



WETLANDS DAY 2023

Theme: "Wetland Restoration"

Global states, which include South Africa, celebrate world wetlands day on the 2nd February of every year. This was the date of adoption of Convention on Wetlands in 1971 in the Iranian city of Ramsar. Since 1997, member countries contracted to the Ramsar convention acknowledge this environmental calendar day to promote awareness and encourage protection of wetlands worldwide.

According to Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (2023), the 2023 theme, "Wetland Restoration", highlights the need for urgent intervention through prioritizing wetland restoration and revival of degraded wetlands. The theme also resonates with global initiative, UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration, which began in 2021 and runs until 2030. Therefore, addressing this environmental issues is critical for social and environmental reasons that can be seen in the importance of wetlands in achievement of Sustainable Development Goals.



WHAT IS A WETLAND?

Working for Wetlands publication states that, "A wetland is defined in the National Water Act (Act 36 of 1998) as the land which is transitional between terrestrial and aquatic systems where the water table is usually at or near the surface, or the land is periodically covered with shallow water, and which land in normal circumstances supports or would support vegetation typically adapted to life in saturated soil," (2021:3).

In simple terms, wetlands can be regarded as surface water sources that are seasonally (and some permanently) covered by shallow water with plants, animals and insects adapted to live in and around them. Examples of wetlands that are inland includes ponds, lakes, underground aquifers, wet grasslands, peatlands, and flood plains. Coastal wetlands include estuaries, deltas and mangroves as well as coral reefs, (Ramsar, 2018:2).

DID YOU KNOW?

1971

This is the year in which Ramsar Convention on Wetlands was established in Iran

172

172 countries, officially known as Contracting Parties of the Ramsar convention currently

1997

World Wetlands Day has been celebrated on the 2nd February since 1997

35%

Percentage of Wetlands degraded or lost in the last 50 years

THREATS TO WETLANDS

With the current human development trajectory, wetlands like other natural environments, have not been spared from destruction. There is an alarming disappearance of these water sources as 35% of world wetlands have been degraded or lost since 1970 (Ramsar, 2023). Among the key threats is mining, agricultural activity, agrochemicals pollution, drainage pollutants, poor road infrastructure design, invasive land and aquatic plants, sewage spillage, wetland soil erosion and human housing settlements.

2.4%

Wetlands make up 2.4% of SA surface area

48%

Percentage of wetland ecosystem types that are endangered in SA

50%

SA has lost almost 50% of its wetlands

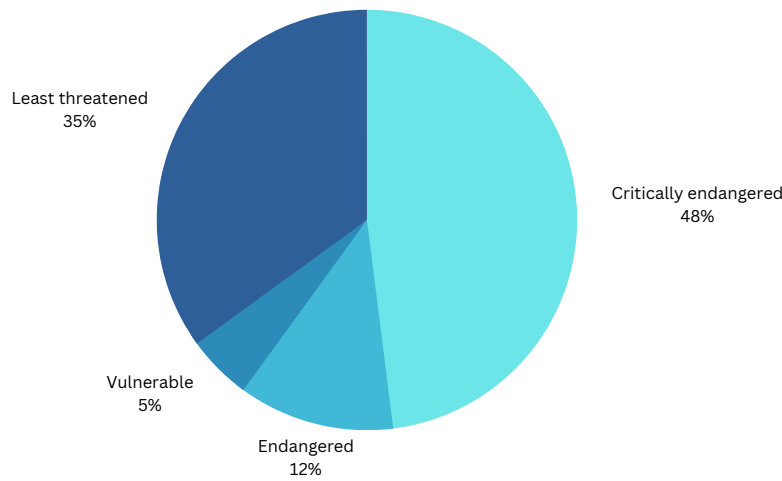
IMPORTANCE OF WETLANDS

Wetlands provide ecosystem services as well as provide support to social and economic activities. They are also "essential to human wellbeing, inclusive economic growth and climate mitigation and adaptation. They provide water for human consumption and agriculture. They protect our shores and help make cities and settlements safe and resilient. They are the Earth's greatest natural carbon stores," (Ramsar, 2018:2).

Besides being critical for their ecosystem services, healthy wetlands have a direct and indirect contribution to the realisation of sustainable development. Wetland perform a critical function in the achievement of some Sustainable Development Goals such as: SDG 1; SDG 2; SDG 5; SDG 6; SDG 13; SDG 14; and SDG 15 amongst others.

STATUS OF WETLANDS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

It has been recorded that there are 300 000 remaining wetlands which make 2.4% of South Africa's surface area, with 48% of the 791 wetland ecosystem types being critically threatened. The country has already lost almost 50% of natural wetlands, which is a significant amount for an arid country. Wetlands are the most threatened ecosystems in South Africa with over 70% of the ecosystem types not protected and a mere 11% being sufficiently protected, (Working for Wetlands, 2021:3).



In a country like South Africa, which has diverse natural environments that support and host biodiversity, the health and preservation of wetlands is very important. There are wetlands that have been considered important and acclaimed to status of protected wetlands in South Africa (See box below).

Ramsar Listed Wetlands in South Africa:

- Barberspan, North West.
- Blesbokspruit, Gauteng.
- Kleinmond Estuarine, Western Cape
- Dassen Island Nature Reserve, Western Cape.
- De Hoop Vlei, Western Cape.
- De Mond, Western Cape.
- Dyer Island Nature Reserve, Western Cape.
- False Bay Nature Reserve, Western Cape.
- Kgaswane Mountain Reserve, North West.
- Kosi Bay, KwaZulu-Natal.
- Lake Sibaya, KwaZulu-Natal.
- Langebaan, Western Cape.
- Makuleke, Limpopo.
- Natal Drakensberg Park, KwaZulu Natal.
- Verlorenvlei, Western Cape.
- Orange River Mouth Wetland, Ndumo Game Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal.
- Ntsikeni Nature Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal.
- Nylsvley Nature Reserve, Limpopo Province.
- Orange River Mouth, Northern Cape.
- Prince Edward Islands, Western Cape.
- Seekoeivlei Nature Reserve, Free State.
- St. Lucia, KwaZulu-Natal.
- Turtle Beaches/Coral Reefs of Tongaland, KwaZulu-Natal.
- uMgeni Vlei Nature Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal.
- Verloren Valei Nature Reserve, Mpumalanga.
- Wilderness Lakes, Western Cape

(Source: Working for Wetlands. 2021)

CONCLUSION

Wetlands provide an important ecosystem service for the environment and society. The alarming degradation and destruction of these water sources has resulted in loss of biodiversity in some ecosystems while it has compromised peoples livelihoods. The call for "Restoration of Wetlands" is timely and important considering the environmental and social challenges facing the global community. Restoring wetlands to their healthy status will results in benefits that will promote sustainable development and ensure a healthy planet for future generations.

Sources:

Working for Wetlands, 2021. 20 Years of Wetland Restoration in South Africa
 Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, 2018. Scaling up wetland conservation, wise use and restoration to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals
 Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, 2023. Campaign Toolkit WORLD WETLANDS DAY 2023.