



More Than Just A Swamp

Introduction:

Wetlands are very important to the well-being of many plants and animals, including people. But what are these areas, and what do they do? A Wetland is the area between dry land and open water. It is sometimes covered with a shallow layer of water, but there are also wetlands which can be dry for part of the year. The plants and animals which live there are adapted to this watery environment. There are many different types of wetlands.

Wetland Types

Swamp - Wetland where trees and shrubs grow which are flooded and rivers that experience both wet and dry periods during the year. They are often forested.

Marsh - Marshes are the wet areas filled with a variety of grasses and rushes. They can be found in both freshwater areas and in the saltwater areas near our coast.

Pocosin - These are the wet areas with evergreen trees and shrubs growing on peat or sandy soils. Peat is a spongy-feeling material made up of decaying plants. The word pocosin comes from the Algonquin Indian word meaning "swamp on a hill."

Wetland Functions

Flood Control - Excess water from heavy rains is slowed by wetland plants and stored in the low-lying areas of wetlands, preventing the waters of nearby rivers and streams from overflowing and damaging property.

Storm Buffer - Along our coast, wetlands take a beating from high winds and waves, yet remain intact. The thick vegetation buffers the forces of storms and protects the land from erosion.

Water Banks - Wetlands hold water during the wet season. This water seeps through the soil and into our underground water supplies.

Water Filter - Wetlands help purify runoff waters which carry pollutants. Silt and soil, which choke aquatic life, settle out. Wastes are broken down and absorbed by aquatic plants, as are many harmful chemicals.



Nurseries - Many fish and animals use wetlands as nurseries. They provide an abundant supply of food and shelter for they young.

Home Sweet Home - Wetlands are home to many animals. A thriving wetland probably has more life in it than any other kind of habitat.

Wildlife Pantry - Wetlands are so productive, many animals depend on them for food. Many migrating birds stopover in wetlands each spring and fall to rest and feed before continuing their trip, and some will spend the winter in the wetlands.

Recreational Opportunities - Wetlands provide us with places to watch birds and animals, and to fish, boat, and hunt.

Economics - Commercial fisherman depend on the wetlands to supply us with crabs and many other types of seafood.

Wetlands in Danger!

More than half of the U.S. wetlands have been lost since the 1600's. They have been drained to make farm fields, or filled for developments or dredged for waterways. Wetlands become "drylands" when people fill them, build dams, or divert the water that feeds these areas.

In the past wetlands were considered useless wastelands. Now we know that they are very valuable to people and wildlife. Changing opinions are resulting in new laws to help save wetlands, but there is still much work to be done to stop the destruction and to restore our wonderful wetlands.