

Celebrate Wetlands

May 2008

May is American Wetlands Month, a time to celebrate the vital importance of wetlands to the Nation's ecological, economic, and social health and to educate Americans about the value of wetlands as a natural resource.

What is a wetland?

Wetlands are characterized by their water levels, dominant plant species and soil types. The areas have either shallow standing water or are saturated within the surface soils. A wetland does not have to hold water all year. In fact, many wetlands dry up for at least part of the year.

Ohio EPA classifies wetlands based on the quality of the wetland and the species that depend on it, among other things.

- Category 1 wetlands are low quality, typically dominated by cattails and often located in active agricultural fields.
- Category 2 wetlands are good quality but don't support threatened or endangered species.
- Category 3 wetlands are the cream of the crop - the highest quality and relatively scarce.



Category 1 Wetland



Category 3 Wetland

Why celebrate wetlands?

Wetlands are valuable because they often support diverse species of plants, wildlife, insects and fish. Many endangered species inhabit wetlands during part of their life cycles. Amphibians like frogs and salamanders often rely on wetland areas for mating, laying eggs and early development of young. With the loss of wetlands, species are becoming threatened and disappearing from many parts of Ohio.

Wetlands are important for flood reduction and control. They help store large amounts of water, which is released slowly to surrounding surface or ground water sources. Wetlands also help reduce erosion by trapping soil that is washed off of farm fields and other open areas.

They are often referred to as "nature's kidneys" because they retain and cycle nutrients from the soil and water.

In addition, some wetlands help replenish water supplies for local drinking water sources.

Wetlands and Water Quality

Until recently, wetlands were largely ignored in evaluations of water quality. Ohio EPA is a national leader in the development and application of wetland assessment methods. These monitoring tools were modeled after Ohio EPA's river assessment tools, long recognized as the national standard for effective and comprehensive stream monitoring.

Each year, Ohio EPA employees conduct biological monitoring to gauge the health and quality of Ohio's wetland and water resources. Agency employees collect information including the kinds and numbers of organisms living in the area, the habitat quality, water levels and soil and water chemistry. This information is compared to conditions and data gathered from known high to poor quality sites. If an area is disturbed or affected by development or other factors, it will generally have less diversity of species and a lower number of sensitive species present.

What threatens wetlands?

Historically, most wetland losses were due to agriculture. Today, the most common threat to Ohio wetlands is

development. Because of their fertile soil and location, many wetland areas are desirable for farming, business and housing developments. Other threats come from fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides that wash into wetlands when it rains.

How does Ohio EPA protect wetlands?

Before anyone can impact a wetland, they must obtain a Clean Water Act Section 401 water quality certification or isolated wetland permit from Ohio EPA. To disturb wetlands adjacent to other water bodies, they must also obtain a Clean Water Act Section 404 permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

In 1998, Ohio EPA adopted wetland water quality standards and wetland antidegradation rules. These rules allow staff to categorize wetland areas based on their function, sensitivity to disturbance, rarity and mitigation potential. We can then determine appropriate avoidance, minimization and mitigation techniques based on the wetland's category.

For More Information and Helpful Links

- U.S. EPA Wetlands site - www.epa.gov/owow/wetlands/
- American Wetlands Month - May - www.iwla.org/index.php?id=214
- United States Geological Survey National Wetlands Research Center - www.nwrc.usgs.gov/
- Ohio Wetlands Foundation - www.ohiowetlands.org
- United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service Wetlands Reserve Program - www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/wrp/
- Especially for Kids and Teachers
 - Wetlands coloring book from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - http://training.fws.gov/library/Pubs/Wetlands_colbk.pdf
 - Ohio Department of Natural Resources wetland site - <http://ohiodnr.com/?TabId=998>
 - Photo Tour of Ohio Wetlands - from U.S. EPA's site - www.epa.gov/owow/wetlands/bawwg/case/ohphoto1.html
 - U.S. EPA Region V Wetland Education sites - www.epa.gov/region5/water/wshednps/topic_wetlands_education.htm