



## Wetlands Matter Conservation Politics in a Dynamic Wetland



### INTRODUCTION

What is worth conserving and by whom? And who gets to make decisions on what resources are important in an urban wetland? These are essential questions this policy brief seeks to address.

Today, wetlands continue to decline very fast (35% are lost since 1970s). This is also true for the *Sakumono Wetland*, an urban wetland in *Greater Accra*, Ghana. Despite its official recognition as a Ramsar Site in 1992, there are critical limitations and challenges to conservation efforts, including expanding urban settlement in the wetland.

This policy brief informs policy makers about the value of the wetland's ecosystem. Based on insights from the *Sakumono Wetland*, it provides recommendations to ensure wetlands are managed and used sustainably and benefits they provide to local communities are acknowledged by all.

### KEY FINDINGS

To appreciate the importance of an intricate ecosystem like the *Sakumono Wetland* and shape sustainable conservation efforts, we need to understand the dynamics of current conservation strategies and wetland degradation. Based on research conducted in *Greater Accra* in 2016-2019, we have analyzed perspectives, interests and political roles of a variety of actors involved in management of the urban wetland. Key findings include:

- Conservation politics are inextricably linked to questions of power and control: Under the guise of conservation efforts, land and resources can be claimed.
- Limiting conservation efforts to defined areas, such as the wetland's core area, bears the risk of neglecting the interconnectedness of the larger ecosystem.
- Decision-making processes need to be inclusive to appropriately reflect on the interwoven nature of social-ecological systems and thus also reflect on local knowledge and practices.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

#### Wetland governance

Only the agreement over land rights will enable a sustainable management of the wetland:

- To address conflicts between various local authorities and entities with claims to local land, managerial bodies need to communicate and address legal issues regarding land allocation in the wetland.
- A platform to connect involved actors and managerial bodies would enhance an open dialogue and aims, goals and benefits of wetland conservation and help facilitate the coordination of activities.
- There is an alarming trend in overfishing of small fish. By changing the mesh size of nets and the minimum landing size of fish it will be possible to fish more while creating less risk of overfishing.

#### Engagement with and involvement of local actors

Protection of wetlands depends on the strength, dedication and commitment of local people. Actions to engage with and involve local actors could include the following efforts:

- Education should go beyond the previously defined 'ecological character' of the wetland (see box 1) and requires an additional assessment of today's local realities, livelihoods, and needs.
- The establishment of ongoing workshops and roundtables on wetland conservation with diverse stakeholders will find common ground and would help facilitate joint strategies.
- An inclusive policy making process ensuring the right to participate at all levels is critical.
- The multitude of local understandings, practices, needs and desires need to be reflected; for instance through dialogue and negotiations for specific interventions that help shape mutually agreeable courses of action for both, conservation objectives and local communities.
- Gender analysis and gender-responsive biodiversity indicators in biodiversity-related policy planning and monitoring would be critical tools to be incorporated.

#### Scale and conservation

In the *Sakumono Wetland*, conservation efforts focus on the lagoon's core area, whereas areas upstream that play a critical role for the wetlands ecology are insufficiently addressed. Conservation efforts should reflect the following:

- Wetlands are a part of larger ecosystems and have to be managed as such. An identification and acknowledgement of the intricate connections in the area is critical.
- Regulation of land-use in the catchment areas, pollution prevention and periodic assessment of water quality could be effective strategies to maintain the hydrological and ecological integrity of wetlands.

## BACKGROUND

Wetlands account for the most productive habitats on earth. They are defined by a high biological diversity and productivity and provide numerous ecosystem services – yet, they are degraded and progressively lost at higher rates than any other ecosystem (Ramsar Convention, 2018).

**Box 1:** The *Ramsar Convention*, which was signed in 1971 in Ramsar, Iran, is an intergovernmental treaty for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. Article 3.1 of the Ramsar Convention requires contracting parties ‘to formulate and implement their planning so as to promote [...] the wise use of the wetlands’. Wise use is defined as the ‘maintenance of their ecological character, achieved through the implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development’. The ‘ecological character’ presents the combination of the ecosystem components, processes and benefits/services that characterize a wetland at a given point in time. Contracting parties promote wise use through national policies and legislation; inventory, monitoring and research; training, education and public awareness; and integrated site management plans. The signatory countries promise to make inventories of their Ramsar Sites and to develop management plans. These management plans include the sustainable use of the many other functions of wetlands, such as food production, water storage, and recreation.

## ARTICULATIONS OF ECOSYSTEM SERVICES - CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

The *Sakumono Wetland* (1,340 hectares) is located in an urban area of the West African coastal hub, the *Greater Accra Metropolitan Region*. It offers a substantial source of livelihood to local fishermen and farmers. Farming is practiced all year and claims roughly 49% of the wetland’s core area.

Additionally, it has been an essential area for a variety of species, including migratory birds and diverse fish species. The wetland represents a vital environment that can provide a wide range of habitats and food sources. For instance, it has played a particular role in allowing fish stocks to move from fresh water to a brackish environment and the lagoon can provide necessary spawning and nursery grounds for numerous marine fish species.

### Conservation politics and challenges in wetland governance

In 1952, the Government of Ghana acquired the land; however, the initially promised conservation project was never fully completed. Traditional land owners revoke these land claims. In the last 10 years, there has been a drastic increase in urban settlements around the core area of the lagoon, exerting pressure on the wetland’s ecosystem. Land use/cover is slowly transforming, e.g. agriculture and vegetation are decreasing. Furthermore, large amounts of solid and liquid waste is discharged into the wetland, as well as sediments that are frequently deposited.

In 1953, a culvert and sluice structure was built, permanently connecting the lagoon to the sea through a sand dune. The culvert was built to enable the construction of the Accra-Tema road along the coast. As the *Sakumono Lagoon* was previously a closed lagoon, the road’s construction led to changes in its ecological integrity. While the sluices are currently no longer functional, the permanent open connection between lagoon and sea remains.

Today, the main lake of the *Sakumono Wetland* is covered with *water hyacinth*, which suffocates the lake. The plant withdraws oxygen from the water. As a result, the water’s acidity increases, leads to the deposition of sludge and diminishes the fish reservoir. These impacts hurt the local economies dependent on fishing.

Several government and non-government institutions are involved in the management and utilization of the wetland’s resources. A lead institution is the *Wildlife Division of the Forestry Commission*, which stations Conservation Officers at each Ramsar Site. The *National Wetlands Committee* includes and represents key-institutions and experts involved in different areas of wetland management. However, there are many more institutions and agencies performing different tasks in the wetlands’ management carrying their strategies out autonomously. For instance, the *Ghana Wildlife Society* and *Friends of Ramsar Sites* represent two major NGOs operating in the wetland. Furthermore, the *Environmental Protection Agency*, *Water Research Institute* and the *Centre for African Wetlands* monitor the water quality. However, collected data is not available for public. Furthermore, the local population has a traditional knowledge system and practices linked to the management of wetlands. For instance, traditional authorities (also known as the wetland’s custodians) seek to protect the Sakumono Wetland and have placed a ban on fishing. Yet, to this date, no common platform connects the activities of different managerial bodies, enabling them to exchange information and create a network for their activities.

### Ramsar Convention - unexpected impacts of non-local forces

The Ramsar Convention grants contracting countries much liberty with regards to the interpretation of the convention’s resolutions to ensure differentiation and relevance reflecting individual, national and local circumstances. However, the lack of clarity also leads to different interpretations of the implementation of conservation efforts, especially in terms of policy guidelines. Ultimately, even though the resolutions are binding, there are no mechanisms to enforce them.

Education and management strategies evolved around the ‘ecological character’ of the Sakumono Wetland at the time of the ratification of the Ramsar Convention. However, since 1992, dynamics and conservation needs of the wetland have changed, whereas education and management strategies have not adjusted accordingly.

Additionally, the evaluation of the wetland’s use and value and the resulting focus of conservation efforts is spearheaded by governmental institutions and based on their management plans. Yet, the realities of local resource use and management bear a deplorable risk: Under the guise of conservation efforts, these practices can serve as a tool to impose control over land and resources.

## CONCLUSIONS

Results of WaterPower’s research team demonstrate that there is a great need for action for sustainable land management in the contested wetland area. The wetland’s ecosystem is subject to constant changes. These changes also call for adjustments of ways in which the wetland is understood and managed. The Ramsar Convention and its constituted goals shape current education measures. This obscures local needs and results in vaguely defined rules regarding access to land and resources. The case of the Sakumono is illustrative for the struggle in many wetlands and ecosystems around the world. It demonstrates how new insights are gained when linking dynamics of environmental change to interests and power relations of different actors.

## REFERENCES

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