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Q7

**What is wetland? Explain the Ramsar concept of 'wise use' in the context of wetland conservation. Cite two examples of Ramsar sites from India. (150 Words, 10 Marks).**

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2018 · GS III · 10 marks · Environment and Conservation

Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment.

**Core demand of the question**

- Define a wetland
- Explain the Ramsar idea of **wise use**
- Cite two Indian Ramsar sites and how **wise use** applies

**Revision summary**

- **Wetlands are waterlogged transitional ecosystems:** marshes, lakes, floodplains, mangroves and similar habitats.

Ramsar **wise use** means maintaining ecological character inside sustainable development, not a total ban and not drainage.

India is a Ramsar party (1982); **Wetlands Rules 2017** add domestic controls.

**Chilika Lake** (Odisha) and **Keoladeo National Park** (Rajasthan), both listed in 1981, are two Indian Ramsar sites.

**Wise use** at those sites is hydrology, livelihood and limits on conversion.

**Introduction**

A **wetland** is land that is wet enough, often enough, to support plants and animals that need waterlogged soil: marshes, lakes, floodplains, mangroves, coral flats and peat. These are not wastelands. They store flood water, recharge wells, hold fish and birds, and buffer storms. The **Ramsar Convention (1971)** asks countries to list important sites and to practise **wise use** so people can live from the wetland without killing its ecological character.

**Body****What a wetland is**

- Wetlands are **transitional ecosystems** between dry land and deep water, with water at or near the surface for a large part of the year.
- They include inland lakes and marshes, river floodplains, estuaries, **mangroves**, lagoons and man-made tanks and reservoirs when they function as wetland habitat.
- India notified the **Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017** to identify wetlands (other than those already under Forest or coastal regulation in specified ways) and to restrict filling, dumping and untreated effluent.

**Ramsar 'wise use'**

- Ramsar defines **wise use** as the maintenance of the **ecological character** of a wetland through ecosystem approaches, within **sustainable development**.
- Ecological character means the ecosystem services, habitat and species assemblage that made the site important.
- **Wise use** is not a fence that bans all people, and not a licence to drain. It is **use that does not convert** the marsh into a colony, a dump or a dry field.
- Tools include zonation, regulated fishing and tourism, treatment of inflow, community rights, and bans on reclamation and invasive species.
- India joined Ramsar in **1982**. Listing a **Ramsar site** creates an international conservation duty plus a domestic management plan.

## Two Indian Ramsar sites

- **Chilika Lake (Odisha)**, listed in 1981, is a brackish lagoon with Irrawaddy dolphins, migratory birds and a large fishery. **Wise use** here means keeping the sea mouth and salinity balance, regulating aquaculture and tourism, and supporting fisher livelihoods - work associated with the Chilika Development Authority after the site faced degradation and a Ramsar Montreux concern, later improved.
- **Keoladeo National Park (Bharatpur, Rajasthan)**, also listed in 1981, is a man-managed marsh famous for migratory waterbirds. **Wise use** means **assured water** from upstream, control of feral cattle and invasive plants, and tourism that does not starve the birds of habitat. Water conflict with nearby agriculture has been the test of **wise use**, not a postcard of painted storks.
- Other early sites such as **Loktak (Manipur)** or **Sundarbans (West Bengal)** show the same rule: people and hydrology must be planned together.

## Comment

- **Wise use** fails when a Ramsar plaque sits on a shrinking map while sewage and real estate continue.
- It succeeds when **hydrology, livelihood and law** are one plan, as Chilika's later recovery partly showed.

## Flow diagram

Wetland ecosystem -> Ramsar list  
 Ramsar list -> Wise use keep ecological character  
 Wise use keep ecological character -> Chilika fishery and salinity  
 Wise use keep ecological character -> Keoladeo water and birds  
 Wise use keep ecological character -> No drain dump convert

## Conclusion

A wetland is a water-shaped ecosystem, not empty land. Ramsar **wise use** means keeping that ecological character while allowing sustainable livelihood. Chilika and Keoladeo show the duty in India: manage water, fishing and tourism so the site still functions as a wetland, not as a drained plot with a name board.

## Facts & figures

**Ramsar Convention**

1971 treaty on wetlands of international importance; India acceded in 1982.

**Wise use**

Ramsar term: maintain the ecological character of a wetland through ecosystem approaches within sustainable development.

**Chilika Lake**

Brackish lagoon in Odisha; among India's first Ramsar sites (1981); fishery, dolphins and migratory birds.

**Keoladeo National Park**

Bharatpur, Rajasthan; Ramsar site (1981); managed marsh for migratory waterbirds, dependent on upstream water.

**Wetlands Rules 2017**

Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules: identify wetlands and restrict reclamation, dumping and untreated effluent.

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