

Guardians of the Wetlands

Growing with Our Feet in the Mud

GUATEMALA





Wetlands are the planet's most efficient carbon sinks.

Ecosystems like mangroves, peatlands, and seagrass meadows capture carbon up to 50 times faster than forests and can store up to 5 times more carbon in their soil.

But this natural wealth is at risk. Since 1970, the world has lost 35% of its mangroves – they're disappearing at a rate 3 to 5 times faster than forests.

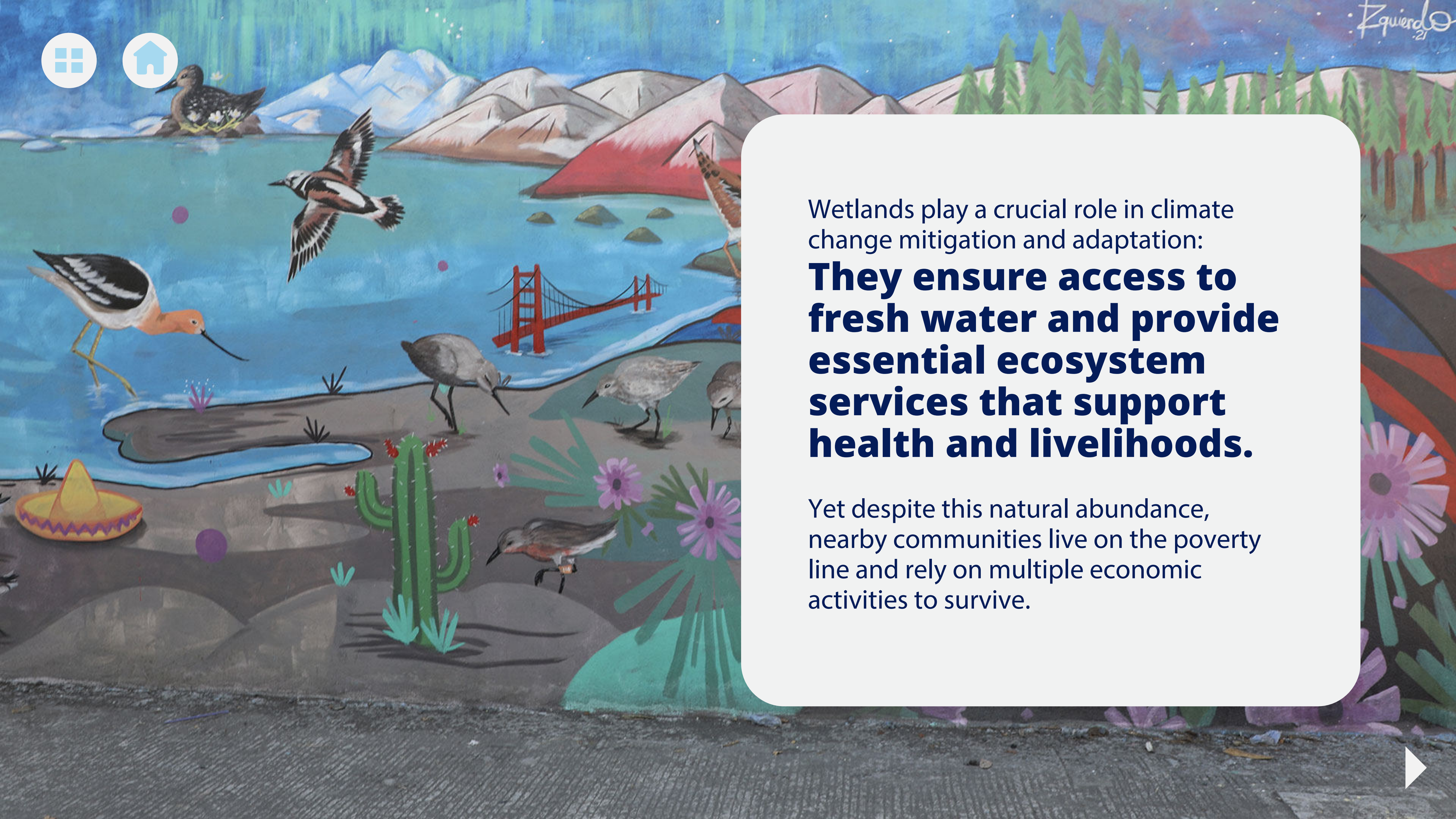
This loss threatens biodiversity and the communities that rely on these ecosystems.



In Guatemala, Sipacate-Naranjo National Park is a prime example of these invaluable ecosystems. Here, mangroves are not only vital to biodiversity but also serve as a foundation for the local economy.

These wetlands act as natural guardians, buffering ocean waves and storms – protecting coastal communities from flooding and property damage.





Wetlands play a crucial role in climate change mitigation and adaptation:

They ensure access to fresh water and provide essential ecosystem services that support health and livelihoods.

Yet despite this natural abundance, nearby communities live on the poverty line and rely on multiple economic activities to survive.





To face of these challenges, Celeste Rubiana, Lady Zulema, and Marcos Ariel – who live near the national park – chose to turn obstacles into opportunities.

Like many young people in their community, they faced a difficult choice: stay or leave in search of better opportunities, after completing their studies.





Their answer was transformative: they bet on conservation and ecotourism.

Alongside 37 other young people, they trained as community guides. In the process, they not only discovered the park's ecological and cultural wealth but also developed the skills to share its significance with the world. This experience deepened their connection to their community and opened new doors for their future.



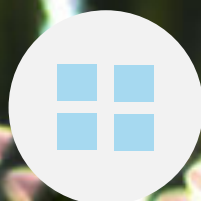


Additionally, 15 youth participated in an intensive three-month birdwatching training program.

They learned to identify and record the park's 50 most common bird families using the eBird digital application. Their findings now contribute to conservation efforts and provide crucial data to the National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP, from its acronym in Spanish).

This process, facilitated by the Wildlife Conservation Society Guatemala and the Small Grants Programme, marked the beginning of both personal and community transformation.





**“I learned that there are
100 bird species here –
both migratory and
local. Before, I only
knew of two or three.”**

Celeste Yubiana Rodas Castañeda
Young Community Guide
Guatemala





Over four months and 180 hours of hands-on training, these young people gained expertise in biodiversity, sustainable tourism, and bird monitoring.

But beyond this technical knowledge, they developed a new perspective on their surroundings – learning to value, protect, and see their environment as a source of opportunity.





"The conservation of species – both flora and fauna – is incredibly important because it benefits humans in one way or another."

Lady Zulema Blanco
Young Community Guide
Guatemala





The project's influence grew through initiatives like community-based waterbird monitoring. This led to the creation of a birdwatching club, now consisting of 15 young members who aspire to establish and lead an association in the future.

It also resulted in developing the first-ever Pacific Guatemala Bird Guide in Spanish, documenting over 152 species and promoting conservation and sustainable tourism in the region.





The project also fostered community participation in conservation efforts.

Teachers, local leaders, and residents joined workshops and festivals, strengthening local pride and community commitment to protecting these wetlands.

Thanks to their contributions, more than 200 people gained awareness around the importance of preserving these ecosystems and their biodiversity.





“What we learn, we must share in our schools so that our children can understand the birds that live, mature, and reproduce in our country. This way, in the near future, most of our population will be educated about the care and protection of the different bird species found in our region.”

Marcos Ariel Alvarado López
Young Community Guide
Guatemala

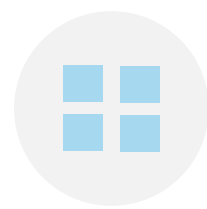




The dedication of young leaders like Celeste Rubiana, Lady Zulema, and Marcos Ariel brings hope for the future of Sipacate-Naranjo National Park.

Their work goes beyond conservation: they are building a model where community development and environmental protection go hand in hand – proving that the future of wetlands and their communities is deeply interconnected.

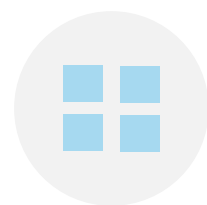




"This project proves that regions with high conservation value can be drivers of social and economic development, as they sustainably leverage environmental services like tourism, ensuring no one is left behind."

Ana María Díaz

Resident Representative, UNDP



Learn more about the ICCA-GSI project:

[Building Ecotourism Capacity for Youth in the Sipacate-Naranjo National Park Communities](#)

[ICCA-GIS project profile.](#)

[Guatemala's Pacific Bird Guide](#)

[Story: Guardians of the Wetlands](#)

[Global ICCA-GSI Links on the SGP Website: Phase 1 and COVID-19 Rapid Response Initiative](#)

[News: Protecting biodiversity through indigenous and local solutions](#)

[Germany supports nature conservation efforts of indigenous peoples and local communities](#)

Sources:

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- Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. (2019). Wetlands and climate change (WWD19 handout). Ramsar Convention Secretariat.
- PPD Guatemala. (2023). Safeguarding Wetlands (link in Spanish) Small Grants Programme Guatemala.
- National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP) (2023). Promoting Tourism and Sustainable Natural Resources Management in Sipacate-Naranjo National Park (link in Spanish).

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