

Meanjin Brisbane Declaration on World Lake Sustainability

Adopted at the 20th World Lake Conference

Meanjin (Brisbane), Australia, 2025

Recognising the Sustainable Lake Management Resolution adopted unanimously by governments at the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), the vital role of lakes in supporting the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the recent UN General Assembly Proclamation of World Lake Day;

Acknowledging the continued promotion of integrated management approaches for lakes that include their basins, and their inflowing and outflowing river and groundwater systems;

Emphasising the opportunity to propose the inclusion of lakes as a specific indicator of progress in the post-SDG framework;

Noting ongoing challenges, including weak policy implementation and monitoring, limited transboundary cooperation, and the need for enhanced education and awareness focused on lake conservation and sustainable use;

We, the undersigned delegates of the 20th World Lake Conference, gathered in Meanjin (Brisbane), Australia, on the traditional lands and waters of the Turrbal and Yuggera Peoples, together with those who choose to stand for the protection and sustainable future of lakes, affirm our collective commitment to the protection, restoration, and sustainable governance of the world's lakes—for the benefit of present and future generations. We call upon all stakeholders, including governments, non-governmental organizations, local communities, and international bodies, to commit to the actions outlined in this Declaration.

Recognising lakes as vital systems for life

Water is essential for all life. However, only about one percent of the water on the Earth's surface is liquid freshwater. More than 90% of this water is contained in lakes, reservoirs and wetlands. Additionally, saline lakes located in arid and semi-arid regions account for approximately one-fifth of the total surface area of freshwater lakes globally. Lakes provide vital resources and habitat to support biodiversity, but they are among Earth's most vulnerable ecosystems. Natural and artificially constructed lakes (reservoirs) regulate hydrological and climatic processes, provide water for drinking, agriculture, industry, and sanitation purposes, support food security and biodiversity, mitigate water disaster risks, and underpin cultural, spiritual, and recreational values. From early civilisations to contemporary cities, lakes have shaped human life and wellbeing.

Despite their central role in our global life-support system, lakes are in crisis. Pollution, water over-extraction, altered flows, unsustainable land use, biodiversity loss, infrastructure development, invasive species, weak policy implementation, and climate change have led to widespread degradation—and some lakes have disappeared entirely.

In acknowledging the **inaugural UN World Lake Day on 27 August** and recognising the **2023 UNEA Resolution on sustainable lake management**, we declare that the sustainability of lakes and their basins must be embedded in all global, national, and local actions for sustainable development, climate resilience, and biodiversity conservation. We commit to advancing practical solutions, strengthening governance, and fostering inclusive collaboration to secure the future of the world's lakes.

Principles for Lake Sustainability

1. Lakes are essential to life and planetary health.

Lakes store freshwater, sustain biodiversity, regulate climate, and support economies, cultures, and livelihoods. Their ecosystem services are globally valued at trillions of dollars annually.

2. Lakes are connected systems, not isolated waterbodies.

The condition of lakes reflects the health of upstream catchments including surface water and groundwater systems and biota, and in turn influences the flow, water quality and resilience of downstream ecosystems. Lakes and reservoirs must be managed as integral components of broader hydrological, terrestrial, and ecological networks.

3. Lakes are sentinels of environmental and societal change.

As highly responsive systems, lakes signal ecological stress, climate impacts and catchment health. Lakebed sediments are an important archive of past climate, landscapes and ecological conditions. Robust monitoring using Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Protocols, community science, and emerging technologies is essential. Geographical imbalances of inadequate monitoring in the Global South and many developing nations must be addressed to provide global scale understanding of lake responses to rapid environmental change.

4. Lake degradation undermines planetary sustainability goals.

Declining lake health threatens progress toward the SDGs, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, the Paris Agreement, and the Sendai Framework. Declining biodiversity in lakes, as part of an interconnected freshwater continuum, outpaces that in marine or terrestrial systems and requires an emergency plan for recovery.

5. Indigenous Peoples and local communities must lead.

The custodianship, governance, and knowledge of Indigenous peoples must be embedded in law and practice for lake sustainability. Equity, justice, and the rights of nature must form the foundation of lake stewardship. Achieving sustainability of our life-supporting lake systems and equitable standards of living requires integrating lake policies into broader sustainable development frameworks, mediating conflicts that compromise our biosphere, and ensuring the rights of all, including Indigenous, under-represented groups, and emerging generations. Lake management must be grounded in local knowledge and co-developed with the communities whose livelihoods depend on the health of lake basins.

6. Climate change demands urgent and adaptive responses.

Current governance and management systems are not adequate to address the accelerating impacts of population increases and climate change. Integrated, proactive, and inclusive strategies for lake restoration are essential.

Commitments to Action

We commit to protect and restore lake ecosystems and catchments by:

Integrating lakes and their specific indicators into national and global policy frameworks and governance, to monitor progress associated with actions that reduce current threats to water, biodiversity, and climate, and promote disaster risk reduction.

Advancing integrated basin-scale coordination, recognising upstream and downstream water systems, and transboundary interdependencies, and promoting cooperative and integrated lake basin management across sectoral, ecological, and regional boundaries.

Supporting Indigenous and community stewardship, by forming genuine partnerships through legal recognition, inclusive co-management, dedicated funding, and respect for knowledge systems, to ensure lake management aligns with Indigenous goals and balances sustainable use and long-term protection.

Strengthening monitoring and research by incorporating traditional knowledge, citizen science, and emerging data technologies, and addressing the under-representation of developing countries in global assessments. Detecting change and understanding trends in lake health need to be embedded in scientific knowledge and principles.

Promoting innovation and technology transfer to support lake sustainability, including nature-based solutions for catchment restoration and pollution control methods that restore water quality and strengthen climate resilience, ensuring equitable access to innovations and solutions for communities managing and depending on lake systems.

Investing in sustainable lake financing, through green bonds, payment for ecosystem services, nature repair markets, and climate finance, tailored to lake-specific challenges, to enable long-term restoration and equitable management that reflects the true value of lakes to humanity and nature.

Educating and engaging emerging generations, communities, and civil society, to build a culture of intergenerational stewardship in lakes as shared natural and cultural assets, recognising the urgent need to reconnect people, including youth, with lakes as vital spaces for learning and collective well-being.

A Global Call to Action

We call on:

Governments to enact science-based national lake strategies, restoration targets, and integrated lake basin management policies, including their diligent enforcement.

United Nations to plan for the adoption of lakes within the post-SDG global assessment framework.

Multilateral organisations to prioritise lakes in environmental agreements and funding mechanisms.

The scientific community to co-develop tools, improve understanding of emerging threats, and support evidence-based policy and research goals.

The private sector to disclose environmental impacts on lakes and adopt nature-positive practices across supply chains to facilitate their sustainable use.

Citizens and civil society to reconnect with lakes and advocate for their protection.

Summary

Lakes are not only reflections of the landscapes that feed them—they are mirrors of our values and vision for the future. From small ponds to Great Lakes that are transboundary, lakes hold the key to humanity’s resilience, security, justice, and life itself.

We, the participants of the 20th World Lake Conference, and other global citizens, unite in declaring:

Every lake matters.

The time for action is now.

In support of the principles outlined in the Meanjin Brisbane Declaration on World Lake Sustainability, the following individuals and organizations have added their names as signatories. Their endorsement reflects a shared commitment to advancing the protection, restoration, and sustainable management of lakes and their basins.

Tony Weber, Fellow - Alluvium Consulting Australia, Industry Fellow-Griffith University, Fellow of the Modelling and Simulation Society of Australian and New Zealand	Prof Angela H Arthington, Griffith University
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