

Session: Global and Local - Mires and Peatlands in the African Landscape (1)
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The Status of Mires and Peatlands in Africa

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Peatlands have a wide international significance and their wise use is crucial to the implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Ramsar Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and other international instruments and agreements. Peatlands are globally important as carbon stores and sinks. They store more carbon than all forests of the world and constitute a global carbon pool of about 412×10^{15} g C as compared to about 694×10^{15} g in all global plant biomass, $1,600 \times 10^{15}$ g in all soils (including peat), and $>700 \times 10^{15}$ g in the atmosphere (Gorham 1995). Currently sequestering rate of C in global mires is estimated at $40-70 \times 10^{12}$ g y^{-1} . Peatlands contain 10 % of the global freshwater volume and are significant in maintaining freshwater quality and hydrological integrity. Peatlands furthermore play an important role in maintaining permafrost and preventing desertification. Peatlands support important biological diversity. They are the refugia of some of the rarest and most unusual species of wetland-dependent flora and fauna. Various mire types develop sophisticated self-regulation mechanisms over time and have an inherent tendency to develop complex surface patterning. This makes them outstanding examples of ecosystem biodiversity. With a peatland area of 130,000 km² and an estimated peat carbon volume of 10 Gigaton Africa belongs with Australia and Antarctica to the continents poorest in peat resources. The differences between African countries are, however, enormous with many countries possessing little by way of peat reserves and few countries possessing substantial peatlands. Similarly the diversity is large, with peatlands occurring from the high mountains to the coastal lowlands. The paper discusses the status of mires and peatlands in Africa, compares this with the situation in other continents, and formulates urgent priorities for peatland inventory and conservation.

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