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PRESS RELEASE

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Millions affected, billions at stake:

Scientists urge 'wiser' use of wetlands to tackle poverty and conserve ecosystems

(2nd February 2014 – Colombo, Sri Lanka) -- Agriculture and wetlands should be managed in unison in order to conserve vital ecosystems and support the livelihoods of millions of people, according to a new report published to coincide with World Wetlands Day, today.

Boasting a wealth of wildlife, providing water and food for people and livestock, and playing a crucial role in the hydrological cycle, the debate around conservation of wetlands has been polarized for years, with agriculture implicated as one of the greatest threats to their survival.

But now there is a growing consensus that a 'people-centered' approach that seeks to optimize the benefits for smallholder farmers and reduce poverty, while simultaneously protecting biodiversity and ecosystems, is the most promising approach for long-term conservation of wetlands.

"Wetlands and agriculture can and must coexist," said Matthew McCartney, a hydrologist at the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), a CGIAR center, and a contributor to the report, *Wetlands and people*. "We need policies on wetlands that support ecosystems, sustain rich biodiversity, and simultaneously improve the livelihoods of farming communities who depend on wetlands or whose activities directly affect them. We need to find a way to have the best of both worlds."

Around 6% of the world's landmass is classified as either permanent or seasonal wetland, with millions of people directly depending on them for food, water, and other products and services, such as medicines, fuel and wildlife tourism. Wetlands also capture and store rainwater, help replenish groundwater, regulate river flows and are important carbon sinks. Researchers estimate that wetlands are worth around USD 70 billion, globally, each year.

But they also face a number of threats, the most serious of which is agriculture. Millions of hectares in Southeast Asia have been drained for oil palm and biofuel production; water in rivers that supply wetlands have been diverted for irrigation; and wetlands have also been polluted by fertilizers and

pesticides from farms. Hydropower development, climate change, land degradation and population growth are also significant and growing threats.

In the report, *Wetlands and people*, researchers highlight a number of examples of the value of wetlands to poor, rural communities in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and ways to manage them sustainably for current and future generations. It encourages 'wise use', as advocated by the Ramsar Convention, an intergovernmental treaty on wetland conservation that has long supported a move away from the absolute protection of wetlands to an approach that integrates conservation with development.

In Cambodia, for example, new laws have been established that aim to reduce fertilizer and pesticide use to preserve water quality in the Tonle Sap Great Lake area, the country's largest inland fishery. In the Caohai Nature Reserve in China's Guizhou Province, local farmers were encouraged to move away from practices that were destroying the wetland, and diversify into tourism and more sustainable farming methods. In Uganda, the National Wetland Policy recognizes the importance of seasonal wetland margins for grazing cattle, growing arable crops and for domestic water use. It also acknowledges that wetland conservation can only be achieved through a cooperative approach involving all the concerned people and organizations, including the local communities.

"Outright protection of wetlands is incompatible with farming and undermines livelihoods. We've frequently seen these approaches fail in the past," said McCartney. "But there are landscape approaches and agricultural practices that can support and sustain healthy wetlands, and vice versa. Working with local communities will help us find the best solutions."

World Wetlands Day 2014 - *Wetlands and agriculture: Partners for growth* is organized by The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

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Additional information:

Wetlands and People is a compendium of research by IWMI, the CGIAR Research Program on Water, Lands and Ecosystems, and the CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF). You can download your free copy here (www.iwmi.cgiar.org/Publications/Books/PDF/wetlands-and-people.pdf).

IWMI Research Report 137, *Wetlands, agriculture and poverty reduction*, also gives a detailed overview of work being done to find ways to support wetlands and livelihoods around the world. You can download your free copy here (<http://www.iwmi.cgiar.org/publications/iwmi-research-reports/iwmi-research-report-137/>).

Wood, A.; Dixon, A.; McCartney, M.P. (eds.). 2013. *Wetland management and sustainable livelihoods in Africa*. Routledge and Earthscan.

The **International Water Management Institute (IWMI)** is a non-profit, scientific research organization focusing on the sustainable use of water and land resources in developing countries. It is headquartered in Colombo, Sri Lanka, with regional offices across Asia and Africa. IWMI works in partnership with governments, civil society and the private sector to develop scalable agricultural water management solutions that have a real impact on poverty reduction, food security and ecosystem health. www.iwmi.org

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