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WORLD WETLANDS DAY 2011: SPOTLIGHT ON THE WESTERN CAPE'S VERLORENVLEI

The 2011 World Wetlands Day celebration, which took place within the Bergrivier Municipality in the Western Cape, was a success with an international delegation of mayors and deputy mayors from about 20 cities attending. The event began with a warm welcome from the Bergrivier Municipality Mayor, Kobie Liebenberg, at Vensterklip venue with the Verlorenvlei wetland offering a scenic backdrop for the celebration. The Deputy Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs, Rejoice Mabudafhasi, who officiated the event under the theme 'Wetlands, Forests and Climate Change', had the audience eating out of the palm of her hand. She encouraged everyone in the room to take a conscious decision towards the protection of the environment. In her speech she also highlighted the threats facing Verlorenvlei, "Verlorenvlei has come under severe pressure from agricultural activities, including groundwater abstraction and reduced water quality. Alien ! vegetation in the upper catchment impacts on water flow. The estuary mouth is frequently closed because of sediment build-up and poor water movement."

The Verlorenvlei wetland, which was declared a RAMSAR site in 1991, is a very important bird habitat. The area also boasts many endemic fish species. It is also one of the largest coastal lakes along the West Coast with the water body on this vlei covering about 14 km. The catchment is about 136 058 ha. With the annual rainfall at 200 to 300 mm, this wetland system is not solely dependent on surface water runoff but is also driven by groundwater input. The bird site on the vlei gave the visitors a taste of why this wetland is so important.

Working for Wetlands began rehabilitation activities in Verlorenvlei in 2006. To date over 2 000 ha of alien vegetation have been eradicated. This brought about an increase in the bird life and subsequently a bird hide was built. Over the last five years R5 233 100 has been spent on this project utilising 17 536 worker days, creating a Wise-Use brochure in the process. About 39 job opportunities were created.

The formal part of the event covered a diverse number of topics ranging from the current mining threats to the archaeological significance of Verlorenvlei and its surrounding landscape. Discussions also ranged from communication, education and public awareness on biodiversity matters, estuaries and estuary management issues. Experts from different organisations including CapeNature, SANBI's Working for Wetlands, the Department of Environmental Affairs and the Universities of Cape Town and Rhodes shared their expertise on why it is important that sites such as the Verlorenvlei wetland are worth protecting and how this message can be spread. The floor was also given an opportunity to ask questions and make comments. The Deputy Mayor of Auckland in New Zealand, Penny Hulse, took this opportunity to commend Mabudafhasi for the immense interest and role she plays in environmental issues of this country.

This event was organized in partnership by the Departments of Water, Environmental Affairs, Agriculture, Forests and Fisheries, Expanded Public Works Programme, the Water Research Commission, SANBI and Local Action for Biodiversity (LAB).



Figure 1: Japie Buckle, the Working for Wetlands Provincial Coordinator explaining the rehabilitation work that has taken place in the Verlorenvlei wetland to Deputy Minister Rejoice Mabudafhasi (Photographer: Tiyese Teranji).

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PROVINCIAL CELEBRATIONS

World Wetlands Day was also celebrated in various provinces. Below are reports on how the celebratory events took place in some of the provinces this year.

North-West

The provincial event took place on 2 February at a local primary school in Tseng village near Vryburg. The area falls within the Dr Ruth Moipati Segomotsi District and Kagisano Local Municipalities. Dignitaries including government officials, the executive mayor, chiefs, learners as well as local communities attended in big numbers. The event was preceded by a two-day awareness campaign organised by the newly formed Department of Economic Development, Environment, Conservation and Tourism.

Like some other wetlands in the country, the local wetland—a dolomitic eye—has some folklore associated with it. People are discouraged from visiting or getting close to the wetland during certain times of the day or else the 'Badimo' (ancestors), who are believed to be living in the wetland, will capture them. People have to wait until the right time to visit the wetland. The Chief also advises keen visitors when it is safe to visit the wetland.



Figure 1: Starting at school level to teach about wetlands protection is the best way.



Figure 2: Dignitaries at the World Wetlands Day celebration in the Free State.

Free State

The celebratory event was held at the Tshiya Education Resource Centre in Phuthaditjhaba on 4 February. About 600 people including government departments, local councillors, academics, school kids and their teachers attended the event.

Limpopo

In Limpopo local leadership, community members, teachers and school pupils took part in various successful celebrations in support of the protection of wetlands. This demonstrates the role that communities play in environmental issues. The Waterberg District celebrated their event on 2 February.

The provincial event was celebrated on 8 February at the Matangari local sports ground while the Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality celebrated its event at the Serutle School on 10 February and on 15 February the Phomolong school in Polokwane also held its event.

Mpumalanga

Officials from Mpumalanga also did their bit in creating awareness about wetlands. The provincial celebration took place on 2 February at Chrissiesmeer. Working for Wetlands demonstrated the building of a gabion structure as an activity for the day for the guests, mainly school kids and government officials. The district celebration took place at the Amsterdam Environmental centre on 11 February.

Eastern Cape

The Eastern Cape Province celebrated the event on 3 February at the Maluti wetlands in Matatiele. It was attended by about 700 people including the Matatiele Mayor, government officials, local municipality and schools. Traditional healers also took part. The

focus of the event was on schools and communities. In the evening a gala dinner was held to hand over the local Matatiele Nature Reserve project which was established and proclaimed a nature reserve in 2007.

Western Cape

It seems the Western Cape was the busiest as a number of events took place in the province. Below is a list of the events that were successfully carried out all in celebration of wetlands.



Figure 3: Traditional healers demonstrating the importance of protecting wetlands for medicinal benefits to the audience.

Date	Venue	Event proceedings
31 January–4 February	Kuils River Schools	Ten schools participated in celebration activities from 9:00 each morning
2 February	Redelinghuys Primary School	Organised activities for learners
2 February	Intaka Island (Century City)	Ten schools participated in a Wetland Discovery Race
2 February	Kenilworth Racecourse	Held an educational session at the Claremont Primary School
2 February	Liesbeek River	Maintenance of two bird hides
2 February	Rondevlei and Zeekoeivlei Nature Reserves	Organised a wetland awareness programme for a group of learners
2 February	Table Mountain National Park	Hosted Ukhanyo Primary school learners
2 February	Agulhas National Park	SANParks and Working for Wetlands hosted Grades R–7 learners
2–3 February	Edith Stephens Wetland Park	A 'show and tell' event between Working for Wetlands contracting teams and City of Cape Town Water Hyacinth Clearing teams
3 February	Rietvlei Nature Reserve	Hosted a talk on 'Conserving our wetlands—the story of the Ramsar Convention'
3 February	Agulhas National Park	Hosted Grade 6 learners at Nuwejaars
4–6 February	Glen Vlei	Promoted wetland clean-up activities

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Limpopo

Date	Venue	Municipality
17 February	Kgolokgotlo School	Aganang Municipality
22 February	Fedlle School	Molemole Municipality
24 February	Malebogo School	Blouberg Municipality

If you wish to attend any of these events, please contact:
 Arnot Ravele
 E-mail: ravelea@cdm.org.za
 Tel.: 015 294 1289 or 071 686 500

Gauteng

Date	Venue	Municipality
25 February	Merafong (near Carletonville)	Fochville Municipality

If you wish to attend this event, please contact:
 Mpfareleni Mashau
 E-mail: Mpfareleni.Mashau@gauteng.gov.za
 Tel.: 011 355 1884 or 083 596 9821

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REHABILITATION PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION DISTURBED BY FLOODS

Wetland rehabilitation work has come to a halt in a number of Working for Wetlands projects nationally due to the recent country-wide floods. Floods pose a real challenge to the projects as it becomes difficult for workers to conduct any rehabilitation work. In most areas it becomes impossible and dangerous to get to the wetlands due to the conditions of roads they use to get to the wetlands.

In Limpopo the Mutale and Waterberg projects could not resume with work in January. Kruger National Park project workers were forced to down tools as early as December due to heavy rainfalls while some of the Gauteng projects like Tswaing only started work mid-January. Gauteng North is also on hold at this stage. In the Free State the Seekoievlei and Maluti projects have also lost a month's work.

In North-West the only project that is operating is Kuruman, as workers are attending the Expanded Public Works training. For the Western and the Northern Cape it is business as usual as they have not been affected by rain.

High rainfall in some areas have also affected newly built structures as the cement cannot dry under wet conditions. Lufuno Netangaheni reported that in the North-West some of the structures were completely submerged due to heavy rain explaining, "Landowners have been helpful in giving us information as we cannot get to some of these sites. Some wetland structures were completely covered by rain water and some of the streams have been widened by up to 4 m."

Rustenberg and Buffelspoort valley have been hard hit. "Buffelspoort valley is largely affected by a lot of high flows from the nearby mountain," explained Netangaheni. This, unfortunately, will mean that projects have to operate beyond the current financial year in order to meet their targets. With some projects it looks like construction work will only resume towards the end of April or at the beginning of May as this area normally experiences less rain during that time.

David Lindley, Manager of WWF WESSA Mondi Wetlands Programme attributes the impact of floods to man's altering of natural systems like wetlands and river banks. He says that wetlands are meant to play a vital role in the natural infrastructure that is needed to help control erosion and flooding. "Unfortunately poor land use practices over the past decades in South Africa have resulted in more than 50% of our wetlands being destroyed. Similarly, riparian zones are infested with alien woody species, such as black wattle. The combined effect is that we've greatly altered the functionality of these systems. When we have heavy rainfall as we have seen in the central parts of South Africa, this water simply flows directly off the surface and into the river systems, resulting in rivers breaking their banks and the disastrous impacts we have recently witnessed," explained Lindley.

He advises that we must really up our efforts at conserving the wetlands because they are like giant sponges that absorb large amounts of water and release this slowly into river systems over a long period of time.

When projects resume work there will be a lot of dedication required in order to make up for lost time.

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SNIPPETS

Latest National Freshwater Ecosystem Priority Areas (NFEPA) update

The final NFEPA shapefiles (rivers, wetlands and fish) now have metadata and are ready for uploading. This data will be uploaded into a user-friendly portal accessible to everyone in the near future. Those who can use the raw data files can download them at: <ftp://ftp.csir.co.za/NRE/Ecosystems/NFEPA/>

Should you experience any problems when downloading your specific maps, please contact Ashton Maherry or Jeanne Nel.

Ashton Maherry: AMaherry@csir.co.za or 021 888 2599

Jeanne Nel: JNel@csir.co.za or 021 888 2484

Third Orange River Basin Symposium

The University of the Free State's Strategic Academic Cluster, Water management in water-scarce areas, will be hosting the third Orange River Basin Symposium from 8–9 June 2011 under the theme 'The role of water in food security'.

The Orange River is South Africa's largest river. Its catchment straddles South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana and Namibia and plays a major role in agriculture, industry, mining and rural development.

The Orange River is also a major source of water for the dry west of the subcontinent as it is one of the subcontinent's major non-perennial river system.

Objectives of the Symposium

The Symposium aims annually to provide a forum and a communication channel between academics, researchers, public officials (local to national government and parastatal), industry, suppliers, consultants and development organisations interested and affected by the Orange River Catchment. It encourages discussing matters of mutual interest in a friendly atmosphere.

In line with the objectives, facilities can be made available for associated meetings, workshops and courses.

Focus areas of the Symposium

The Programme is broadly accommodating and not restricted to the overall theme, but participants are asked, where possible, to consider it in the light of the following preliminary topics:

- Environmental water requirements
- Water harvesting
- Changing environments
- Water-related rural development issues
- Water-related urban development issues
- Training in integrated water management
- Trans-boundary water issues
- State of the Orange River
- The role of water in food security
- Acid mine drainage
- Wetlands
- Water disaster risk management

Important Dates

Second announcement: 11 April 2011
Abstract submission deadline: 2 May 2011

Registration

Early Bird: R1 000 (before 6 May 2011) per delegate, payable in advance.
Late Fee: R1 400 (payment after 6 May 2011) per delegate, payable in advance.
Subvention will be considered for UFS staff and students on application. Fees cover lunches, a dinner, teas and the programme.

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Working for Wetlands champions the protection, rehabilitation and sustainable use of South Africa's wetlands through co-operative governance and partnership. The programme is managed by the South African National Biodiversity Institute on behalf of the departments of Environmental Affairs, Water Affairs and Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, and forms part of government's Expanded Public Works programme.



**Environmental Affairs
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