

Ramsar Convention on Wetlands COP15

Highlights: Thursday, 24 July 2025

Delegates to the Convention on Wetlands gathered in Victoria Falls City, Zimbabwe, home to Mosi-oa-Tunya – the smoke that thunders – for the first day of the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP15), under the theme “Protecting Wetlands for our Common Future.” The ceremony included remarks by the President of Zimbabwe. Delegates exchanged views during ministerial panels on mainstreaming wetland policy and legal frameworks, collaborative approaches, and resource mobilization. The day closed with the Wetland City Accreditation ceremony.

Opening Ceremony

Yan Zheng, Deputy Director, National Forestry and Grassland Administration, China, on behalf of the COP14 President, gave the opening remarks. He shared China’s progress in advancing global work on wetlands protection and conservation, including his country’s leadership in establishing Ramsar Wetland Cities around the world, and promoting international cooperation. Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, Deputy Executive Director, UN Environment Programme (UNEP), speaking on behalf of UN Secretary-General António Guterres and UNEP Executive Director Inger Andersen, emphasized wetlands as key to achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) on health (SDG 3), food (SDG 2), and water (SDG 6). She highlighted UNEP’s role in supporting delivery of national biodiversity strategies and action plans (NBSAPs) to include actions for wetlands protection and conservation. She urged for countries to work together, not in silos, and to seek long-term solutions.

Astrid Schomaker, Executive Secretary, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), emphasized the importance of wetlands for biodiversity protection, human health, and wellbeing and welcomed the collaborative work between the CBD and the Convention on Wetlands for implementing the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Ivonne Higuero, Secretary General, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), underscored the collaboration between CITES and the Convention on Wetlands, noting that conservation and protection of wetlands and wildlife are interdependent goals. She stressed that collaboration and aligned strategies between the two conventions will enable progress and build a resilient future.

Highlighting the unique legacy of Zimbabwe, Audrey Azoulay, Director-General, UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), noted that Mosi-oa-Tunya, or Victoria Falls, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. She said urgent challenges, including for wetlands, should be addressed through international cooperation, and no country should withdraw from this collective responsibility.

Grethel Aguilar, Director-General, International Union for Conservation of Nature, urged delegates to scale-up work in wetlands, noting that wetland ecosystems offer the most effective nature-based solutions, and highlighted the potential for lasting impacts by opening more spaces through stronger collaboration, including with the private sector, innovative financing, and Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

Coenraad Krijger, Chief Executive Officer, Wetlands International, speaking on behalf of the Ramsar International Organization Partners, identified key elements for a successful COP15: adoption of an ambitious 5th Strategic Plan; a focus on finance; commitments for the rapid implementation of key resolutions; expanding engagement with freshwater challenges; and a call to action for climate change mitigation and adaptation. Éliane Ubalijoro, Chief Executive Officer, Center for International Forestry Research and World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF), underlined the importance of science-based partnerships to help translate the Convention on Wetlands into meaningful action on the ground. Amy Fraenkel, Executive Secretary, Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS), noted that wetlands serve as critical habitats for migratory species, and stressed the need for protection and restoration of ecological connectivity.

Richard Moyo, Minister of State for Provincial Affairs and Devolution, Zimbabwe, welcomed participants and emphasized the symbolism of gathering in a setting where “nature still speaks with such a mighty voice.” Evelyn Ndlovu, Minister of Environment, Climate and Wildlife, Zimbabwe, expressed hope that delegates will produce tangible results to protect wetlands, emphasizing the importance of knowledge exchange and empowering communities through appropriate policy resolutions.

Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa, President of Zimbabwe, welcomed global leaders and delegates to Victoria Falls, calling it “a living testament to the power and beauty of wetlands.” He emphasized the role wetlands play in ensuring ecological health, providing livelihoods and critical ecosystem services, and supporting the achievement of the SDGs. He called for prioritizing resilience to climate change impacts and noted the designation of seven Ramsar Sites in Zimbabwe. In the context of the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, he called for increased commitment from all stakeholders to increase sustainable financing and recommended integrating wetlands conservation in National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and NBSAPs to access financing. He further stressed cooperation, effective implementation, and knowledge sharing across all stakeholders.

Russell Mmiso Dlamini, Prime Minister, Eswatini, said his country’s progress in the protection and wise use of wetlands has resulted in the restoration of plant species, income generation, and sustainable food production. He recommended mainstreaming wetlands protection and conservation across all multilateral environment agreements (MEAs) and called for stronger partnerships between countries.

Michael Bizwick Usi, Vice-President, Malawi, emphasized work on wetlands conservation and protection in Malawi, highlighting strategic partnerships and creation of a wetland national action plan. He urged exploration of sustainable financial mechanisms and new partnerships with the private sector.

Musonda Mumba, Secretary General, Convention on Wetlands, closed the opening plenary. She lauded the Convention’s growth, but lamented that wetlands ecosystems are still undervalued, underfunded, and underrepresented in national planning. She underscored COP15 as a platform for collaboration and science-based action and urged countries to capitalize on synergies, recognize knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and empower future generations to make wetlands the backbone of sustainability.

High-Level Ministerial Segment

The High-level ministerial segment included three panel segments.

Strengthening policy and legal frameworks by mainstreaming wetlands conservation: Ivonne Higuero, CITES, moderated the panel, emphasizing integration of wetland conservation into NBSAPs, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), NAPs, and land degradation neutrality targets.

Narend Singh, South Africa, stressed the importance of enabling environments, including institutional coordination across sectors, wetland conservation at a larger scale, and inclusivity of local governments and peoples. Sara Petkov, Serbia, highlighted municipal efforts to integrate wetlands into planning and intergenerational cooperation.

Yan Zheng, China, emphasized strengthening bilateral and national cooperation, and highlighted China's efforts to promote synergies, develop Ramsar Wetland Cities worldwide, and implement its 2021 Wetlands Conservation Law.

Bhupender Yadav, India, underscored promoting sustainable lifestyles for the wise use of wetlands, and highlighted expansion of its wetland network, including through Ramsar Wetland Cities.

Ricardo Antonio Molina Peñaloza, Venezuela, discussed protection of Mother Earth through state and municipal governance, Indigenous and gender-based approaches, comprehensive water resource management and a basin-based approach, and commitment to Ramsar regional initiatives.

Marwan Abdullah Al Zaabi, United Arab Emirates, said wetlands are at the forefront of nature-based solutions to the triple planetary crisis. He stressed strengthening scientific research, synergies, international cooperation, and transboundary partnerships.

Hamad Yusuf Masauni, Tanzania, highlighted environmental wetland assessments and impacts to human wellbeing. He called for strengthening Africa's engagement across MEAs, improving access to climate and environmental finance for adaptation and local river solutions, and transboundary cooperation.

Improving integrated planning and management through promoting collaborative approaches: Panelists discussed collaborative approaches to improving integrated wetlands management, by sharing examples from their own countries. Ubalijoro, Chief Executive Officer of CIFOR-ICRAF, moderated the panel.

Evelyn Ndlovu, Zimbabwe, highlighted the collective responsibilities of countries to safeguard the crucial and irreplaceable function of wetlands. She underscored the importance of the adoption of the Victoria Falls Declaration as a commitment for future generations and as a genesis for a transformative global movement dedicated to wetlands.

Maisa Rojas Corradi, Chile, underscored the national and international importance of wetlands and the importance of multilateralism. She described that work on wetlands in Chile involves collaboration across 17 ministries and highlighted Chile's commitment to include wetlands in their NDCs.

Vera Kamtukule, Malawi, presented four priorities for integrated wetland planning and management: the range of ecosystem services and goods provided, multisectoral management, ecosystem interconnectivity, and collaborative approaches.

Ernesto Adobo, the Philippines, highlighted participatory approaches, regional cooperation, transboundary planning, and shared learning among states. He underscored integrating scientific methods with ecological knowledge and advancing rights-based conservation centering on local stewardship.

Jiwoh Abdulai, Sierra Leone, emphasized partnerships with local communities and highlighted that major environmental decisions in Sierra Leone now require agreement across ministries, avoiding duplication and future conflicts.

Dominic Chiinda, Zambia, said Zambia had established a Ramsar National Committee that included civil society and youth. He called for a regional platform to harmonize cross-border planning, joint scientific initiatives, and financing mechanisms on nature-based bonds.

Identifying and mobilising resources to fund sustainable wetland interventions, programmes and activities: Amy Fraenkel, CITES, moderated the panel. Noting that science confirms excessive pressure on the planet, with wetlands

experiencing the highest loss and degradation rates, Adianez Taboada Zamora, Cuba, said a sustainable future requires increasing predictable and public international funding; building domestic resources; and ensuring technological knowledge transfer, especially for Small Island Developing States and coastal countries. She highlighted Cuba's efforts to mobilize external and national resources and emphasized her country's willingness to participate in identifying the best solutions to ensure a fairer and healthy environment for future generations.

Ana Paula Chantre Luna de Carvalho Pereira, Angola, requested support for developing management plans for Ramsar Sites, citing the challenges Angola faces from climate change, pressure on water resources, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Raquel Hilianova Soto Torres, Peru, described advances in its legal and policy frameworks and novel economic instruments for wetlands. She highlighted the role of subnational governments in incorporating wetlands in planning instruments and budgets, and discussed Peru's work with Indigenous organizations on wetland and peatland conservation.

Calling for greater international cooperation, Mona Mohamed Ali Ahmed, Sudan, lamented the damage to their wetlands from ongoing military conflict and requested the Secretariat's support for restoration efforts. Citing the threat of large dams to wetlands worldwide, she emphasized the need to address large dam construction, particularly on transboundary rivers.

Evelyn Ndlovu, Zimbabwe, concluded the panel by noting that the key elements of the draft Victoria Falls Declaration are tied to the three themes of the panel discussions.

Special Presentations

Wetland City Accreditation: Jay Aldous, Deputy Secretary General, Ramsar Convention on Wetlands; Ingrid Coetzee, Director, Biodiversity, Nature and Health, Local Governments for Sustainability Africa; and Suh Seung Oh, Executive Director, Ramsar Regional Center East Asia, described the newly-accredited Wetland Cities. Secretary General Mumba presented the accreditation certificates to representatives of 31 cities from 16 countries that have supported the wise use of urban wetlands, including: Trelew, Argentina; Mechelen, Belgium; Kasane-Kazungula, Botswana; Shakawe, Botswana; Valdivia, Chile; Chongming, China; Dali, China; Fuzhou, China; Hangzhou, China; Jiujiang, China; Lhasa, China; Suzhou, China; Wenzhou, China; Yueyang, China; Abbeville, France; Arles, France; Champigny, France; Indore, India; Udaipur, India; Babol, Iran; Bandar Kiasar, Iran; Gandoman, Iran; Nagoya City, Japan; Mehdiya, Morocco; Balanga City, Philippines; Poznan, Poland; Gimhae, Republic of Korea; Mungyeong, Republic of Korea; Novi Sad, Serbia; Canton de Genève, Switzerland; and Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe.

In the Corridors

The first day of COP15 showcased both calmness and intensity, echoing the essence of Victoria Falls, Mosi-oa-Tunya, or "the smoke that thunders." The scene greeting the delegates was calm, but the live local music and dance underscored a deeper energy that some delegates hoped could drive ambitious outcomes.

Music was a common theme including a Zimbabwe plenary choir singing between events. Tsimba Itsoka – "no foot, no footprint" – the famous album of renowned Zimbabwe national artist Oliver Mtukudzi – was quoted to reflect the strong interest of parties to embed wetland planning across multilateral agreements, sectors, and borders.

Increased energy was also generated by the presence of Zimbabwe President Mnangagwa. Other high-level ministers were also present, which prompted one delegate to claim, "Wetlands are really important right now—both nationally and internationally."

Talk of synergies and regional and cross-border cooperation featured strongly in the ministerial statements. But in the corridors, some lamented the shortcomings and mystery of the Victoria Falls Declaration. One delegate asked, "I haven't even seen it—was it really adopted?" Others said adopting an attitude of flexibility was key to the process and the venue. At the end of the day, the tone of the meeting remained hopeful, reflecting the words of Mtukudzi: "If we're not walking, if our feet are not moving, there's no footprint for people to follow."