

## Why we need to protect wetlands

Many people living in the United States are unaware of the importance of wetlands and the need to protect them. It's an issue occasionally reported on television news and sometimes on programs found on cable TV channels such as The Discovery Channel, Animal Planet and the National Geographic Channel. But what are wetlands? And why are they so important?

Wetlands are land in which the soil is saturated with moisture either permanently or during certain times during the year. Wetlands may be partially or completely covered by shallow pools of water and include lakes, rivers, streams, ponds, swamps and marshes. They can be saltwater, freshwater or brackish. Another way to describe a wetland is that it is an area of land having a water table that stands at or near the surface for a long enough season each year to support aquatic plants.

An example of a large wetlands system is the Florida Everglades which is the large wetlands system in the United States. A little closer to home we have the Congaree Swamp located in Richland County, just southeast of Columbia, S.C. which consists of more than 22,000 acres of floodplain forest, swamp and adjacent uplands. While not the largest wetland in the country, it is considered to be the largest remnant of old-growth floodplain forest remaining on the continent. It is quite spectacular and well worth a visit.

Most people don't realize that wetlands are considered the most biologically diverse of all the Earth's ecosystems. Besides a wide variety of plant life consisting of many species of trees shrubs, flowers, grasses and sedges, there is an abundance of animal life including amphibians, reptiles, mammals, birds, fish, and insects.

Wetlands have other important functions that are not as well known. Wetlands are very effective at filtering and cleaning water pollution and serve as a natural wastewater purification system. Flood control is another vital function evidenced by the vastly increased potential for flooding that exists in urban areas when compared to undeveloped natural areas.

Concern about the health of our wetlands hasn't always existed. As recently as 2008, approximately half of the world's wetlands had been drained for development, either for residential, industrial, agricultural or other uses.

In the U.S., all wetlands are protected. Construction near or in wetlands requires a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Generally in the U.S., wetlands will not be filled in unless a substitute wetland is created as a replacement.

Residents of Joint Base Charleston can help protect wetlands by keeping trash, dirt, yard waste and pet waste properly picked up and by not performing vehicle maintenance in their driveways. Airmen, Sailors, and civilians can all do their part by preventing or reporting spills and by ensuring work such as building or aircraft maintenance doesn't result in trash chemicals or other debris being left out in the rain.

Remember, when you prevent storm water contamination, you protect wetlands. The point of contact at Joint Base Charleston for any Environmental questions or concerns is Kurtis Evans ([kurtis.evans@us.af.mil](mailto:kurtis.evans@us.af.mil)).