



Earth Facts

FROM THE JAMAICA ENVIRONMENT TRUST



WHAT IS A WETLAND?

A wetland is any place that is regularly flooded with fresh, brackish or salty water.

Wetlands are often found on the coast, on coastal plains or on near-shore islands.

They are also known as swamps (when they have more trees) or marshes (more grass).

One of the most common types of wetland in Jamaica is the mangrove wetland, which is found along coasts, coastal rivers, tidal creeks, around ponds, lagoons and on small islands (cays).



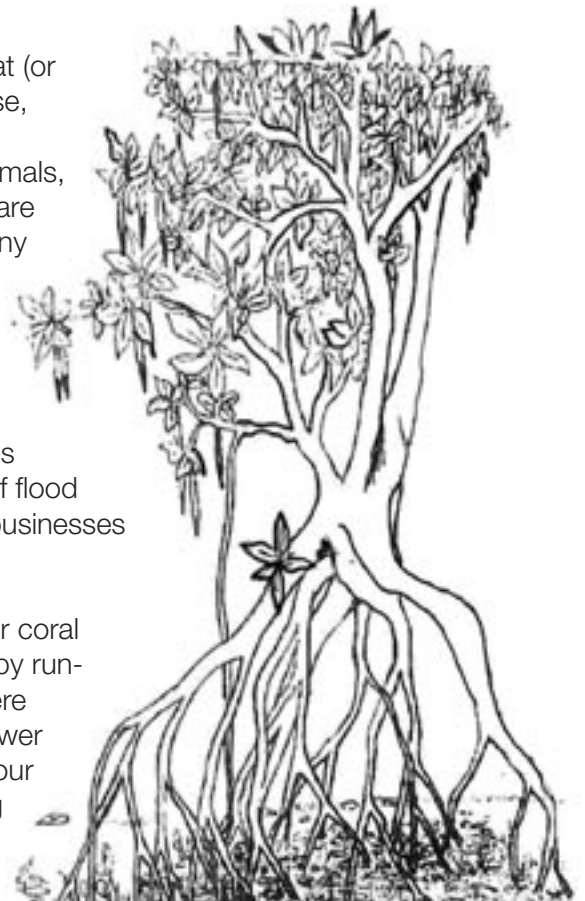
WHY WETLANDS ARE IMPORTANT

Wetlands are barriers that act as filters between the land and the sea. They protect marine (salt water) ecosystems such as coral reefs from too much freshwater. In the same way they protect fresh coastal groundwater from salt water that might seep in.

Wetlands are a habitat (or home) to many diverse, unusual and unique species of plants, animals, birds and fish. They are also a nursery for many types of marine organisms.

Wetlands protect coastal areas from storms and hurricanes and reduce the risk of flood damage to houses, businesses and roads.

Without wetlands, our coral reefs will be harmed by run-off from the land, there would be less fish, fewer beaches to visit and our underground drinking water would become more polluted.



GOING, GOING, GONE !

How we are destroying our Wetlands

WHAT WE DO NOW	EFFECTS
We dump rubbish into wetlands.	We pollute the natural environment.
We fill in wetlands to build houses and businesses.	We increase the risk of damage to structures from hurricanes and flooding.
We drain wetlands for agriculture.	We cause the land to become saline, polluted and unproductive.
We cut down trees for timber and charcoal.	We increase soil erosion, decrease coastal protection and lose fish and wildlife populations.
We use too much fertilizer and pesticides on our farms and gardens.	These toxic substances can run-off into wetlands where they may accumulate, killing plants and animals and possibly causing cancer and other diseases fatal to humans.



About one quarter of the Earth's rain runs off as flood water, causing loss of life and billions of dollars in damage. Wetlands are like huge sponges that hold flood waters and reduce the likelihood of flooding.

As the global climate changes, coastal storms and hurricanes are likely to increase. Hurricane Gilbert caused more than US\$ 900 million in damage, much of it in coastal areas. Wetlands break the force of storms and lessen the amount of damage.

Wetland plants absorb carbon dioxide from the air and produce oxygen through photosynthesis. Preserving wetlands (and all forested areas) is an important way to reduce global warming and improve the quality of the air we breathe.

During the day, water evaporates from wetlands and breezes carry it inland where it contributes to local rainfall, benefiting farms and providing fresh water.

Wetlands are extremely rich in plant and animal life and provide the basis for wetland and marine food webs. They are therefore essential to the survival of local fish populations.

We need places of quiet, natural beauty to relax and get away from city life. Wetlands offer many recreational and educational opportunities such as boat trips, canoeing, fishing, bird watching and visits for students. Wetlands are a valuable resource for eco-tourism.

WHY SHOULD WE PROTECT WETLANDS ?

Water is essential to humans as well as all other forms of life.

Wetlands are important for maintaining fresh water supplies. They catch and store rain water, refill underground reserves and protect them from salty water.



Most importantly, we should protect wetlands because we have a responsibility to preserve them for our children. Wetlands are an essential part of the wonderful processes that sustain life on earth. We should protect them, not just as a habitat for wildlife but also to guarantee the health and welfare of those who live near or around them for generations to come.

BUT WHAT ABOUT CROCODILES AND MOSQUITOES???

It's true that mosquitoes live in wetlands and so do crocodiles. Mosquitoes carry diseases that are harmful to humans and crocodiles are large, threatening predators that may attack even when unprovoked.

HOW SHOULD WE LIVE WITH THESE CREATURES?

Mosquitoes have a very short range of flight – if we kept human dwellings away from wetlands, we would not be bothered by them. In fact, most mosquitoes find breeding places right in our own gardens – the best thing we can do about that is practice good public health measures around our homes.

Our crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*) is endangered and protected by law. It is important to wetland habitats, because it is the major predator and keeps populations healthy by preying on sick or weak animals thereby maintaining the balance of nature. Crocodiles should not be approached or fed by humans and coastal areas should be kept free of fish guts and other waste, which may attract crocodiles.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Check it out!

We should get to know our wetlands. Find out where your nearest wetland is. Try to determine what is happening to it and if there are any alternatives.

Reduce!

The health of wetlands depends on fresh water inflows. If we use more fresh water, less runs off into our wetlands, therefore, we should conserve water and reduce the amount we use. Although more than 75% of the Earth's surface is made up of water, only 2.8% is available for human consumption. On islands with limited groundwater supplies, the shortages can be very serious. So, when you take a shower or brush your teeth, do NOT leave the tap running. Turn it on when you need it and off when you don't. Water your garden at night to reduce evaporation.

Reject!

Prevent water pollution. Do not dump rubbish in wetlands or in open spaces. Never cut down mangroves or clear wetland areas. Do not use pesticides, fertilizers and inorganic cleaning products. Contaminated water supplies threaten human, animal and plant life. Encourage others to reject bad practices.

Support!

Join an environmental group and support the conservation of wetlands. Let people know that you care about the environment and don't want to see it destroyed.





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