

Liquid Gold: Wetlands Aren't Wastelandsⁱ

Wetlands are perhaps one of the most valuable ecosystems on the planet.ⁱⁱ Only about 5–10% of the world's land surface is currently wetland, but more than 70% is already destroyed or impaired.ⁱⁱⁱ Florida has more wetlands than any other state in the continental United States.^{iv} Yet these precious resources are at risk.



Why are wetlands important?

- Wetlands are foundational to human health, water quality, drinking water resources, floodwater protection, fish and wildlife habitats, and resilience against the effects of climate change.^v
- Wetlands are the kidneys that can absorb nutrients and pollution and prevent them from reaching downstream waters.^{vi} Up to 90% of the sediments from runoff can be removed if it passes through wetlands.^{vii}
- Wetlands allow water to filter into groundwater aquifers that are critical for our water supply.^{viii} According to a U.S. Geological Survey Report, 91% of Florida's population gets their drinking water from groundwater.^{ix}
- Wetlands serve as natural infrastructure for disaster risk reduction from hazards such as floods, droughts, and storm surges, which account for over 90% of natural disasters.^x
- "One acre of wetland can store over one million gallons of flood water."^{xi} This means, during times of flood, wetlands can hold these waters and release them gradually. The loss of the average hectare of wetlands between 2001 and 2016 cost society \$1,840 annually, and over \$8,000 annually in developed areas when looking at flood water mitigation only.^{xii}
- Wetlands are biodiversity hotspots.^{xiii} More than one-third of the threatened and endangered species in the United States are found only in wetlands, and more than half rely on wetlands as part of their life cycle or routine habitat.^{xiv}
- Wetlands contain about a third of the world's carbon, and when they're degraded, the emissions locked in their soils are released.^{xv}

Despite these values, wetlands are “among the most vulnerable and most threatened habitats.”^{xvi} Wetlands in the United States decreased by 53% from the 1780s to the 1980s. These losses were largely due to water diversion and development.^{xvii} The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reported to Congress in 1989 that twenty-two states had already lost more than 50% of their wetland acreage.^{xviii}

Many remaining wetlands are in poor condition.^{xix} In 2017, EPA reported to Congress that over 46% of our nation’s rivers and streams, and 32% of our wetlands were in poor biological condition.^{xx}

The Conservancy of Southwest Florida is fighting to protect our precious wetlands. We are a watchdog to the rampant growth and development that often targets wetlands, flowways, and aquatic habitats. When necessary, we’ve taken destructive developments to court to minimize impacts to our waters and to secure wetland preserves.

Additionally, in 2021, the Conservancy and our partners brought a challenge against the Florida-assumed wetland permitting program that undermines and weakens our most foundational wetland protection and environmental safeguards. What’s at stake are wetlands across the entire state of Florida, including sensitive ecosystems from Corkscrew to the Big Cypress and beyond.

Find out more about our battle to save Florida’s wetlands at www.conservancy.org/404.



ⁱ Thanks to our partners at Earthjustice for their collaboration to protect Florida’s wetlands and for these citations.

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