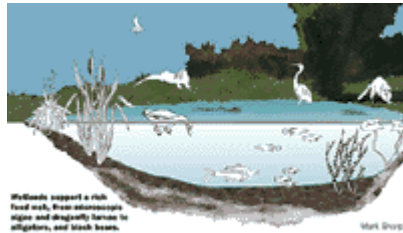


# What are Wetlands?



**W**etlands are among the most productive ecosystems in the world, comparable to

**rain forests and coral reefs.** An immense variety of species of

microbes, plants, insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, fish, and mammals can be part of a wetland ecosystem. Physical and chemical features such as climate, landscape shape (topology), geology, and the movement and abundance of water help to determine the plants and animals that inhabit each wetland. The complex, dynamic relationships among the organisms inhabiting the wetland environment are referred to as food webs. ([see illustration](#)). This is why wetlands in Texas, North Carolina, and Alaska differ from one another.



**High Mountain Valley Wetland at 10,000 ft.**

Wetlands can be thought of as "biological supermarkets." They provide great volumes of food that attract many animal species.

These animals use wetlands for part of or all of their life-cycle. stems break down small particles of "detritus." This many small shellfish, and for larger amphibians, birds,



**Bottomland Hardwood Swamp**

Dead plant leaves and in the water to form organic material called enriched material feeds aquatic insects, small fish that are food predatory fish, reptiles, and mammals.

The functions of values of these society depend on relationships and the other watershed. A geographic area in and dissolved higher elevations outlet or basin a point on a larger stream, lake, underlying aquifer, or estuary.

a wetland and the functions to human a complex set of between the wetland ecosystems in the watershed is a which water, sediments, materials drain from to a common low-lying

**Wetlands play an integral role in the ecology of the watershed.** The combination of shallow water, high levels of nutrients, and primary productivity is ideal for the development of organisms that form the base of the food web and feed many species of fish, amphibians,

shellfish, and insects. Many species of birds and mammals rely on wetlands for food, water, and shelter, especially during migration and breeding.

Wetlands' microbes, plants, and wildlife are part of global cycles for water, nitrogen, and sulfur. Furthermore, **scientists are beginning to realize that atmospheric maintenance may be an additional wetlands function.** Wetlands store carbon within their plant communities and soil instead of releasing it to the atmosphere as carbon dioxide. Thus wetlands help to moderate global climate conditions.

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Last updated on Wednesday, February 22nd, 2006  
URL: <http://www.epa.gov/owow/wetlands/vital/nature.html>