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Press Statement from Dr. Wari Lea Iamo , Secretary of the Department of Environment and Conservation World Wetlands Day

[For immediate Press Release]

The International World Wetlands Day falls on the 2nd of February each year. It marks the day the Ramsar Convention was signed in the Iranian City of Ramsar in 1971.

This year the theme is Wetlands and Forests – Forests for water and wetlands in celebration of the United Nations International Year of Forests. As the Secretary of the Department responsible for protection and the sustainable use of natural resources I launch this day as a significant day for us to remember that Wetlands and forests are important for our economic and social wellbeing.

Papua New Guinea as a sovereign Country signed up to the convention and became a member on the 16th July 1993. PNG being a member to the Convention shows that it is committed to raising awareness locally, in the region and globally that PNG has very significant areas of wetlands that are important to its people. By being a signatory it has enlisted two sites as significant wetlands in PNG. Tonda Wildlife Management Area in Western Province and Lake Kutubu Wildlife Management Area in the Southern Highlands Province.

Wetlands are all about water, the continuous supply of water and its natural resources. Recognising wetlands and its importance is very essential for the supply of fresh water, maintenance and use of biodiversity, mitigation of the effects of climate change and the hydrological cycle of water, livelihoods of communities who depend on all wetlands ecosystems from coral reefs, coastal ecosystems, peat lands, and

swamps to lakes and rivers to alpine wetlands. There are many benefits that we all derive from these wetlands.

Simple things that we do everyday involve water. In Papua New Guinea, these wetlands provide for us tremendous economic and conservation benefits through fisheries production, flood control, maintenance of shoreline stabilization, estuarine systems for our coastal fisheries, water quality and provision of recreational opportunities and large quantities of varieties of food. We wash or fish in the seas or rivers or reefs or look for crabs or shells or dig for mud crabs in the rivers, mangroves, mudflats, marshes and sea grass beds.

Wetlands also house extensive biodiversity, ranging from corals, sea grasses, fishes of all sorts from small ones to very huge whales and sharks in the deep oceans, crocodile in our rivers, shorelines and swamps, crustaceans, mollusks, from microscopic organisms as bacteria, algae and lichens, mosses to varieties of mushrooms to higher plants, thousands of insects, varieties of birds that fly in the sky or on the ground, water snakes that use the wetlands to breed, all kinds of animals that also live in the wetlands and in the forests. These animals also are a significant part of the wetlands ecosystem.

The 2nd of February, however, should have special meaning for everyone in this country. For anyone who has ever jumped into the river on a hot day, paddled a canoe through some mangroves to collect crabs or shellfish from mudflats, dived or snorkeled over a brightly coloured coral reef, or simply stood by to see a reef heron awaiting the arrival of its next meal, or watched a sooty oyster catcher search for its meals on the shoreline or a masked Lapwing in the swamps or flocks bar tailed godwits in their thousands using our wetlands on their way to the north of Siberia where they breed . In fact, for every Papua New Guinean, the 2nd of February is a time to celebrate a very special part of our natural environment – the “wetlands”.

So for us we can focus on all types of forest, those that are often or always wet, such as mangroves, flooded forests, peat swamp forests and lowland rainforests often inundated with water for most part of the year. What better occasion for us to look at the importance of these forested wetlands, whether we live near them or not, because of the many benefits they bring. It is also a good opportunity to focus on the many threats they face too.

As we reflect on the immense economic, social and ecological value of our wetlands, we are also painfully aware of the rapid rate at which many of our wetlands are being degraded and disappearing. Impact projects occur mainly in our wetlands also as too often we wrongfully think of them as wastelands. In other parts of the world they are used as waste dumping grounds resulting in toxic and harmful substances entering the waterways and ocean, or they are used as landfills for housing projects. Furthermore, wetlands tend to be over-used through excessive withdrawals of water for townships or cities or through the removal of key species from the area. Thus losing biodiversity species that are importance to maintain healthy waterways.

Losing our wetlands means losing the valuable services they provide and this almost always impacts negatively on humans. Tourism, food security and coastal protection are often the most obvious losers when

wetlands die. In small islands, marginalised people, often live very near to and depend directly on wetland ecosystems for their livelihood. They are also the least able to cope with the impacts of wetland loss.

Climate change adds another dimension to the continuing destruction of our wetlands but it brings a greater concern for their preservation. Across the country, there is growing evidence that climate change is resulting in more frequent cyclones and storm surges, coastal erosion, loss of fish breeding grounds and reduced water quality on many small islands resulting in loss of community's livelihoods.

However, it is also becoming clear that better management and protection of our wetland ecosystems could help our most vulnerable communities whether coastal and inland ; build resilience and adapt better to the impacts of our changing climate. Strong mangrove areas, for example, act as highly effective buffers against storm surges and cyclonic waves; healthy coral reefs and seagrass beds provide breeding grounds for fish and other marine animals, thus strengthening food security of coastal dwelling populations; healthy and strong coral reefs are also the first line of defense against storm surges and waves associated with the changing climate. The interaction between healthy coral reefs and healthy mangroves can therefore not be discounted as a major defensive asset of our islands, and one that we need to protect.

Protecting and conserving the diversity of life, including conserving our valuable wetlands and adapting to and building resilience to climate change impacts are inextricably interlinked. Our mandated role as a Government agency recognises that we cannot realistically address one without the other and, more importantly, that human activity is as much to blame as climate change for the continuing destruction of our natural ecosystems especially focusing on the impacts of logging on forests.

This year, the International Year of Forests, presents us with an opportunity to take stock of our ongoing contribution to nature conservation and work towards building resilience to the ever-increasing impacts of climate change. It may seem all too simple, but if we strengthen our commitment to conserving mangroves, coral reefs and seagrass beds; improving waste management and preventing marine pollution; and to reducing our consumption of fossil fuels and destruction to forests, we have hope that we can save our forested wetlands and possibly set our communities in preparation to withstand the impacts of climate change.

This World Wetlands Day, I challenge every one of you, no matter who you are or what you do, to take stock of what is happening around you and make a change in your life for the well-being of the unique water-based environments in which half of the population of Papua New Guinea live.

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In Celebration of World Wetlands Day **2 February 2011**, Papua New Guinea

Forests for Water and Wetlands

The theme for World Wetlands Day 2011 was specially chosen to link with the United Nations International Year of Forests. It provides an ideal opportunity to focus on those forests that are often or always wet, they are Marine, Inland Wetlands and Human – made wetlands and Coastal wetlands or intertidal forested wetlands dominated by mangroves.

Whether we live near them or not, wetlands provide many positive benefits for people. Inland swamp forests protect catchments while coastal swamp forests protect our coastline against storms and rising sea levels in some cases. All swamp forests provide diverse habitats for an impressive range of animal and plant species. Riparian forests along or around rivers, streams and lakes play a significant role in stabilising banks, trapping sediments and carbon, removing harmful nutrients, reducing water velocity after storms and providing shade for aquatic life. And of course, forests and wetlands together, have a vital role to play in the provision of freshwater for human health and wealth.

World Wetlands Day is a time to reflect on the importance of wetlands in our lives; to celebrate what has been achieved but also, to rise to the challenge to do more for wetlands, not just on one day but throughout the year.

So, what is World Wetlands Day?

World Wetlands Day is held on 2nd February every year and marks the signing of the International Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (the Ramsar Convention) on 2 February 1971 in the Iranian city of Ramsar on the shores of the Caspian Sea. World Wetlands Day was celebrated for the first time in 1997 and since then, events and activities are held world-wide in February each year to raise awareness of wetland values and benefits.

So where are Papua New Guinea's Wetlands?

I asked Ms. Rose Singadan, Manageress of Sustainable Terrestrial Protection, *"First, there are, many types of wetlands under the three Ramsar classifications but I will name three major types generally recognised as*



wetlands in PNG. They are; the Alpine Wetlands or High Altitude Wetlands e.g., the two lakes on Mt Wilhelm in Simbu Province (plus three other smaller ones]; Mt Victoria wet grasslands in the Central Province, and many other unknown lakes up in many of our mountain tops. There are the Arid Wetlands and they are usually dry and wet in wet seasons but we could include the manmade Waigani Swamp and the Tonda WMA in the Ramu / Markham valley. The third is the Estuarine Wetlands, usually these are locations where the rivers meet the sea like the Gulf Basin, the Galley Reach in the Central Province and the Sepik River Basin. These are basins that hold vast mangrove forests".

For the record, according to surveys and studies carried out in the last 2 decades by the Department of Environment & Conservation, Papua New Guinea has a total record of 5, 383 lakes with a surface area greater than 0.1 hectare; 3, 003 with a surface area of equal to or less than 2 hectares and 22 lakes larger than 1, 000 hectares. 75 % of these lakes are found in the Western Province and East Sepik Province. The largest of these lakes being Lake Murray in Western Province with a surface area of 650 sq.km at an

approximate depth of 10 meters and the second largest is the Chambri Lakes in East Sepik Province with a surface area of just less than 600 sq.km and fills a shallow depression of the Sepik flood plains. These wetlands are home to large tracts of Mangrove and Nipa Palms, the most extensive spread found in the Kikori and the Purari Delta in the Gulf of Papua. Collectively, the mangroves forests in these basins occupy an area of about 162, 000 to 200, 000 hectares providing habitation to an enormous treasure house of wildlife and fauna.

So why conserve wetlands?

Wetlands are among the world's most productive environments. They are cradles of biological diversity, providing the water and primary productivity upon which countless high concentrations of species of plants and animals depend for survival. In turn, this biological diversity is the food source for our people. Wetlands are also important storehouses. They trap carbon [dead trees, leaves, grass etc] in their mud banks and hold edible plant genetic material which supports the livelihood of many of our people. Sago, for example, which is a common wetland plant, is the staple diet of more than half of the country's population. 75% of our population does not have gas and electricity and almost, all of their cooking is fueled by wood, harvested from wetland forests. Wetlands are nature's water filter for fresh, clean drinking water. Therefore, the multiple roles of wetland ecosystems and their value to Papua New Guinea must be understood by all of us.

The Department of Environmental and Conservation [DEC] is mandated to contribute to the conservation and wise use of wetlands in Papua New Guinea, through the strengthening of capacities based on the technical implementation of the Ramsar Convention.

DECs Vision is to minimise the loss of wetlands because it continues to happen in Papua New Guinea through various impacts, like mining and urban expansion, for e.g. the loss of the Era Kone [Ela Beach] wetland. Therefore, wetlands must be conserved, protected or rehabilitated through integral management practices based on the Ramsar Convention

guidelines that will guarantee sustainable enjoyment and livelihoods of wetland communities.

DEC Objectives therefore are to promote research and education on the wise use of wetlands in Papua New Guinea. Promote and encourage biodiversity conservation in Wetlands, promote and increase the number of protected areas in wetland areas, Promote sustainable livelihoods in wetlands, prepare available human resources, increase capacity building for the management and conservation of wetlands, and implement the objectives of Scientific-technical plan of the Ramsar Convention for the wise use and conservation of wetlands in Papua New Guinea.

World Wetland Day is a global call for all including Papua New Guineans to become concerned about the importance of wetlands preservation, its uses and its significance to man's livelihood and *derived* cultures. In the face of rapid urban expansion, population increase, the effects of climate change, and the accelerating crisis of safe drinking water, Papua New Guinea must appreciate the values of Wetlands.

Wetland values

These values range from economic benefits, for example: water supply (quantity and quality); fisheries (over two thirds of the Papua New Guinea's fish harvest is linked to the health of coastal and inland wetland areas); agriculture, through the maintenance of water tables and nutrient retention in floodplains and swamp; timber production in our lowland swamp forests; energy resources, such as peat and plant matter; wildlife resources; and recreation and tourism opportunities.

These functions, values and attributes can only be maintained if the ecological processes of wetlands are allowed to continue functioning with minimum of threat by man.

Ends

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