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India's 98 Ramsar Sites – Wetland Conservation Strategy and the Patna-Chhari Dhand Additions

3 February 2026

SUBJECTS COVERED

ENVIRONMENT

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WHY IN NEWS

On World Wetlands Day (February 2, 2026), India added Patna Bird Sanctuary (Uttar Pradesh) and Chhari-Dhand Wetland Reserve (Gujarat) to the Ramsar List, bringing its total to 98 — the highest in South Asia — a 276% expansion since 2014.

UNDERSTANDING THE RAMSAR CONVENTION

The **Ramsar Convention on Wetlands** is the oldest modern intergovernmental environmental treaty still in force. Signed on **February 2, 1971** in the Iranian city of **Ramsar** on the Caspian Sea coast, it came into force in 1975. The Convention takes its full name from its founding document: the “**Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat.**”

Current status (2026):

172 contracting parties (almost universal participation among UN member states)

2,520+ Ramsar Sites listed globally

Total area protected: approximately **2.5 million square kilometres** of wetlands worldwide

The Ramsar Convention is unusual among international environmental agreements in that it does not have a legally binding enforcement mechanism — it operates on the principle of “**wise use**”: each contracting party commits to the sustainable management of wetlands in its territory, whether listed or not. The Convention provides a framework, technical guidance, and international recognition, not sanctions.

THE TWO NEW INDIAN SITES

Patna Bird Sanctuary — Etah District, Uttar Pradesh

Not to be confused with the capital of Bihar, **Patna Bird Sanctuary** is located in **Etah district, Uttar Pradesh**, near the town of Patna in the upper Gangetic plain.

Key features:

Seasonal freshwater lake (jheels) surrounded by marshland

Winter home for thousands of migratory waterbirds from Central Asia, Siberia, and the Himalayas

Species: Bar-headed Goose, Northern Pintail, Shoveler, Gadwall, Common Teal, Eurasian Coot

The sanctuary draws birdwatchers during October–March migratory peak

First designated as a state wildlife sanctuary before Ramsar nomination

Chhari-Dhand Wetland Reserve — Kutch District, Gujarat

Chhari-Dhand is a seasonal saline marsh in the **Rann of Kutch** ecosystem in **Kutch district, Gujarat**.

Key features:

Part of the larger Rann of Kutch wetland complex

Supports large flamingo aggregations — both **Greater Flamingo** (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) and **Lesser Flamingo** (*Phoeniconaias minor*)

Habitat for the **Desert Fox** (*Vulpes vulpes pusilla*) — a sub-species found in the Thar-Rann ecosystem

Important for **Indian Wild Ass** (*Equus hemionus khur*) — the Rann is the world’s last large habitat for this species

Seasonal flooding creates critical feeding grounds for wading birds

INDIA’S RAMSAR TRAJECTORY — FROM 6 TO 98 IN FOUR DECADES

India has been a Ramsar contracting party since 1982. The pace of Ramsar site additions has accelerated dramatically:

Period	Sites Added	Total
1982–2014	26	26
2014–2019	13	39
2019–2024	50	89
2024–2026	9	98

Key state rankings (top Ramsar states):

Tamil Nadu: 20 sites (most in India)

Uttar Pradesh: 10 sites

Jammu & Kashmir: 5 sites

Notable Indian Ramsar sites:

Site	State	Significance
Chilika Lake	Odisha	India's first Ramsar site (1981); largest coastal lagoon in Asia
Keoladeo Ghana	Rajasthan	UNESCO World Heritage Site; winter home of Siberian Crane
Loktak Lake	Manipur	Only floating phumdis (heterogeneous mass of vegetation); Sangai deer
Wular Lake	J&K	Largest freshwater lake in India
Deepor Beel	Assam	Last remaining large wetland south of Brahmaputra in Assam
Nalsarovar	Gujarat	Largest natural lake in Gujarat; flamingos and migratory birds
Point Calimere	Tamil Nadu	Blackbuck + flamingo sanctuary; internationally significant
Asthamudi	Kerala	Backwater estuary; mangrove-dependent fisheries

INDIA'S WETLAND STATUS AND THREATS

India's wetlands cover approximately **15.9 million hectares** — about **5% of the country's land area**. This includes coastal wetlands (mangroves, estuaries, lagoons), inland freshwater wetlands (lakes, rivers, floodplains, marshes), and human-made wetlands (reservoirs, tanks, ponds).

Threats to Indian wetlands:

Encroachment and conversion: Agricultural expansion and urban development have claimed 40% of India's natural wetlands over three decades

Pollution: Agricultural runoff (fertilisers, pesticides), industrial effluents, and sewage discharge cause eutrophication — explosive algal growth that depletes oxygen and kills aquatic life

Invasive species: Water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) has colonised many freshwater wetlands, blocking light and oxygen

Sand mining: Riverbed extraction destroys aquatic habitats and reduces water retention

Climate change: Altered monsoon patterns, increased evaporation, reduced Himalayan snowmelt affect wetland hydrology

Wetlands Mitigation Plan: The Government of India notified the **Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017** under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986. These rules require states to create a **Wetlands Authority** and develop **Wetland Health Cards** for each designated wetland. The rules replaced the 2010 Wetlands Rules.

WORLD WETLANDS DAY — FEBRUARY 2

World Wetlands Day is observed annually on **February 2** — the anniversary of the signing of the Ramsar Convention in 1971. The first World Wetlands Day was in 1997 (on the Convention’s 26th anniversary). The UN General Assembly formally designated it as an **International Day** through **Resolution A/RES/75/317** (August 30, 2021), with the first official UN observance on **February 2, 2022**.

Theme 2026: “Wetlands and Traditional Knowledge: Celebrating Cultural Heritage” — highlighting indigenous and community-based knowledge systems in wetland management.

ECOSYSTEM SERVICES OF WETLANDS

Wetlands are among the planet’s most productive ecosystems — they cover only ~6% of Earth’s surface but support 40% of global species. Their ecosystem services include:

Water purification: Wetland plants and soils filter pollutants and excess nutrients from water (natural “kidneys”)

Flood regulation: Wetlands absorb and slow floodwaters (natural “sponges”)

Carbon sequestration: Peatlands and mangroves store disproportionate amounts of carbon — peatlands cover 3% of land but store 30% of soil carbon

Coastal protection: Mangroves and coastal wetlands buffer against storm surges and coastal erosion

Biodiversity habitat: Critical breeding, feeding, and migratory stopover sites for birds, fish, reptiles, and mammals

Livelihoods: Fisheries, agriculture, and tourism dependent on wetland ecosystems support millions

UPSC RELEVANCE

Ramsar Convention (Feb 2, 1971; Ramsar, Iran; 172 parties; 2,520+ sites); India Ramsar sites = 98 (Patna Bird Sanctuary/Etah/UP + Chhari-Dhand/Kutch/Gujarat); Tamil Nadu = 20 sites (most in India); World Wetlands Day = Feb 2; UNGA Resolution A/RES/75/317; Chilika Lake = India’s first Ramsar site (1981); Wetlands Rules 2017; Loktak Lake (Manipur — phumdis — Sangai); Wular Lake (largest freshwater lake India); Desert Fox (Kutch); Indian Wild Ass (last large habitat = Rann); Lesser Flamingo (Phoeniconaias minor).

Wetland conservation strategies; Ramsar Convention and India’s implementation; threats to Indian wetlands; ecosystem services; Wetlands Rules 2017; intersection with climate change; wise use concept.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

RAMSAR CONVENTION:

Signed: **February 2, 1971**, Ramsar, Iran (Caspian Sea coast)

In force: **1975**

Contracting parties: **172**

Global sites listed: **2,520+**; total area: **~2.5 million sq km**

Principle: “**Wise Use**” of wetlands (sustainable management)

India party since: **1982**

INDIA RAMSAR SITES (2026):

Total: **98** (highest in South Asia; 276% expansion since 2014)

Latest additions: Patna Bird Sanctuary (Etah, UP) + Chhari-Dhand (Kutch, Gujarat)

Tamil Nadu: **20 sites** (most among states)

Uttar Pradesh: **10 sites**

KEY INDIAN RAMSAR SITES:

Chilika Lake (Odisha): India’s **first** site (1981); largest coastal lagoon in Asia

Keoladeo (Rajasthan): UNESCO WHS; Siberian Crane

Loktak (Manipur): phumdis; Sangai deer

Wular Lake (J&K): Largest **freshwater lake** in India

Deepor Beel (Assam): Last large wetland south of Brahmaputra

WORLD WETLANDS DAY:

Date: **February 2** (anniversary of Ramsar Convention signing)

First WWD: **1997**

Official UN recognition: **UNGA Resolution A/RES/75/317** (Aug 30, 2021)

First UN-recognised WWD: **February 2, 2022**

2026 Theme: Wetlands and Traditional Knowledge

INDIA WETLAND STATISTICS:

Total wetland area: **~15.9 million hectares** (~5% of land)

40% of natural wetlands lost in 3 decades

Governing law: **Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017** (under EPA 1986)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Peatlands: 3% of land area but store **30% of soil carbon** globally

Water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*): Most problematic aquatic invasive in India

Indian Wild Ass (*Equus hemionus khur*): Last large habitat = Rann of Kutch (protected in Wild Ass Sanctuary, Dhrangadhra, Gujarat)

Ramsar “Montreux Record”: List of Ramsar sites facing ecological changes; India has Keoladeo and Loktak on this list (though efforts ongoing to remove them)

IPBES 2019 Global Assessment: Identified wetland degradation as a primary biodiversity threat

Sources: Drishti IAS, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change

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