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**EXECUTIVE SECRETARY OF THE CONVENTION ON
BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY**

on the occasion of

**WORLD WETLANDS DAY
Wetlands and Tourism**

2 February 2012

Today we celebrate World Wetlands Day to raise awareness of these extremely valuable ecosystems that continue to be among the most threatened. We now recognize that wetlands provide many benefits to people, including that wetlands and their wildlife are a key part of the global tourism and cultural travel experience. From the stark beauty of Arctic lakes to breath-taking experiences of coral reefs, wetlands provide magnificent landscapes that tourists can appreciate. Behind the beautiful vistas and scenes, wetlands also underpin many services that tourists need, such as the availability of clean water, the recycling of wastes and protection from extreme weather events.

Tourism represents both a threat and an opportunity to wetlands. Unsustainable tourism has been called a “devourer of landscapes” for the extensive changes it causes in land use and to local economies and cultures. At the same time, if planned and implemented according to best practices, it can provide political and financial support for conservation and sustainable (or wise) use of wetlands and related ecosystem services.

Sustainable tourism means putting the principles of sustainable development into practice by ensuring that tourism protects the environment, conserves biodiversity, respects local communities and their cultural heritage and values, and provides equitable socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders, including by contributing to poverty alleviation.

With the ambitious goal (defined through Aichi target 11) of achieving by 2020, through ecologically representative systems of protected areas, the effective conservation of 17 per cent of the world’s terrestrial and inland water areas and 10 per cent of marine and coastal areas (many of which are wetlands), and with tourism already being the largest global market-based contributor to park agencies’ budgets, tourism is slated to play a larger role in the implementation of both the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Ramsar Convention.

In the United States of America, for example, in 2006 more than 31 per cent of adults fed, photographed and observed wildlife, spending US\$ 45 billion in the process; 1.5 million waterfowl hunters have funded conservation projects and generated a total of US\$ 50 billion annually in economic activity; more than 35 million Americans take part in recreational fishing, almost all of it in wetlands, spending more than US \$37 billion each year. The benefits of wetland tourism are not limited to rural or remote areas: some 200,000 visitors per year enjoy the 40-hectare London Wetland Centre alongside the River Thames, right in the heart of one of the world’s major cities. In developing countries, wetlands tourism is equally important: emblematic examples include the Okavango Delta in Botswana, the African Great Lakes, the Pantanal/Chaco region in Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay (the world’s largest Ramsar site), the Tonle Sap in Cambodia – one of Asia’s largest freshwater lakes, and most coral reefs. Tourism of some sort is invariably associated with most wetlands, large to small, and in most rural and urban areas throughout the world.

In 2010, the number of international tourists reached 940 million, and this is forecast to grow to around 1.6 billion by 2020. This economic activity generated by travel and tourism, also associated with wetlands, represents around 5 per cent of global GDP and up to one in every eight of the world’s jobs. International tourism expenditure linked to wetlands can be estimated at around US\$ 925 billion each year, and this does not include the vast numbers of domestic tourists (thought to represent up to seven times the volume of international arrivals) or visitors who do not stay overnight. Economic values of wetlands for tourism are therefore huge.

Sustainable wetlands tourism is about effective partnerships at all levels. Efforts towards this will be enhanced through guidance to be discussed at the eleventh meeting of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands to be held in Bucharest from 6 to 13 July 2012. The Convention on Biological Diversity, through our joint work programme with the Ramsar

Convention, is pleased to have contributed to this process through its own general guidance on biodiversity and tourism. The efforts of the Ramsar Convention will also be enhanced through its recent memorandum of understanding with the United Nations World Tourism Organization and both of these are among 27 international agencies, organizations and conventions that signed up to cooperate on the implementation of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and the achievement of the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, in November 2011 in Montreal.

Sustainable tourism can bring strong political attention and economic opportunities to securing wetland wise use and the maintenance of key socio-economic wetland values, both in Ramsar Sites and in other wetlands globally. We join the world community in celebrating today in recognition of the importance of wetlands and tourism and commit to continuing our partnership efforts to achieve sustainability and find the future we want.
