

Press release of the Global Nature Fund (GNF)

World Heritage in Flames: The Pantanal is "Threatened Lake of the Year 2021"



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It is a sad record: The Pantanal is the first wetland to receive the title "Threatened Lake of the Year" for the second time. The Global Nature Fund (GNF) and the Living Lakes Network present this award annually on the occasion of the "World Wetlands Day" on 2 February to a lake or wetland that is massively endangered by human intervention. The destruction of the South American natural wonder has different causes. What measures are needed to protect the jaguar, lowland tapir and co. is clear, however. They require the determined commitment of the people on the ground, but also in Europe, whose consumption influences the fragile set of ecosystems.

Radolfzell at Lake Constance, 02.02.2021: André Luiz Siqueira is very worried: "I can't remember a time when it has rained so little here in the summer months as it does at the moment. But we need the rain. If it doesn't come soon, and if there isn't much of it, the next fire season will definitely be worse than the last." Worse? Already in the Brazilian summer period from December 2019 to March 2020, the Pantanal, most of which lies in Brazil, but also reaching into Paraguay and Bolivia, recorded 40 per cent less rainfall than in previous years and the worst drought period of the past 60 years. More than 4 million of hectares have burnt in the Pantanal, consuming about a third of the area of the largest inland wetland on earth, according to Siqueira.

Fires and arson: a devastating scale

The director of the Brazilian nature conservation organisation Ecoa ich – Ecologia e Ação ("Ecology and Action"), with which Global Nature Fund and Living Lakes collaborate in the region, calculates: *"More than 40,000 square kilometres have burnt in the Pantanal. This corresponds to an area of 4 million football fields. And these are not just numbers: I feel sorry for the people who needs to survive there, for every single tree, and for every caiman and animal that does not make it out of the inferno or starves to death after the fires because it can no longer find food. The number of animals killed runs into the millions. And the devastating effects of these fires caused by arson on the South American climate, but also on the world climate, cannot yet be fully assessed."*

It is normal that fires occasionally occur in the Pantanal. Unfortunately, it is also common practice for farmers to clear their cultivated areas by fire. Recently, these fires have increasingly spread to natural areas. Scientists are almost unanimous that a large part of the devastating fires in 2020 can be attributed to deliberate burning to open up new agricultural land. Cattle farming, sugar cane and soy cultivation are booming in Brazil – fuelled by huge overseas demand and pushed by a government led by President Jair Bolsonaro, whose economic policies systematically undermine Brazilian and international nature conservation and environmental protection regulations.

Spiral downwards: a wetland dries up

As the German Parliament's Scientific Service points out in a recent publication on the Pantanal, the forest area in the wetland has decreased by a quarter since the 1980s. In contrast, the area used for agriculture in this region has more than doubled in the same period. The situation is worsened by global climate change. Comparable to the Amazon region, which has to struggle with similar problems but receives greater international attention, the loss of forest area in the Pantanal leads to regional temperature increases and shorter rainy seasons. This results in a lack of water for sufficient evaporation, which otherwise forms a dense cloud cover over the wetland. These clouds would soften the solar radiation and thus protect the land from drying out. Dry areas are then ultimately more susceptible to fires – a vicious circle.

With their second award of the Pantanal as "Threatened Lake of the Year", the Global Nature Fund and the Living Lakes Network which it coordinates again formulate the goal of breaking this vicious circle. In order to preserve what is left of the UNESCO World Heritage Site with its unique biodiversity, a rethink and determined action by the people on site, but also in North America and Europe is needed. *"This is a unique situation for us", says GNF President Marion Hammerl, because we already nominated the Pantanal as Threatened Lake of the Year in 2007. But extraordinary conditions require extraordinary measures. Fourteen years ago, the threat to the Pantanal biodiversity hotspot was already acute. And yet we are surprised and shocked by the dramatic developments of the last few months. If we do not act now – immediately! – there will soon be nothing left to protect on the Río Paraguay. That would be a huge loss."*

[To the GNF info page "Threatened Lake of the Year 2007: Pantanal".](#)

Acute aid and turnarounds: Ways out of the fire crisis

The local partners of GNF and Living Lakes are doing everything humanly possible to minimise the effects of the fires on flora and fauna. For example, employees of the Brazilian Living Lakes partner organisation Fundação Ecotrópica have brought many tons of food for the animals threatened by starvation in the Pantanal to the fire area and distributed it on feeding islands: a lifeline for tapirs, capybaras, and other animals that have been deprived of everything by the fire. Wounded animals receive veterinary care. André Siqueira's Ecologia e Ação is training volunteers from groups and Pantanal communities to be firefighters in order to cope with the flames and to help with the prevention work. *"They are our heroes in a great battle,"* says Siqueira. *"Unfortunately, it's a fight that too often seems hopeless."*

Acute help is imperative, but the Threatened Lake 2021 mission requires more comprehensive measures. *"The solutions to protect and sustainably use the Pantanal have been on the table for a long time! But the Brazilian government is doing exactly the opposite,"* Marion Hammerl underlines. *"The environmental protection laws in Brazil must be expanded, existing ones implemented and violations consistently punished. Our award is a call to Jair Bolsonaro and his Environment Minister Ricardo Salles to reverse their policies. And to the rest of the world not to turn a blind eye and to exert pressure for this turnaround to happen immediately!"*

Global greed: the future of the Pantanal will be decided on three continents

But the issue is not a purely Brazilian matter, Hammerl continues: *"On the one hand, there needs to be an open diplomatic dialogue about the situation in the Pantanal with the riparian states Paraguay and Bolivia. So far, this has not taken place at all. In addition, we need to break the negative links between non-sustainable production methods in South America and North America as well as European consumer behaviour."* With our consumption and dietary decisions, we people in Europe contribute massively to the threat to the Pantanal. For example, three quarters of the soy produced worldwide is used as feed for animals for slaughter. Almost all feed soy in Germany and the EU comes from South America. Facts that the GNF already pointed out last year in an open protest letter to the Brazilian government in order to clearly state the European responsibility.

[To the open protest letter of GNF and Living Lakes](#)

"The awarding of the Pantanal as Threatened Lake of the Year 2021 on World Wetlands Day must be a wake-up call to stop the destructive dynamics in these precious ecosystems", emphasises Hammerl. If this does not succeed, a scenario looms that, according to scientists, becomes more likely with each passing year: *"Ecological collapse. This would turn the lively diversity around rivers, lakes and swamps into desert in the coming decades."* It is up to all of us to avert this nightmare.

About the Global Nature Fund and Living Lakes

Since 1998, the Global Nature Fund (GNF) has been working for nature and the environment from Radolfzell on Lake Constance. As coordinator of the worldwide network Living Lakes, GNF, together with over 130 partner organisations and 112 lakes and wetlands in 56 countries on all



continents, promotes water protection, draws attention to the dangers that threaten lakes, rivers and wetlands around the globe and develops solutions for their preservation.

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