Title

Wetlands are diverse habitats that are extremely important for biodiversity. They also provide vital benefits for millions of people, including food, fibre, flood protection, water purification and supply. Their importance is reflected in the designation of nearly 2,000 Wetlands of International Importance (or Ramsar sites: see www.ramsar.org) covering more than 191 million hectares. February 2nd marks World Wetlands Day, the date of the adoption of the Convention on Wetlands in the Iranian city of Ramsar on the shores of the Caspian Sea (the so-called Ramsar Convention). This year the focus is on sustainable tourism. Responsible, sustainable tourism can support wetland conservation. Wetlands, their wildlife, and the human communities in and around them can benefit directly from tourism through entry fees, sale of local products, and so on. At the same time, the ?use? of wetlands as tourism locations comes with certain risks. The challenge is to ensure that sustainable tourism practices are being implemented and bring benefits for wetlands, their wildlife and people. BirdLife International is one of the Ramsar International Organisation Partners and, with 67% of globally Important Bird Areas (some 6,700 sites) containing natural or artificial wetlands and at least 12% of all Globally Threatened Birds (146 species) depending on them, a strong supporter of the Convention?s work. For example, a Darwin Initiative project implemented by Bird Conservation Nepal (BirdLife Partner) at Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (KTWR)?a Ramsar site and Important Bird Area in Nepal?is demonstrating the importance of a range of ecosystem services provided by the site, such as providing food, fibre, groundwater recharge and spiritual experience. As part of the study, nature-based tourism was valued at $121,000 for 2010?11. This benefit is received mainly by the local lodges and their employees, though significant revenue is received directly by the reserve from entrance fees. KTWR is one of the best sites in Nepal to see birds, with a total of 493 species having been recorded to date, including globally threatened Swamp Francolin and Greater Adjutant, several threatened vulture species, large congregations of migratory waders and the Critically Endangered Bengal Florican. The reserve is under constant pressure from the local population who rely directly on the resources it (and the surrounding buffer zone) provides. This has resulted in a degradation of habitats, especially grasslands which are important to several key bird species. Bird Conservation Nepal is looking at how to alleviate this pressure through a combination of alternative livelihood activities and the expansion of sustainable tourism. As Hum Gurung, the CEO of Bird Conservation Nepal, points out ?Tourism in and around wetlands can provide economic, social and health benefits to people, but it has to be well-managed. This will be a challenge that we face as tourism continues to grow rapidly, but one which can potentially reap huge benefits for the conservation of wetlands and other important sites for biodiversity?.