

iSimangaliso Celebrates World Wetlands Day – Alien Busting!

There can be no better place to celebrate the 40th World Wetlands Day than the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, rehabilitating wetlands and busting aliens!



Working for Water community contractors and iSimangaliso staff join hands to clear aliens at the Lake St Lucia estuary.

iSimangaliso has four wetlands of international importance recognised under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, namely the St Lucia Lake System, the Turtle beaches and Coral reefs, the Kosi Bay Lake System and Lake Sibaya. Available information suggests that no other locality on the globe has such a wide range of wetland types in a single protected area. Of the 30 distinct natural wetland forms recognised by the Ramsar Bureau, 20 of these forms occur within iSimangaliso.

World Wetlands Day is an annual event that commemorates the signing of the Convention on Wetlands on 2 February 1971 in the Iranian City of Ramsar. The annual celebration aims to amongst others raise awareness on the importance of wetlands on socio-economic development. This year, the Ministry and Department of Environment are celebrating *World Wetlands Day* under the theme: *Wetlands and Tourism* with the slogan *Enhancing community livelihoods*.

Dr Guy Preston, the Department of Environmental Affairs' Head of Specialist Unit (Natural Resources Management), responsible for programmes such as Working for Water, Wetlands and Fire programmes says, "The management of wetlands is of enormous importance, for biological diversity, water quantity, water quality, flood control and disease management, as well as food security and other benefits. Invasive alien plants are one of the major threats to wetland conservation, and iSimangaliso is absolutely right to place such an emphasis on this aspect of their work in one of the world's great wetland areas."

Unfortunately, there are no quick-fix solutions to eradicating invasive aliens in Park. The problem starts kilometres upstream and out of the Park with seed loads being washed into the Park with each successive flood. Work needs to be undertaken in the same area over several years. Looking forward, current efforts are at best checking the infestation, but the longer term solution may lie in effective biological control agents.



The National Water and Environmental Affairs Portfolio Committee checking progress on alien busting and lending a working hand.

Enhancing community livelihoods and caring for the land are key drivers in iSimangaliso's bid to build a sustainable world heritage site and tourism destination. The Park's ongoing Land Care Programme, which includes the Department's Working for Water, Working for Wetlands and Coast Care programmes, addresses the problem of invasive alien species protecting iSimangaliso's world heritage status and simultaneously creates community empowerment and job opportunities.

Says Herbert Mthembu iSimangaliso Park Operations Director "In the 2010/2011 financial year, the Working for Water programme employed 3,000 people and 31 Small, Micro, Medium Enterprises (SMME) to clear invasive alien plants from 46,710 hectares of the Park including uMkhuze, St Lucia Estuary, the Eastern Shores, Futululu, Western Shores, Nhlozi Pennisular, Maphelane, False Bay and Nibela. Invasive aliens such as *chromolaena odorata*, guava, self-seeded casuarinas and other invasives were removed. Owing to the successful operations in some areas, they are now on a maintenance stage, requiring only light work once or twice per annum".

This year's Annual Plan of Operation sees the Working for Water teams return to do follow-up clearing of aliens and Coast Care moving into new areas such as Mabibi and Lake Sibaya in the Coastal Forest section of iSimangaliso.



Annually iSimangaliso hosts school groups, students and members of the public to participate in its clearing programmes. Seen at work here are (left) National Water and Environmental Affairs Portfolio Committee Chairperson Mr Johnny De Lange (MP), and (right) Mr Fundisile Mketeni, Deputy Director General - Biodiversity & Conservation, National Department of Environmental Affairs.

Mali Malozi Gumede, a land claimant and member of one of the contractors hired to do the alien plants clearing, says that the job has brought about change to her and her workers as well as her family. "My neighbour, since her employment in 2008, has built a big house with a garage and has sent her son to the University of Zululand to do a law degree. He is now doing his fourth year which is his last year."