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## Wetlands: Ohio's Diamond in the Rough

World Wetland Day celebrates countless benefits of “nature’s kidneys”

Columbus, OH – Swamp. Marsh. Bog. Fen. Wet prairie. Wet Meadow. Vernal Pools.

These are common names for a most uncommon gift of nature: wetlands. And today is World Wetland Day, celebrating the priceless benefits that wetlands provide.

“The theme of this year’s World Wetland Day is quite fitting—Healthy Wetlands, Healthy People,” said David R. Celebrezze, Director of Air and Water Special Projects for the Ohio Environmental Council. “We hope the public will learn about why it is so important to protect these priceless natural wonders. Wetlands are fast disappearing, and once gone, their functions can never be fully replaced by humans.”

Called “nature’s kidneys,” wetlands filter excess nutrients, sediment, and other pollutants before they reach rivers, lakes, and other water bodies. Like a giant sponge, they sop up and then slowly release flood waters. They provide spawning and nursery areas for fish and amphibians, as well as nesting, resting and feeding areas for waterfowl. They also provide a playground for humans, from canoeing to fishing and bird watching.

Habitat degradation since the 1970s especially the draining and filling of wetlands, has been a leading cause of species extinction. According to scientists, a third of all endangered species depend upon wetlands for survival.

Ranging from a small depression sprouting cattails to acres of swamp surrounded by buttonbush plants, wetlands are areas of land that are regularly inundated or saturated by surface or ground water.

But despite all the benefits provided by wetlands, the United States loses about 60,000 acres of wetlands each year. The very runoff that wetlands help to clean can overload and contaminate these fragile ecosystems. In addition, nonnative species of plants and animals and global climate change contribute to wetland loss and degradation.

Ohio has lost more than 90 percent of its original wetlands—second most in the country. Probably the top threats to the Buckeye State’s remaining wetlands are planned development and illegal filling.

“Ohio’s permit process to fill and destroy a wetland requires the developer to replace, or “mitigate,” a natural wetland with a human-made one,” said Celebrezze. “Ohio EPA data reveal that at least a third of Ohio’s artificial wetlands at mitigation banks are failing to measure up to the functions of the destroyed wetlands.

“Wetlands in Ohio are taking a beating from poor land use and ignorance to outright flouting of the law. Only half of one percent of Ohio’s landscape is wetlands. Ohio needs to bulk up its wetland protection laws, including an enforceable requirement to avoid building in a wetland if at all possible and strong minimum performance standards for mitigated wetlands. Further wetland destruction should be the last choice in Ohio”

The Ohio Environmental Council encourages Ohioans to get involved in wetland protection by:

- joining a local watershed group
- keeping informed about wetlands, their destruction, and their protection
- contacting local and state officials when a local construction project threatens a wetland.
- attending the OEC’s 2009 Vernal Pool Monitoring Workshops, scheduled for:
  - Feb. 21, Stratford Ecological Center, 3083 Liberty Rd., Delaware, OH
  - March 7, West Geauga Middle School, 8615 Cedar Rd., Chesterland, OH
  - March 4, Wildwood Preserve MetroPark, 4830 W Central Ave. Toledo, OH

For more information about the OEC’s upcoming workshops, please visit [www.theoec.org](http://www.theoec.org).

Wetlands benefits include

- **Slowing flood waters.** Wetlands store and slowly release flood waters that would otherwise cause damage to private property and public infrastructure (such as roads, bridges, buildings, etc.).

- **Pollution prevention.** Wetlands allow suspended materials in the water to filter out to the bottom before entering in our rivers and streams. According the Ohio EPA, sediment is the number one water way pollutant in Ohio.

- **Drought proofing.** Wetlands store water and contribute to underground water aquifers during times of drought.

- **Urban wetland.** Urban wetlands are usually ranked as “low quality” based on biological diversity. But their physical and chemical functions are highly valuable because they are filtering out pollutants that otherwise would reach our rivers and streams. Urban wetlands play a vital role in the urban setting.

- **Educational/Recreational opportunities.** Wetlands provide opportunities for photography, canoeing, fishing, hunting, education, and an opportunity to escape the stressful day to day life in the city for the individual and the family.

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- **Carbon sinks.** Wetlands prevent and sequester carbon out of the air. When a wetland is destroyed the carbon is released, and sequestration ceases. A 2008 report revealed that wetlands in temperate zones around the world can store more than 1,000 pounds of carbon a year.

- **Habitat.** Wetlands provide habitat for hundreds of species that rely either completely or partially on wetlands for their life cycles.

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The mission of the Ohio Environmental Council (OEC) is to secure healthy air, land, and water for all who call Ohio home. The OEC is Ohio's leading advocate for fresh air, clean water, and sustainable land use. The OEC has a 40-year history of innovation, pragmatism, and success. Using legislative initiatives, legal action, scientific principles, and statewide partnerships, the OEC secures a healthier environment for Ohio's families and communities. For more information, visit [www.theOEC.org](http://www.theOEC.org).