REPORT ON THE COMMEMORATION OF THE WORLD WETLANDS DAY IN LESOTHO

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Lesotho held its first World Wetlands Day celebration at the Lesotho National Convention Centre on the 2nd of February 2004.

Department of Water Affairs, Ministry of Natural Resources through its newly established Wetland Unit and IUCN ROSA, organized the one-day seminar jointly. The aims of the seminar were to join the rest of the World in celebrating The World Wetlands Day and to share ideas on the issues related to wetlands especially in Lesotho.
The seminar was fortunate to be graced by the presence of the following Lesotho dignitaries because of the significance of the wetland the management and involvement in wetland issues:

- The Honourable Minister of Natural Resources, Mr. Monyane Moleleki because wetlands are firstly a natural resources and of their significance in the water resources management and issues in Lesotho
- The Honourable Minister of Tourism Environment and Culture, Ms. Lebohang Nts'inyi because of the concerns of her Ministry in terms of environmental management and wetlands as sources of eco-tourism;
- The Honourable Assistant Minister of Justice, Human Rights, Law and Constitutional Affairs, Ms. Mpeo Mahase who attended the seminar because, wetland issues play a vital role in water supply in her constituency and because of her interest in the legal aspects related to the wetland issues;
- Representatives of local authorities (local chiefs) in whose areas wetlands play a crucial role in community affairs.
- Representatives of programmes and projects dealing with environmental issues in Lesotho, e.g. LHDA, CMBSL, LLWSPU NUL, Youth organizations related to water and NGOs.

The Principal Secretary of the Ministry of Natural Resources Mr. Bataung Leleka provided the introduction, chaired the first session of the seminar, explained the aims and purposes of the seminar and introduced the dignitaries.

2.0 OPENING CEREMONY

The Director of Water Affairs Mr. Mokake Mojakisane introduced the theme of the World Wetlands day as "From the Mountains to the sea - Wetlands at work for us" and briefly stated the major aims of the seminar as sharing ideas about the wetland issues among the different stakeholders and pointed out that the wetlands selected for presentation are not the only ones of concern but represent a small but pivotal role in wetland related issues. He outlined the structures set up in his Department to champion wetlands as an essential part of the environment.

The Seminar was opened by the Hon. Minister of Natural Resources, who put emphasis on the following points relating to the wetlands and their significance to Lesotho:

- commitment of the Government of the Kingdom of Lesotho to support of and involvement in environmental issues especially the wetlands. This is shown by Lesotho's accession to relevant treaties and accords both at global and regional level, e.g. accession to RAMSAR, participation in SADC initiatives the choice of unique wetland sites in the region in [Okavango delta in Botswana, Etosha pan in Namibia, Ngorongoro Basin in Tanzania and Alpine Wetlands in Lesotho] and the setting up of the Wetland Unit within the Department of Water Affairs
- the role of wetlands in the cultural heritage of Lesotho through inspiration to creative writing, poetry and music composition extolling the richness of flora and fauna exhibited by wetland systems; - "wetlands provide us with the answers to where we are, where we come from and where we are headed historically, lest place names derived from these become empty myths".
- dependence of sustained river flows and clean water on wetland functions - the water crises currently facing the region points to the importance of well managed wetland systems as most of our rivers have wetlands as their sources.

The Commissioner of Water, Mr. Manong Lesoma outlined the structures gave the keynote address and institutions entrusted with the water resources management in Lesotho; the policies and legislation governing these activities some of which needed improvement and harmonization. Some of the important elements of the address were the international and regional obligations that Lesotho, as a head-water state is bound by and the initiatives that have been undertaken to ensure the country's ability to meet its obligations locally and regional. He emphasized integrated planning and management of water resources to ensure both equity and sustainability. Besides legislation, he pointed out that the following aspects need special attention:

- accurate and up to date water resources assessment in terms of both quality and quantity (insufficient data exists on this and needs update);
- protection of water resources and aquatic systems,
- reduction of pollution and proper management of waste,
- improvement of sanitation system particularly in rural areas which currently endanger water quality;
- integration of stakeholders in the planning and development of water related policies.

Among the major threats facing water resources and sustainable food production were mentioned drought and impacts of climate change.
The opening speech and key note addresses were followed by remarks from the floor, with special opportunity given to the ministers present. In their comments the two ministers emphasized the following issues after congratulating the Ministry of Natural resources for the important commemoration:

Importance of wetlands has over a long time been obscured by negative impressions associated with water-borne diseases such as malaria and blind sickness and danger to livestock. This view is now being replaced by realization of positive benefits derived from wetland systems such as biodiversity, provision of utility plants and water purification. They welcomed the presence of local authorities in this seminar because most of the wetland problems are normally blamed on herders and poor governance. They indicated several areas in which their respective ministries are involved in improving the awareness and proper management of wetland resources. These included collaboration in the committees that are involved in ratification, development of management plans and their implementation as collaborative effort with Department of Water Affairs, educational efforts concerting local authorities and livestock herders and were one with the host ministry that the motto should be "let there be no further degradation on wetlands.

The important comments from the floor dealt with poor implementation of existing policies and legislation and educational programmes prescribed for herders and local authorities.

3.0 PRESENTATIONS BY THE PEOPLE FROM LOCAL WETLANDS

The second session of the seminar was opened with the presentations by local authorities on the state of wetland resources and related issues in the areas of Tatai, Koro-koro and Qalabane (Hermon). They provided the audience with the state of the wetlands in their areas (slides were used to illustrate some of the issues for Tatai and Koro-Koro), the management issues confronting the areas in historical perspective. Two clear cases emerged from this. Some local communities have realized the importance of the wetlands and they are attempting to address them and need assistance, the other issues is the variety that exists in these systems in terms of relative importance to the community. The Tatai case provided a situation where, based on the historical perspective the communities and the local authorities have manage to recover some measure of the wetland resources, Koro-koro and Qalabane provided cases where development efforts planned centrally have resulted and are resulting in further degradation of the wetland and continued loss of their utility. The difference being that in the Qalabane case the political will seems to be in favour of a policy that might lead to improvement similar to what is happening in Tatai. Poor governance, uncoordinated development efforts were illuminated as the major threats to wetland communities as seen by local authorities. The local authorities provided information about the extent of both the original and current size of their wetland areas and the problems facing them and the efforts being made to address these and indicated in what ways they needed help, namely, restoration techniques, management advice and enforcement of good governance. The remarks following these presentation were related to valuation of wetlands in terms of their resources value and economic terms, the leadership problems facing the local authorities, the advice that local authorities should attend gatherings like this with their local resources managers (advisors) - good example was provided by Hermon community, reduction of bureaucracy in community resource management. The local authorities were applauded for their important input into the national awareness raising efforts for the wetlands.

4.0 TECHNICAL PRESENTATIONS

The presentation by the local communities were followed by technical papers from national bodies involved in issues related to wetlands [Details are provided in the presentations attached to this report] :

4.1 Wetland Unit. [L. Motanya] which provided the definition and classification of wetlands of Lesotho, description of the benefits derived from the wetlands and constraints/threats facing the unit in addressing the wetland issues. The major constraints were listed as

- Lack of coordination
- Conflict of activities
- Poor administrative structures

4.2 National Environment Secretariat (L. Molapo) - Discussed issued related to the national wetland definition, types of wetlands in general and those present in Lesotho, threats Lesotho wetlands, the importance of different types of wetlands occurring in Lesotho (with examples, benefits derived from wetlands grouped into ecological/environmental benefits, economic and social value. The presentation ended with the initiatives undertaken at national level to
address wetland issues, namely,

- Research activities
- Rehabilitation efforts
- Establishment of protected areas
- Recommendations of government input in the improvement of efficiency of wetland management.

4.3 LHDA [T. Mahlelebe]- presented the efforts carried out by Lesotho Highlands Development Authority in the rehabilitation of Bokong Wetland and showed the progress in the healing of the wetland after damage by road construction.

4.4 CMBSL (Mr. Maliehe) -presented the extend of the Conservation of Mountain Biodiversity Southern Lesotho programme which covers two wetland areas Letseng-la-Letsie and Mosaqane in the Quthing district. The problems highlighted include soil erosion and silitation, loss of ecotourism potential and loss of aesthetically unique ecosystem, grazing pressure. Water bottling has been initiated as one of the efforts to improve awareness of the benefits of wetland resources.

4.5 DWA [M. Maseatile]- the paper presented wetland management in Shared Water Resources content. It addressed the mountain wetlands of Lesotho, described the importance to water of the region and ways of achieving the objectives of the SADC Protocol on Shared Water Courses, in terms of the legal framework, implementation and obligation of both Lesotho and downstream members.

5.0 REMARKS BY IUCN-ROSA

Remarks were delivered by the representative of the IUCN ROSA - Mr. Lenka Thamae, following these presentations. The thrust of his remarks was on the historical background of the World Wetlands Day. The commemoration day signifies the day on which the Convention was signed in the city of RAMSAR (Iran) in 1971. The commemorations days are aimed at raising awareness of the values and benefits of wetlands and the RAMSAR Convention. Each year RAMSAR Bureau advances a global theme.

The theme for this year embraces wetlands functions of storage, and purification of water storms, as sources of food, water, utility products, as well as places for recreation, and medium of transport. The ranges of wetland types that occur in southern Africa are wide and includes- sponges, swamps, and springs, rivers, flood plains and natural and artificial lakes. These systems support livelihood of communities in a variety of ways and contribute to national economies in general.

The wetland systems in Lesotho are important not only as for LHDA but also as key sources water, pasture and livelihoods of large sections of our communities, but they are currently faced with critical threats mainly from overgrazing and trampling by livestock herds leading to extensive degradation of the systems. This degradation should be urgently halted because rehabilitation often takes a very long time over which resource may be out of function.

Wetlands in other parts of southern African have been shown to contribute hugely to community and national livelihoods if managed properly (Dambos in Zimbabwe, Okavango Delta in Botswana).

The IUCN and its partners is currently engaged in assisting the region and Lesotho through training officials, provision of platforms for sharing experience and information, identification and support of research and demonstration of best practices in integrated wetland management planning.

6.0 SUMMARY OF THE PROCEEDINGS

The part of the report aims to present in a short form the essential outputs of the Seminar. Three issues were identified as common threats of the day

6.1 ISSUES:

The major issues covered included, awareness of wetland ecosystems and their value and benefits, initiatives undertaken at national and local level to address wetland problems, policies that are in place to assist wetland management and their strengths and weakness.

There is an increase in the general awareness of the wetlands ecosystem benefits but specific sections of the community are at different levels of awareness and needs to be strengthened and supported with well managed
structures at all levels.

Changes in attitudes to wetland resources and uses particularly the cultural ones seem to be on the decline especially among youth. The general consensus seems to increase education and level of knowledge of wetlands among the users the systems so that to ensure sustainability. Educational efforts that have been initiated so far seem to have had little effect. This needs research and development of appropriate strategies to ensure sustained awareness build into the day-to-day activities of the communities and stakeholders.

Policies and legislation regulating wetland issues are generally weak, outdated and often-in conflict. There is need to harmonise these and strengthen their enforcement. One of the issues that were emphasized is the poor governance relating to these resources.

Initiatives being undertaken to address wetlands issues are many but still need harmonization and proper coordination to allow optimal outputs. The establishment of the Wetland Unit as a lead organization recognition of this weakness, but the current state is that wetland initiatives are still structured along narrow sectoral lines with poor communication between the sectors this leads to competition in the housing of initiatives and weakens their potential to get support timely.

6.2 CONSTRAINTS AND THREATS

The major threats identified as affecting wetland ecosystem and wetland management seems to be dominated the following

- Lack of co-ordination of development efforts in areas in which wetland are located. Effects of road construction on Koro-koro reed meadow were given in this seminar as examples.
- Conflict of interests among land users on wetland ecosystem - grazing, crop production, water harvesting are not planned in an integrated manner to optimize the health of the ecosystem but to maximize interest group benefit.
- Weak administrative structures at community level to effectively address the apparent negative effects of land use practices.
- Inadequate education/knowledge on and low level appreciation of importance of wetland ecosystems and their need for special care.
- Delay in providing a home of wetland related units - this often hinders the timely access to resources that might be accorded the unit.

6.3 DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION RELATING TO ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Generally information about environmental resources management is poorly distributed to the appropriate and relevant stakeholder. Although the technocrats and scientist have knowledge about the issues the local communities do not often know it and the local knowledge is not available to the technocrats and scientists because they activities are often carried out and report in a different form to the different forum. Participatory research techniques and integrated planning would go a long way to minimize this because the communities and policy-makers and planners will jointly own the development process.

Workshops and seminars normally are normally attended by narrowly selected groups and held at places accessible to few and their proceedings not widely distributed in appropriate forms (language format) to the exclusion of local communities that are often expected to implement the recommendations and polices. Awareness campaigns should include distribution of these proceedings as widely as possible to reach widest possible audience beside those who attended the workshops and seminar. One suggestion from this seminar was to hold special days on a rotational basis planned to maximize attendance and information sharing at local level.

7.0 CLOSING REMARKS

The Commissioner of Water who thanked all the participants for joining Lesotho in the celebration of this important day, closed the seminar. Special thanks were extended to the Ministers that graced the day with their presence and IUCN for financial and logistics support.

APPENDICES:
1. The World Wetlands Day - Letsatsi la Machaba la Mekhoabo le Matša: Programme
2. Official Opening Speech: Hon. Minister of Natural Resources
3. Key Note Address: Commissioner of Water
4. Paper Presentations
   a. Regional Cooperation in Wetlands Management - Thamae
   b. Wetland of Lesotho Current Trends - Motanya
   c. Ecologic, Social and Economic Importance of Wetlands - Molapo
   d. The Lesotho Highlands Water Project: Experiences in Wetland Management - Mahlelebe
   e. Role of Lesotho’s Wetland systems in Functioning and distribution of water in SADC Subregion - Maseatile
   f. Conserving Mountain Biodiversity - Maliehe
   g. Wetlands in Lesotho - Local Experience - Makhonofane

Letsele-la-Letsie, suggested Ramsar Site