Ramsar Sites and the Significance of Listing

Why in news?

On the eve of the World Wetlands Day (February 2), the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands designated Khijadia Bird Sanctuary in Gujarat and Bakhira Wildlife Sanctuary in Uttar Pradesh as wetlands of international importance.

What are wetlands?

> *Wetlands are referred to as "Kidneys of the Earth"*

- The **Ramsar Convention on 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 6 meters."
- The Indian government's definition as per **The Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017** excludes river channels, paddy fields and other areas where commercial activity takes place.
- **US Fish and Wildlife Service** has adopted the definition of wetland as, "lands transitional between terrestrial and aquatic systems where the water table is usually at or near the surface or the land is covered by shallow water."
- For the purposes of this classification wetlands must have one or more of the following three attributes:
    - at least periodically, the land supports predominantly hydrophytes
    - the substrate is predominantly undrained hydric soil
    - the substrate is non-soil and is saturated with water or covered by shallow water at some time during the growing season of each year.
- The theme of this year's World Wetlands Day is "**Wetlands Action for People and Nature**".
- Wetlands provide a wide range of important resources and ecosystem services such as
    - food
    - water
    - fiber
    - groundwater recharge
    - water purification
    - flood moderation
    - erosion control
    - climate regulation
- Five major wetland types are generally recognized:

1. **Marine -** Coastal wetlands including coastal lagoons, rocky shores, and coral reefs.
2. **Estuarine -** Including deltas, tidal marshes, and mangrove swamps.
3. **Lacustrine -** Wetlands associated with lakes.
4. **Riverine -** Wetlands along rivers and streams.

5. **Palustrine -** Meaning “marshy” - marshes, swamps and bogs.
6. **Human-made wetlands -** such as fish and shrimp ponds, farm ponds, irrigated agricultural land, saltpans, reservoirs, gravel pits, sewage farms and canals.

What is the status of wetlands in India?

- Globally, wetlands cover 6.4% of the geographical area of the world.
- In India, according to the National Wetland Inventory and Assessment compiled by ISRO, wetlands are spread over 1,52,600 sq km which is 4.63 % of the total geographical area of the country.
- Of this, inland-natural wetlands account for 43.4% and coastal-natural wetlands 24.3%.
- India has 19 types of wetlands.
- In state-wise distribution of wetlands, Gujarat is at the top (22.7% of total wetlands areas of the country), followed by Andhra, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

What is Ramsar Convention?

- The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance came into existence in 1971.
- It is named after Ramsar, the Iranian city.
- It is an intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources.
- Wetlands declared as Ramsar sites are protected under strict guidelines of the convention.
- As per the Convention, signatory countries can declare specific wetlands as ‘Ramsar sites’, if they meet one or more of nine criteria (such as if it regularly supports 20,000 or more waterbirds).

What is Montreux Record?

- The Montreux Record is a register of wetland sites on the List of Ramsar wetlands of international importance where changes in ecological character have occurred, are occurring, or are likely to occur as a result of technological developments, pollution or other human interference.
- It is a voluntary mechanism to highlight specific wetlands of international importance that are facing immediate challenges.
- It is maintained as part of the List of Ramsar wetlands of international importance.
- At present Keoladeo National Park,Rajasthan and Loktak Lake,Manipur are the two Indian sites listed under it.
- In 1993, Chilika Lake was also listed in Montreux Record due to problem of siltation but later it was removed from the list as the problem of siltation was tackled by Govt. of India.

What about Ramsar sites in India?

The countries with the most Ramsar Sites are the United Kingdom (175) and Mexico (142).

- India signed the Ramsar Convention on 1st February 1982.
- Chilika Lake (Odisha) and Keoladeo National Park (Rajasthan) were designated the first Indian wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention.
- Sundarbans is the largest Ramsar Site of India.

- At present, Ramsar Sites in India has gone up to **49** spreading across 18 states and two Union Territories, the highest for any country in South Asia.
- Of the 49 sites, 10 are in UP, 6 in Punjab, 4 each in Gujarat and Jammu and Kashmir.

To know more about Ramsar sites, click here

What are the two new additions?

- **Khijadia Bird Sanctuary**- Located in Gujarat, the sanctuary is a freshwater wetland, heaven for birds.
- Along with marine and fresh water habitats, there are also marshy lands, mangroves, prosopis areas, mudflats, salt pans, creeks, forest scrub, sandy beaches, and even farmlands bordering the area.
- These ecosystems provide a haven for more than 220 species of endangered resident and migratory birds such as Dalmatian Pelican, Asian Open Bill Stork, Black Necked Stork, Darter, Black-headed Ibis, Eurasian spoonbill, bar-headed goose and Indian Skimmer.
- Gujarat becomes the first landing point of many international migratory species.
- **Bakhira Wildlife Sanctuary**- Located in Uttar Pradesh, Bakhira Wildlife Sanctuary provides a safe wintering and staging ground for a large number of species of the Central Asian flyway.
- Established in the year 1980, the sanctuary's lake is important for the migratory birds who fly down here in the winter season.

What is the significance of Ramsar listing?

- Under the Wetland (Conservation and Management) Rules 2017, states can identify wetlands of importance.
- Simultaneously, state forest departments can also designate wetlands of importance under the Central Asian Flyway Action Plan.
- Together, these can provide legal protection to these sites from the perspective of birds.

- Ramsar secretariat designating a wetland as wetland of global importance may **not lead to any extra funding** by the global body but it is like an accreditation.
- A Ramsar tag makes it incumbent upon authority to strengthen the protection regime there and also creates defences against encroachment etc on wetlands.
- Designating a wetland as a Ramsar site also means that it gets more public attention.

References

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