

Wetlands – What they are and why are they important . . .



What is a wetland? A wetland is transitional land that lies between the water and dry ground. It has often been referred to as ‘too wet to plow and too dry to swim’. Most people think of wetlands as marsh-like areas filled with cattails. However, there are many types of wetlands such as swamps, marshes, bogs and fens, and seasonal wetlands such as wet meadows, sedge meadows and wet prairies.

Officially, a wetland contains:

1. Water at or near the surface during at least part of the year.
2. Special wetland soils known as hydric (or moisture containing) soils.
3. Specific types of plants known as wetland plants and vegetation.

Why are wetlands important?

While some view wetlands as wasted land, in reality they are one of our most valuable resources. Indeed, their importance to the protection of our lakes and streams cannot be overstated. For this reason, many wetlands, particularly the larger ones and those bordering the Great Lakes, are protected by state and federal laws. A number of communities also regulate smaller wetlands. Some of the many benefits we derive from wetlands include:

1. Helping to control flooding and storm water. Wetlands help to stabilize soil and reduce erosion by soaking up excessive surface water runoff. They can then slowly release this excess water either into the groundwater or into the lake or stream.
2. Protecting water quality by filtering and breaking down sediments, nutrients, and toxins and then slowly releasing the water to recharge the groundwater.
3. Providing habitat for many different species of wildlife including fish, insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals. This habitat is used for breeding, nesting, feeding and cover. Many threatened or endangered species depend on wetlands.
4. Providing numerous recreational opportunities for fishing, bird watching, canoeing, hiking and hunting. In addition, there are other economic benefits such as farming for blueberries, cranberries, wild rice and timber.
5. Treating pollution by serving as a biological and chemical oxidation basin.
6. Controlling erosion by serving as a sedimentation area and filtering basin for silt and organic matter.

You can play a role in protecting our vital wetland resources by helping to restore wetlands, promoting wetland stewardship and permanent protection through conservation easements, and educating yourself and others about the importance of wetlands and how to protect them.

Having a clean environment is of primary importance for our health and economy. Clean waterways provide recreation, commercial opportunities, fish habitat, and add beauty to our landscape. All of us benefit from clean water - and all of us have a role in getting and keeping our lakes, rivers, wetlands, and groundwater clean. For more easy steps on protecting our lakes and streams, visit www.mywatersheds.org.

