

UN Water Conference 2026

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, 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 for Member States to establish an intergovernmental process on water—potentially leading to a Global Framework for Water—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. The December 2026 Conference in Abu Dhabi provides the opportunity to transparently start this process.



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 [universal] accession to and implementation of the 1992 Water Convention and the 1997 Watercourses Convention, alongside mobilizing finance for water security through innovative approaches and methods to accelerate implementation, close capacity gaps and support long-term, inclusive cooperation.



INTEGRATION

Finally, 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 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 fresh water and human mismanagement. Since 1990, over 50% of large lakes have been 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. There has been no negotiated UN document focused specifically on water in the 80 years since the founding of the UN system. 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 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 2026 UN Water Conference should result in recommendations to the General Assembly to commence an intergovernmental process on water. The process, ideally resulting in an agreed document such as a “Global Framework for Water”, would lead to improvements in the definition, commitments, role, and coordination needs for global water governance, 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 enforcement of commitments and;
3. A dedication and alignment of public and private finance to commitments.

The overall aim of the process should be to ensure a sustainable, equitable and inclusive secure future for people and planet. To be adopted in 2030 the outcome of the process would be complementary to the post-2030 framework.

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

With over 310 shared river basins, 400 transboundary aquifers and almost 300 hundred shared wetlands worldwide are 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. 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.

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.

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.

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:

- The conference should call 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.
- Mobilization and alignment of finance for water security, including through innovative approaches and mechanisms that support countries and basins most in need, and catalyse investment in resilient, nature-positive solutions.
- Adoption of principles and standards on data collection, sharing and information exchange in transboundary basins, building on existing toolkits and guidance. The priority is not simply more dialogue, but more operational cooperation, meaning functioning arrangements that support joint planning, data exchange, risk management, institutional continuity and implementation across shared basins, aquifers and wetlands.

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.

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 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. Greater support is needed to position the Convention on Wetlands as a key driver for collaboration between Conventions where water is increasingly important. Existing initiatives, such as the Freshwater Challenge, which over 55 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.
- The Convention on Wetlands flagship publication, the Global Wetland Outlook, established that wetlands deliver ecosystem services worth up to \$39 trillion annually — more than any other type of ecosystem. 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.

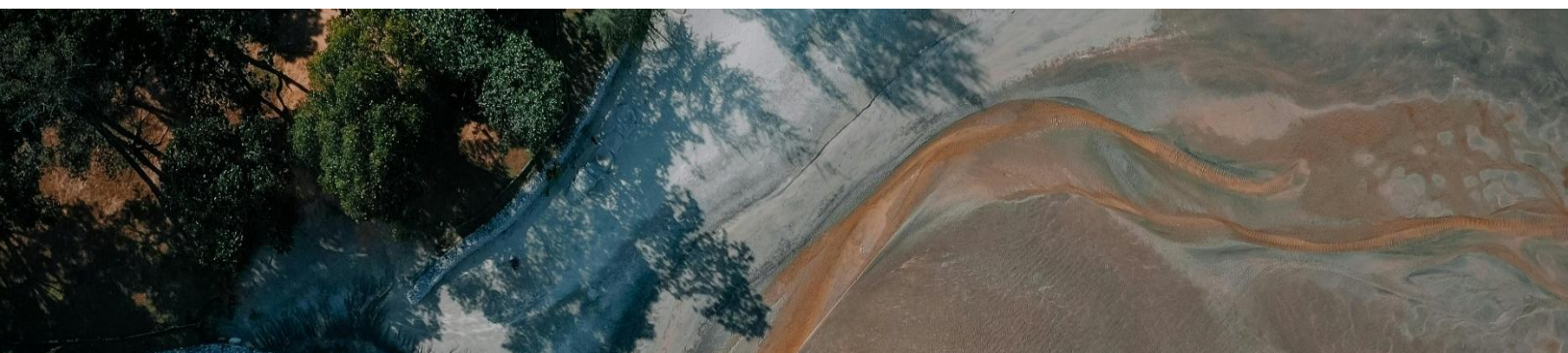
Exchanging data and information in good faith facilitates cooperation and serves operators, policy makers, diplomats and users across borders to reach informed agreements over shared waters. An adequate understanding of the conditions, challenges, needs, interests and priorities of water use in all sectors 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.

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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