's major cities. Created from a series of redundant reservoirs, the site offers a complex of lakes and marshes, boardwalks, hides and pathways, as well as an exhibition centre to inform, inspire and entertain visitors on the functions and values of wetland ecosystems, biodiversity and other environmental topics in an informal, recreational setting.

Not all recreational and tourism uses are necessarily compatible with sustainable management or 'wise use' of wetlands. At many Ramsar Sites recreational activities are carefully 'zoned', meaning that they are limited to certain areas, or particular seasons, for instance to avoid disturbance to wildlife. The Ramsar Convention also promotes rigorous prior assessment of any development likely to impact significantly on wetlands. Nevertheless, the lure of short-term financial profits (which often do not benefit local people) means that wetlands continue to be damaged or destroyed by unsustainable tourism and recreation projects in many parts of the world.



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