UN Water Conference 2026

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, 8 – 10 DECEMBER 2026

Key messages

The global water cycle is under unprecedented pressure from climate change, over-extraction of water, pollution and ecosystem degradation, with accelerating impacts on people, economies and nature. The world is off track to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 6, while water insecurity is emerging as a systemic risk to food security, energy systems, biodiversity, human health and political stability. Despite the centrality of water to sustainable development, there is no comprehensive global water governance process or agreement that addresses all dimensions of water governance to support countries in managing shared water resources.

GOVERNANCE

The 2026 United Nations Water Conference represents a critical opportunity to close this global governance gap and deliver tangible outcomes that match the scale of the crisis. IUCN calls on the Conference to give clear direction to the emerging intergovernmental process on water, building towards a global framework for water that provides shared principles, sustained political momentum, multi-stakeholder implementation mechanisms, and dedicated public and private finance. Such a process should be inclusive, multi-sectoral and designed to secure a sustainable, equitable and water-secure future for people and planet.

COOPERATION

The 2026 UN Water Conference should deliver a clear political signal that strengthening operational transboundary water cooperation is a core implementation priority for SDG 6, climate resilience, ecosystem protection and regional stability. With over 310 shared river basins, 468 transboundary aquifers and almost 300 shared wetlands worldwide, cooperation on transboundary waters is a foundation for regional stability, peace and resilience. IUCN urges the Conference to call for universal accession to and implementation of the 1992 Water Convention and the 1997 Watercourses Convention, the establishment of regional cooperation mechanisms, and the creation of a dedicated fund for transboundary basins to accelerate implementation, close capacity gaps and support long-term, inclusive cooperation.

INTEGRATION

Water must be recognised as an organising principle for sustainable development, integrating water, climate and biodiversity policy by 2030. This requires scaling up water-outcome-focused nature-based solutions, positioning freshwater ecosystems as natural infrastructure, and strengthening science-policy interfaces and data and information sharing.

DATA AND SCIENCE

Establishing accessible and transparent science-policy platforms, common data standards and open information exchange will enable evidence-based decision-making, support cooperation across borders and sectors, and ensure that investments deliver resilience for ecosystems, economies and communities alike.

Introduction

The global water cycle is experiencing unprecedented, potentially irreversible disruption driven by climate change, competition for freshwater and human mismanagement. Since the early 1990s, more than half of the world's largest lakes have lost water[1], around 70% of aquifers are in decline[2], and monitored freshwater wildlife populations have declined by an average of 85% since 1970.[3] Wetlands, which are vital to the water cycle, have declined by 22% since 1970 and are disappearing faster than any other ecosystem; one in four of those that remain is in poor condition. Their loss puts up to US$39 trillion a year in benefits at risk.[4] The world is not on track to meet SDG6, and 25% of the world's population does not have access to water free from contamination and available when needed[5]. One quarter of the world's population lives in countries facing extreme annual water stress[6].

Addressing the water crises globally requires a broadly supported, joint international effort from the UN and its member states, civil society, cities, financiers and the private sector. There is no comprehensive global water governance process or agreement that addresses the multiple dimensions of water governance. With the global water cycle under increasing pressure, there is no framework outlining core principles for the management, use and allocation of water resources, including transboundary water resources.

The 2026 United Nations Water Conference to Accelerate the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all was mandated by General Assembly resolution A/RES/78/327 following the significant momentum that came out of the 2023 UN Water Conference.

The six themes for the interactive dialogues for the 2026 UN Water Conference were adopted by consensus following the preparatory meeting in July 2025:

A. Water for People
B. Water for Prosperity
C. Water for Planet[7]
D. Water for Cooperation[8]
E. Water in Multilateral Processes[9]
F. Investments for water

The conference will result in a summary by the President of the General Assembly instead of a negotiated outcome document. **IUCN considers it essential that the conference results in clear, tangible outcomes for water.**

IUCN has four main objectives for the UN Water Conference 2026:

1. Strengthen the global water governance system through the initiation of an intergovernmental process on water

The world urgently needs to address the water crisis at the global level. The preparatory process for the 2026 UN Water Conference has seen unprecedented momentum towards enhancing global water governance. IUCN welcomes the emerging intergovernmental process on water, including the series of UN Water Conferences convened by the General Assembly in resolution 77/334. We also welcome the agreement by Member States, in resolution 79/323, that the 2028 UN Water Conference will have a negotiated outcome, the "Dushanbe Water Framework".[10] We consider it essential that the 2026 UN Water Conference provides clear recommendations for the process going forward, including on the definition, commitments, role, and coordination needs for global water governance, helping to define its architecture. As set out in IUCN's brief on



[1] Yao, F. et al. (2023). Satellites reveal widespread decline in global lake water storage. Science 380(6646): 743–749 (53% of the world's largest lakes lost water storage between 1992 and 2020).
[2] Jasechko, S. et al. (2024). Rapid groundwater decline and some cases of recovery in aquifers globally. Nature 625: 715–721 (groundwater levels declining in 71% of aquifer systems assessed, 2000–2022).
[3] WWF (2024). Living Planet Report 2024 – A System in Peril. Gland, Switzerland: WWF (85% average decline in monitored freshwater wildlife populations, 1970–2020).
[4] Convention on Wetlands (2025). Global Wetland Outlook 2025: Valuing, conserving, restoring and financing wetlands. Gland, Switzerland: Secretariat of the Convention on Wetlands.
[5] WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (2025). Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2024. See also UN DESA (2025), The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025.
[6] World Resources Institute (2023). Aqueduct 4.0: 25 countries, housing one quarter of the global population, face extremely high water stress.
[7] United Nations (2026). Concept paper for interactive dialogue C, "Water for Planet: climate, biodiversity, desertification, environment, source to sea, resilience and disaster risk reduction". A/CONF.240/2026/6.
[8] United Nations (2026). Concept paper for interactive dialogue D, "Water for Cooperation". A/CONF.240/2026/7.
[9] United Nations (2026). Concept paper for interactive dialogue E, "Water in Multilateral Processes". A/CONF.240/2026/[symbol to be confirmed].
[10] General Assembly resolution 79/323 on the modalities of the 2028 United Nations Water Conference, which provides for a negotiated outcome, the "Dushanbe Water Framework". Adopted 2 September 2026.

illustrative elements for a future water framework[11], the framework should include four substantive outcomes: water and sanitation for all; water security and sustainable use; healthy freshwater ecosystems and resilience; and cooperation on shared waters.

The purpose of the framework should be to accelerate water action; strengthen policy coherence and implementation across sectors and levels; support science, data, finance and institutional capacity; and sustain political attention, review and learning beyond 2030. The framework should encompass the whole global water cycle and the natural systems that shape water security: freshwater resources, groundwater, wastewater and sanitation, water-related ecosystems, water-related disaster risk, transboundary waters, and the policy, institutional and financial systems that shape water outcomes.

While the framework would address global obligations, principles and priorities, it would be voluntary and non-legally binding, implemented in accordance with national circumstances, capacities and priorities, and fully consistent with the Charter of the United Nations and existing international law. This is in line with the concept paper for interactive dialogue E, which notes that, unlike climate change, biodiversity and desertification, water governance lacks a permanent multilateral institutional anchor and recommends building on the mandates of the UN Water Conferences to establish a regular intergovernmental process on water, with a United Nations framework on water among the options.[12]

2. Scale up transboundary water cooperation including by showcasing IUCN's work on transboundary cooperation as best practice

With over 310 shared river basins, 468 transboundary aquifers and almost 300 shared wetlands worldwide, cooperation on transboundary waters[13] is essential for people's wellbeing, political stability, and the sustainability of ecosystems. Approximately 40% of the world's population lives in river and lake basins that comprise two or more countries.[14] Yet only 43 of the 153 countries sharing transboundary waters have operational arrangements covering 90 per cent or more of their shared rivers, lakes and aquifers, and fewer than a third are on track to reach this by 2030.[15] In an increasingly water-scarce world there are growing complexities to enable the equitable and sustainable sharing of water between and among States.

This requires innovation and change within conventional approaches to water governance, calling for improved water diplomacy which recognises the multiple dimensions and values of water at different levels and for different sectors and stakeholder groups, emphasizing the equitable sharing of water's multiple benefits and highlighting the need for multi-level governance of water within basins and at State level.

The conference should explicitly strengthen cooperation not only on shared river basins, but also on transboundary aquifers and wetlands, where governance, data and institutional arrangements remain much weaker.

IUCN has been driving work to enhance transboundary water cooperation through multi-level governance approaches and nature-based solutions over the past 25 years. Transboundary cooperation depends on more than high-level treaties. It is sustained through diverse legal agreements, joint institutions, technical protocols, shared data systems and practical arrangements that make cooperation operational at basin level. One of our flagship programmes, BRIDGE (Building River Dialogue and Governance) enables countries sharing river basins to implement effective and inclusive water arrangements through a shared vision, based on the benefits of cooperation and transparent, coherent and cost-effective institutional frameworks. Its goal is to enhance cooperation among riparian countries through applying water diplomacy at multiple levels. The concept paper for interactive dialogue D cites BRIDGE's work in the Buzi, Pungwe and Save basins, shared by Mozambique and Zimbabwe, as an example of good practice.[16]

[11] IUCN (2026). Consultations on the Future of Water Governance: Illustrative Elements – An IUCN Contribution, V2.1, September 2026. https://iucn.org/sites/default/files/2026-09/V2.1%20Illustrative%20Elements.pdf

[12] Concept paper for interactive dialogue E, paras. 38–39 and 66.

[13] McCracken, M. and Wolf, A.T. (2019). Updating the Register of International River Basins of the world. International Journal of Water Resources Development 35(5): 732–782; IGRAC (2021). Transboundary Aquifers of the World Map 2021 (468 transboundary aquifers and aquifer systems).

[14] UN-Water, Transboundary Waters. https://www.unwater.org/water-facts/transboundary-waters

[15] UNECE and UNESCO (2024). Progress on Transboundary Water Cooperation: Mid-term status of SDG indicator 6.5.2, with a special focus on climate change. Geneva and Paris.

[16] Concept paper for interactive dialogue D (A/CONF.240/2026/7), para. 47.

International water law provides the principles on which cooperation over shared waters is based, and these become ever more important as climate change, ecosystem degradation and competing demands increase pressure on basin relations.

As outcomes of the 2026 UN Water Conference, IUCN would like to see the following on transboundary water cooperation:

- IUCN strongly supports the 100 Parties initiative17 by Finland and Zambia, calling for wider accession to and stronger implementation of the 1992 Water Convention and the 1997 Watercourses Convention, alongside practical support for translating their principles into operational basin, aquifer and wetland cooperation arrangements, including regional cooperation mechanisms.
- IUCN also fully supports the Basins for Cooperation initiative and looks forward to supporting this practical work to enhance cooperation at the basin level.
- IUCN urges the creation of a dedicated fund for transboundary basins, aquifers and wetlands to accelerate implementation, strengthen basin institutions, close capacity gaps, support joint data systems and enable long-term, inclusive cooperation.
- Adoption of principles and standards on data collection, sharing and information exchange in transboundary basins, building on existing toolkits and guidance.

IUCN promotes transboundary water cooperation through a plurality of mutually reinforcing legal and institutional arrangements, including treaties, basin agreements, protocols, joint bodies and local cooperation platforms, anchored in international water law principles and designed to support implementation, adaptation and long-term cooperation.

3. Emphasize water as an organizing principle for sustainable development and integrate water, climate and biodiversity policy at national and global levels by 2030, including through scaling up water outcome focused nature-based solutions

Water resources management can play a crucial role in addressing climate change and biodiversity loss due to the interlinkages between them: the negative impacts of climate change are mainly manifested through water-related events such as floods and droughts, water pollution limits the availability of freshwater and impacts ecosystems, and poor water management leads to habitat loss and, consequently, biodiversity loss. Water also connects land, rivers, deltas, coasts and the ocean: a source-to-sea approach links upstream decisions on land and water use with their downstream impacts on estuaries, coastal ecosystems and the ocean, and should guide how water, climate and biodiversity policies are integrated.

Sustainable water resource management, including relevant ecosystem data and information is therefore indispensable to confronting these threats. Water should be considered an organising principle for sustainable development. Rather than dealing with water through sector approaches, water should be used to link the planning processes and decision-making, framing various sectors together. The concept paper for interactive dialogue C reaches the same conclusion, noting that water is still insufficiently recognised as both an organising and operating principle in implementing multilateral environmental agreements, and recommends a roadmap for mainstreaming water in the Rio Conventions.[18]

Water should become a risk signal for economic, environmental and development decision making, mobilizing data 'into the open' to better assess trade-offs, recognize freshwater ecosystems as functional assets and not externalities, and where limits are hit mobilize investment in conservation and unconventional supplies.

The 2026 conference should result in the following commitments:

- Integration of water, climate and biodiversity policy at national and global levels by 2030, including through scaling up water outcome focused nature-based solutions, for instance through the establishment of an Inter-COP process focused on water.
- Scaling up protection and restoration of healthy ecosystems – including rivers, groundwater, wetlands and lakes that are essential for health, climate change mitigation and adaptation, agriculture, safe drinking water and reducing disaster risks. Greater support is needed to position the Convention on Wetlands as a key driver for collaboration between

[17] Concept paper for interactive dialogue D (A/CONF.240/2026/7), para. 46 (the "100 Parties" flagship initiative, aiming for 100 Parties to the UN Water Convention by 2030).

[18] Concept paper for interactive dialogue C (A/CONF.240/2026/6), paras. 15 and 69.

Conventions where water is increasingly important. Existing initiatives, such as the Freshwater Challenge[19], which over 55 states have joined, can play a central role in turning commitments into action for the protection and restoration of freshwater ecosystems.

- Endorsement by Member States and other stakeholders of the joint statement on groundwater led by EDF, IWMI, IUCN and AGWA, recognising that groundwater is the least visible and least governed part of the water cycle.
- Bringing transboundary aquifers into basin agreements, joint institutions and monitoring systems: only 37 countries report most of their transboundary aquifers covered by operational arrangements, against 60 for rivers and lakes.[20]
- Establish a Green Water Action Platform that shares experience, scales on-the-ground green water solutions for drylands and rainfed agricultural systems and shifts from blue only to whole cycle water governance.
- Position freshwater ecosystems centrally in water governance, recognizing their critical role in combating the climate emergency, validating their importance as natural infrastructure essential for water security and resilience, mobilising investment for restoration of freshwater connectivity, and reducing pressures driving freshwater biodiversity loss.
- Commitments to halt and reverse wetland loss and to redirect finance towards wetland conservation and restoration. The Global Wetland Outlook 2025 of the Convention on Wetlands finds that wetlands deliver benefits worth up to US$39 trillion a year, yet more is still invested in activities that destroy wetlands than in restoring them.[21] Investing in wetlands is investing in our shared future.

4. Promote science-based decision-making and enhanced cooperation and sharing of hydrological data

Data and information are essential to guide governments, river basin organisations and international organizations in the effective management and governance of transboundary waters.

Exchanging data and information in good faith facilitates cooperation and serves operators, policy makers, diplomats and users across borders to reach informed agreements over shared waters. An adequate understanding of the conditions, challenges, needs, interests and priorities of water use in all sectors facilitates the development of management plans, policies and laws, agreements and investments. As a crosscutting issue, IUCN will work to promote science-based decision-making and enhanced cooperation and sharing of data, including hydrological data. The concept papers for interactive dialogues C and D similarly call for interoperable monitoring systems and open data standards, people-centred early warning systems, and exploring a periodic global scientific assessment on water.[22]

Key commitments that should come out of the conference therefore include:

- Creation of science-policy platform(s) at global, regional and national levels to enable sharing of data, knowledge and information across disciplinary and institutional boundaries, facilitating the transparent access and processing of data and knowledge between scientific institutions and water-related stakeholders to support informed, data-driven decision-making and action.
- Provision of support for the adoption of digital resources (data, services, code, etc.) by various stakeholders (from scientists to managers), who are all contributors at their own level, and commitments to take meaningful steps to enhance the accessibility, affordability and transparency of digital resources.
- Empowerment of citizen science data to support local and national action on protection and sustainable management of freshwater ecosystems, while integrating the traditional knowledge and practices of Indigenous Peoples and local communities for inclusive decision-making.
- Development of universally applicable standards for data collection and sharing across the realm of water engagement in different sectoral uses and impacts as well as improvements on how to measure water cooperation.

[19] Concept paper for interactive dialogue C (A/CONF.240/2026/6), para. 33.
[20] Concept paper for interactive dialogue D (A/CONF.240/2026/7), para. 11.
[21] Convention on Wetlands (2025). Global Wetland Outlook 2025.
[22] Concept paper for interactive dialogue C (A/CONF.240/2026/6), para. 66; Concept paper for interactive dialogue D (A/CONF.240/2026/7), paras. 87–88.

The 2026 UN Water Conference is a unique opportunity for action to address the global water crisis and ensure a secure future for all. It is essential to build political will for decisive action, underpinned by an inclusive and participatory stakeholder engagement process.



PHOTO: PEXELS | POK RIE

For more information, please contact:

Maria Ana Borges
Head (ad interim), Water and Wetlands
mariaana.borges@iucn.org

Sofie Sandstrom Jaffe
Permanent Observer of IUCN to the UN
sofie.jaffe@iucn.org