

UN Water Conference 2026

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, 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 for the establishment of an intergovernmental process on water—potentially leading to Global Framework for Water Governance and Action—to provide 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, 400 transboundary aquifers and almost 300 hundred shared wetlands worldwide, cooperation on transboundary waters is a foundation for regional stability, peace and resilience. IUCN urges a strong call for wider accession to and stronger implementation of the 1992 Water Convention and the 1997 Watercourses Convention, alongside the creation of a financing facility for transboundary basins, aquifers and wetlands to accelerate implementation, strengthen institutions, close capacity gaps, support joint data systems and sustain long-term, inclusive cooperation.

INTEGRATION



Water must be positioned 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 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 1990, over 50% of large lakes are shrinking and 70% of aquifers are in decline. 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. One quarter of the world's population lives in countries facing extreme annual water stress.

Addressing the water crises globally requires a broadly supported, joint international effort from the United Nations 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. Unlike climate and biodiversity, water still lacks a dedicated global governance process that integrates human rights, ecosystem protection, and international cooperation into a coherent architecture. 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
- D. Water for Cooperation
- E. Water for Multilateral processes
- 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 one main objective and three outcomes for the UN Water Conference 2026:

Main Objective: Strengthen the global water governance system through the initiation of an intergovernmental process on water

The 2026 Conference should recommend that the UN General Assembly launch an intergovernmental process toward a Global Framework for Water Governance and Action a unifying, voluntary and action-oriented architecture that strengthens coherence across existing commitments, accelerates implementation, and mobilises finance, science and political attention, helping to define the architecture including:

1. Regular intergovernmental meetings on water at the global level to maintain political momentum and accelerate progress.
2. Multi-stakeholder designed mechanisms for implementation, monitoring and review of commitments.
3. A dedication of public and private finance to commitments.

In UAE we hope to see secured political support for water, clear recommendations for renewed global water governance, and the necessary mandates to proceed beyond 2026, including development of the process, institutional architecture, financing mechanisms, standards, and implementation pathways for a Global Water Accord, for adoption in 2030 complementary to the post-2030 framework, with the 2028 conference as a key milestone in the process.

The overall aim should be to secure a sustainable, equitable and water-secure future for people and planet.

Outcome 1. Strengthen and scale-up transboundary water cooperation, incorporating aquifers, wetlands and glaciers, using best practices on cooperation

With over 310 shared river and lake basins, around 400 transboundary aquifers and nearly 300 shared wetlands, cooperation over shared waters is central to human wellbeing, ecosystem stability and regional security. Approximately 40% of the world's population lives in river and lake basins that comprise two or more countries. In an increasingly water scarce world there are growing complexities to enable the equitable and sustainable sharing of water between and among States.

IUCN promotes multi-level water governance because transboundary agreements only become effective when they are linked to basin institutions, technical agencies, subnational authorities, local communities and other water users who shape implementation on the ground.

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. The priority is not simply more dialogue, but more operational cooperation. The conference should explicitly strengthen cooperation not only on shared river basins, but also on transboundary aquifers, glaciers 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. 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.

International water law principles provide the minimum operating discipline for cooperation over shared waters, especially as climate change, ecosystem degradation and competing demands increase pressure on basin relations. As an outcome from the 2026 UN Water Conference IUCN would like to see the following commitments related to transboundary water cooperation:

- **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.
- **Creation of a financing facility** to support the governance of transboundary basins, aquifers and wetlands, focused on strengthening implementation, basin institutions, reducing capacity gaps, supporting joint data systems and enabling 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, resulting in functioning arrangements that support joint planning, data exchange, risk management, institutional continuity and implementation across shared basins, aquifers and wetlands.

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IUCN promotes transboundary water cooperation through a range 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.

Outcome 2. Position 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 a reduction in habitats and consequent biodiversity loss.

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.

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. Existing initiatives, such as the **Freshwater Challenge**, which over 54 states have joined, can play a central role in making commitments into action for the protection and restoration of freshwater ecosystems.
- 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.

Outcome 3. Promote science-based decision-making and enhanced cooperation and sharing of hydrological data to support implementation.

Data sharing is not only a technical issue, but also a governance function that underpins cooperation, trust, risk management and accountability, especially in shared basins. 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.

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
- Empowerment of citizen science data to support local and national action on protection and sustainable management of freshwater ecosystems.
- 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.

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 that political will is built for decisive action, supported by wide support from an inclusive and participatory stakeholder engagement process.

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