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Explained: What are Ramsar Sites, and what is the significance of this listing?

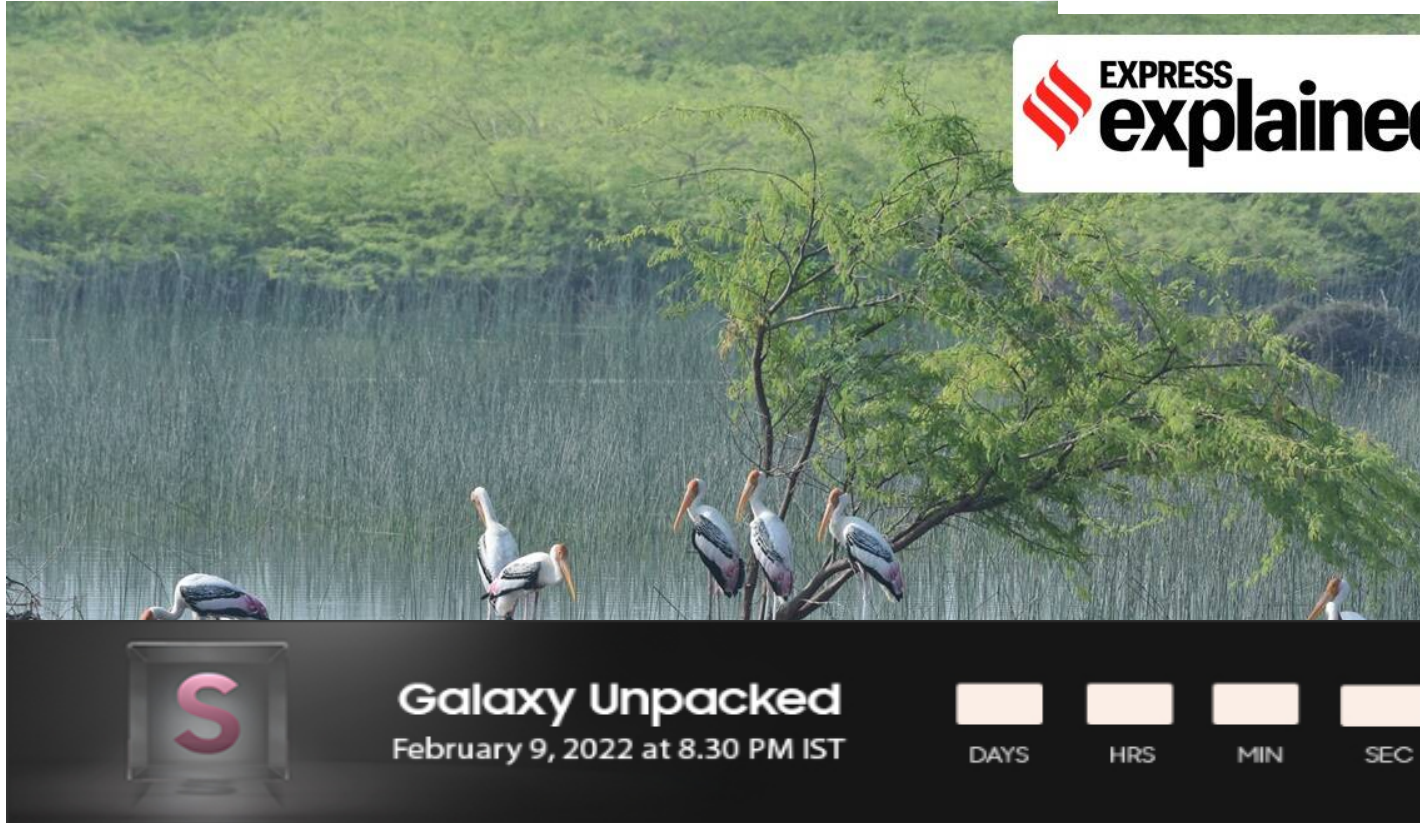
The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands has designated Khijadia Bird Sanctuary near Jamnagar in Gujarat and Bakhira Wildlife Sanctuary in Uttar Pradesh as wetlands of international importance. What is the significance of this?

EXPRESS EXPLAIN

Written by **Gopal B Kateshiya** , Edited by Explained Desk | Ahmedabad | Updated: February 6, 2022 2:49:42 pm



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Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary in Jamnagar. Photo by Vishwas Thakker

On the eve of the World Wetlands Day, **the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands designated** Khijadia Bird Sanctuary near Jamnagar in Gujarat and Bakhira Wil Sanctuary in Uttar Pradesh as wetlands of international importance. The Ramsar Convention, which came into existence in 1971, is an intergovernmental treaty provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources.

With the addition of these two wetlands, the number of Ramsar Sites in India has gone up to 49, the highest for any country in South Asia.

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At Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary in Jamnagar. (Photo: Vishwas Thakker)

What are the different definitions of wetlands?

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands defines wetlands as “areas of marsh, fen,] 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 depth of which at low tide does not exceed six meters.”

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US Fish and Wildlife Service has adopted the definition given by Cowardin and others who defined wetland as, “are 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: (1) at least periodically, the land supports predominantly hydrophytes; (2) the substrate is predominantly undrained hydric soil; and (3) 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.”

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At Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary in Jamnagar. With the addition of these two wetlands, the number of Ramsar Sites in India has gone up to 49, the highest for any country in South Asia. (Photo: Vishwa Thakker)

However, the Indian government's definition of wetland excludes river channels, paddy fields and other areas where commercial activity takes place. The Wetland (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017 notified by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change define wetlands as "area of marsh, fen, peatland 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 six meters, but does not include river channels, paddy fields, human-made water bodies constructed for drinking water purposes and structures specifically for aquaculture, salt production, recreation and irrigation purposes.

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Wetlands in India

Globally, wetlands cover 6.4 per cent of the geographical area of the world. In India, according to the National Wetland Inventory and Assessment compiled by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), wetlands are spread over 1,52,600 square kilometres (sq km) which is 4.63 per cent of the total geographical area of the country. Of the 1,52,600 sq km, inland-natural wetlands account for 43.4%, coastal-natural wetlands 24.3%. Rivers/streams occupy 52,600 sq km, reservoirs/barrages 24,800 sq km, inter-tidal mudflats 24,100 sq km, tanks/ponds 13,100 sq km and lake/ponds 7300 sq km. India has 19 types of wetlands. In state-wise distribution of wetlands, Gujarat is at the top with 34,700 sq km (17.56 per cent of total geographical area of the state), or 22.7 percent of total wetlands areas of the country thanks to a long coastline. It is followed by Andhra Pradesh (14,500 sq km), Uttar Pradesh (12,400 sq km) and West Bengal (11,100 sq km).

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Ramsar Sites in India

India's tally of 49 designated wetlands spread over 10,936 sq km in 18 states and two Union Territories is the largest network of Ramsar Sites in South Asia, twice that of any other country in the region, announced Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) after the latest inclusions. Of the 49 sites, 10 are

UP, 6 in Punjab, 4 each in Gujarat and Jammu and Kashmir, 3 each in Himachal Pradesh and Kerala, 2 each in Haryana, Maharashtra, Odisha, West Bengal, Rajasthan and one each in Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh.

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Global leaders

The countries with the most Ramsar Sites are the United Kingdom (175) and Mexico (142), as per the Ramsar List. Bolivia has the largest area with 142,000 sq km under the Convention protection. Canada, Chad, Congo and the Russian Federation also each designated over 100,000 sq km.

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India's importance in the Central Asian Flyway (CAF)

Dozens of species of birds of Central Asia and Siberia migrate to warmer tropical regions, including India and equatorial regions to escape harsh winter in their breeding grounds. According to Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), CAF, which includes 30 countries, covers at least 182 populations of 182 migratory waterbird species, including 29 globally threatened and near-threatened species, which breed, migrate and winter within the region. Wetlands in India act as foraging and resting grounds for these migratory birds during winter.

Significance of Ramsar listing

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At the Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary in Jamnagar. The countries with the most Ramsar Sites are the United Kingdom (175) and Mexico (142), as per the Ramsar List. (Photo: Vishwas Thakker)

Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (wildlife) and wildlife warden of Gujarat Shyamal Tikadar says that Ramsar secretariat designating a wetland as wetland of global importance may not lead to any extra funding by the global body. “But from the management point of view, it is like an accreditation. It is like an ISO certification. They can take you off the list as well if you don’t meet their standards continuously. Fine, it’s a feather in the cap but there is a cost to it and that cost c

be paid only if there is brand value.” Uday Vora, a retired IFS officer who is joint secretary of Bird Conservation Society of Gujarat says the Ramsar tag helps indirectly. “Not every Ramsar Site is a notified protected area under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1972, hence systematic protection and conservation cannot be in place there. But a Ramsar tag makes it incumbent on the government to strengthen the protection regime there and also creates defences against encroachment etc on wetlands,” he says.

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Gujarat's importance

While species like bar-headed goose fly over the Himalayas to enter India, not every waterbird or shorebird is strong enough to fly at such high altitudes. A number of species of birds, therefore, prefer to avoid the Himalaya and instead choose the route passing through Afghanistan and Pakistan to enter the Indian sub-continent via Gujarat and Rajasthan. Thus, Gujarat becomes the first landing point of many international migratory species of ducks, waders, plovers, terns, gulls etc and shorebirds as well as birds of prey.

The state has eight protected wetlands and Uday Vora says that in addition to the four wetlands on the Ramsar List, there are at least 17 other wetlands in Gujarat which make the cut for Ramsar. Experts say there are enough wetland resources in Gujarat to host these winged visitors, including greylag geese, crab plovers, common pochards, black-necked grebes, common cranes, demoiselle cranes etc.

“Wetlands in Gujarat are not just for migratory waterbirds and thus they should be considered only as areas for birders, eco-tourist and avi-tourists. Actually, wetlands are required for supporting daily life of our human society,” says Keta Tatu, a senior scientist with Gujarat Ecological Education and Research (GEER) Foundation and member of Gujarat State Wetland Authority.

AP Singh, additional principal chief conservator of forests (monitoring and evaluation of Gujarat, says Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary and Thol, both Ramsar Sites, are examples of sustainable and wise use of wetlands that provide livelihood to locals besides supporting around 100 per records available of Nal Sarovar and Thol sanctuaries, visit Nal Sarovar every year and forest department earns revenue about Rs.30 l and about 50,000 visitors and Rs 50,000 revenue from Thol. In Nal Sarovar, tourists visit the wetland by boats and about 300 boatmen earn about Rs80,000 each in a season,” says Singh.

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