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*Dangerous Illusions about Wetlands*

by Alyson Flournoy  
May 19, 2004

It was a surprise to many when President Bush, on Earth Day, **announced a new initiative** on wetlands that seemed to contradict previous actions by his administration - which has loosened protections for wetlands and invited a stampede of destruction by oil, gas, mining, forestry, military, and other development interests.

How can this record be squared with the president's new goal of increasing wetlands? The answer can be found by taking a closer look at what the president proposed - and what he left out.

The Bush proposal calls for additional funding to "increase" the nation's wetlands primarily by restoring, creating and enhancing two million acres of wetlands. However, this plan focuses on replacing and repairing wetlands after they've been destroyed or degraded rather than preventing their destruction in the first place. Indeed, when it comes to protection, the president's proposal makes just one commitment: the purchase of one million acres of wetlands that might otherwise be destroyed. There is not even a mention of enforcing existing laws meant to protect wetlands.

Restoring and buying wetlands are clearly very good things, but by themselves won't stop the loss of these critical areas. For the past 200 years, we have been sacrificing wetlands to development at a terrifying pace - draining and filling them for farms, mines, and roads, and paving them for shopping malls, parking lots and more. Despite laws from the 1970s that should prevent this destruction, we continue to lose between 50,000 and 90,000 acres of wetlands a year, and as described in **a recent report** by the National Wildlife Federation, are falling far short of the goal of "no net loss" of wetlands set in 1989 by President George H.W. Bush.

This destruction puts public health and the environment at substantial risk. Among other things, wetlands are ecologically critical for a healthy water supply, prevent erosion of stream and river banks, protect property against flooding, and provide vital habitat for a broad range of wildlife and commercially valuable fish and shellfish.

The president's focus on creation, restoration, and enhancement in place of protection feeds a dangerous illusion - that we can destroy all the wetlands we want because we can "replace" them. Trying to replace wetlands after they're gone is both more costly and less effective than leaving them alone. Study after study documents the high failure rate and short lifespan of many artificial wetlands. As wetlands expert Joy Zedler recently put it, restoration attempts are often "like taking hamburger and trying to put it back on a cow."

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And even when we succeed in creating and restoring wetlands, it doesn't mean we've replaced what has been destroyed. Nature has a way of putting wetlands where they are most useful to nature's purposes. When mitigation is the main focus - as it is in the president's Earth Day proposal - we wrongly celebrate every increase in quantity and ignore the substantial losses in quality. Yet not all wetlands are created equal. For instance, we might lose a diverse and rare bottomland hardwood forest, only to have it "replaced" with a cattail marsh - far from an even trade.

While we can and should applaud increased funding for wetlands restoration, enhancement, and purchase, we should reject this approach as a substitute for wetlands protection and turn away from the dangerous illusion that wetlands are at once disposable and readily replaceable. If the president is serious about the problem, he should rescind policies that speed the destruction of wetlands and enforce existing laws that protect wetlands from being destroyed in the first place.

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