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## WORLD WETLANDS DAY CELEBRATED AT MAKULEKE VILLAGE

This year's national World Wetlands Day (WWD) event, to commemorate the date of the signing of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands 41 years ago, was successfully hosted by the Limpopo Province on 2 February 2012. More than 700 people gathered at the Makuleke Village to celebrate this day of global importance for wetlands under the exciting theme and slogan 'Wetlands and Tourism: A great experience—Enhancing community livelihoods'. The Departments of Environmental Affairs, Water Affairs and Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Expanded Public Works Programme, Water Research Commission, SANParks, Makuleke Communal Property Association, Vhembe District Municipality, Limpopo Department of Agriculture, Limpopo Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism (Ledet) and the Makuleke Joint Management Board joined forces in making this event a success. The presence of both the Deputy Ministers of Water and Environmental Affairs (Ms Rejoice Mabudafhasi) and Tourism (Ms Tokozile Xasa), two Members of Executive Council, three mayors and eight traditional leaders made it apparent that this region is very special, and has much to teach the rest of the country.



For Ms Mabudafhasi, the Makuleke wetland system particularly holds a significant reminder of the work that she and her department spearheaded years ago in ensuring that sites like this one remain healthy, provide benefits to surrounding communities and receive the recognition they deserve as valuable ecological infrastructure. Ms Mabudafhasi was instrumental in this wetland system being designated a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance on 22 June 2007. The proposal for its designation brought much publicity to this region during the celebration of World Wetlands Day in 2002. During that event, Ms Mabudafhasi highlighted the fact that, should this site be designated a Wetland of International Importance, it would be the first community-owned Ramsar site in the country, and as such, it would represent a new approach to wetland management.

It is no wonder that what followed was South Africa receiving international acclaim for its exceptional work during the Tenth meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention (COP10) at Changwon, Republic of Korea. Here the Convention handed over the certificate for Makuleke Wetlands to Mabudafhasi and encouraged other countries to learn from South Africa.

## THE SITE VISIT

The day's proceedings began with a site visit to the Mapimbi pan—named after an old Makuleke resident—situated on the floodplain of the Limpopo River. It is one of 31 such pans on the floodplains adjacent to the confluence of the Limpopo and Luvuvhu Rivers. This diverse mosaic of habitats makes up the Makuleke wetland system and provides a home to a diverse range of rare, vulnerable and/or endangered, endemic plants and animal communities.

For the Makuleke communities the Ramsar site represents an endowment fund from which benefits can be derived in the form of wetland tourism. There are three tourism concessions in the Makuleke region namely EcoTraining, Pafuri Camp and the Outpost. Currently, 75 community members are permanently employed by these operators, putting R4.5 million into the community annually in the form of salaries, not to mention the rentals the concessions pay to the community or the direct employment of community members by SANParks. Kruger National Park sees thousands of visitors, mostly international, descend on this region every year, which goes to show how the unique value of Makuleke wetlands for ecotourism has placed this region on the world map. The region attracts tourists from all parts of the world thereby contributing to local economic development and conservation.



## THE FORMAL EVENT

In her address to over 700 assembled guests, Deputy Minister Mabudafhasi began by likening wetlands to kidneys in human bodies, pointing out the vital role they play in sustaining healthy lives. She went on to explain how wetland ecosystem services have the potential to generate thousands of jobs and reduce poverty through mechanisms such as wetland tourism. "Healthy ecosystems can also be tourism assets and, in so doing, contribute to local economic development if used sustainably. Biodiversity is not only a cornerstone of our climate change response strategy, but it is also good for growth and providing jobs. Making this a reality has required an approach to conservation and biodiversity management which promotes social justice and puts people at the centre, creating opportunities for people to benefit from biodiversity," said Ms Mabudafhasi.

Ms Tokozile Xasa, the Tourism Department's Deputy Minister, stressed that our country is endowed with natural resources which, if properly utilised, can benefit people sustainably. Ms Xasa said, "South Africa is recognised as one of the most biodiverse destinations of the world. Rural areas, particularly those in South Africa, offer a unique experience that cannot be found anywhere else in the world. It is also a fact that the majority of poor South Africans live in these areas and most of them are women who are often the bread winners in their respective households, she elaborated." She added that the lives in these households must change for the better and believed that wetlands and tourism have a contribution to make towards realising this.

"In line with the available resources, government together with the social partners needs to prioritise development and job creation in these areas," she pointed out.

With South Africa being well known for the wide range of nature-based tourism activities it provides for visitors, it is no surprise that the Ramsar Convention has listed 20 South African sites as Wetlands of International Importance. This recognition is a globally known hallmark that attracts tourists eager to experience the attributes that make these sites internationally significant.

Ms Xasa appealed to the public to heed the warning of the climate change reality being experienced worldwide. "In line with our vision, to be globally celebrated as a leader in tourism excellence, responsible tourism remains a major aspect of the destination's competitiveness. As a long haul destination, it is imperative that we manage the sector's carbon footprint effectively. We call upon all the tourism stakeholders and travellers themselves to contribute their part of the global responsibility to safeguard the intricate web of unique species and ecosystems that make us to be proud South Africans. Wetlands and tourism are good friends. We need to pay attention to the two. It calls on all of us to use the opportunities of celebrations of this nature to educate and learn to protect our environment. We seek to protect our richest biodiversity through practising sustainable tourism," she said.

In conclusion, Ms Mabudafhasi said that government recognises the value of wetlands not just in the country but also globally and that is the reason why ongoing monitoring is extremely important to Ramsar sites such as this. "Our message is simple: our vast wealth of biodiversity—our variety of life from species and ecosystems—is our endowment fund! We must step up our efforts to unlock the potential of our biodiversity to deliver benefits to communities and provide jobs."

In other provinces, the events will be taking place until March.

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## WORLD WETLANDS DAY CELEBRATED IN OTHER PROVINCES

Below is a list of places in the different provinces that have organised various events to celebrate this year's World Wetlands Day.

### FREE STATE

World Wetlands Day celebrations for the Free State Province, organised by the Free State/Northern Cape Wetlands Forum, took place on 3 February at Martie Lotz Hall, Clarens. The event was organised in partnership with SANParks, SANBI, CWR, DETEA, DWA, DAFF, DLM, Basic Education Department. More than 500 people attended this event.



About 290 Grade 6 to 12 learners from local schools such as the Clarens Intermediate School, Clarens Combined School and Moriti wa Thutho School were among the participants in this event where they were introduced to different environmental careers. Working for Wetlands' projects, Upper Wilge, Maluti a Phofung and Golden Gate projects also joined in the fun.

The Seekoeivlei Wetland project also celebrated WWD on 13 February in partnership with the Local schools in Memel.

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### GAUTENG

The Gauteng Wetland Forum, in conjunction with the Johannesburg City Parks, Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (GDARD), City of Joburg, Joburg Zoo and the Rand Water Foundation, hosted their celebrations on 23 February 2012 at the Dorothy Nyembe Environmental Education Centre in Dobsonville, Soweto. Hundreds of people attended this event. The proceedings of the day involved visiting the Dorothy Nyembe wetland.

For more information, please contact Angie Phaliso on cell: 082 389 2409; e-mail: [mashudua@mweb.co.za](mailto:mashudua@mweb.co.za)

### LIMPOPO

Besides the national event taking place in Limpopo, this province has been abuzz with other celebrations on 9 February, organised by the Sekhukhune district, and on 16 February, organised by the Mopani district. Community members, local authorities and government officials made sure this important day for wetlands was well commemorated. Hundreds more people attended the district events that took place at the Waterberg district on 21 February and at the Capricorn district on 23 February.

For more information, please contact Collin Silima on tel: 015 516 2072; cell: 071 686 1975; e-mail: [C.nemadodzi@sanbi.org.za](mailto:C.nemadodzi@sanbi.org.za)

### MPUMALANGA

The Working for Wetlands' Highveld Project, in partnership with the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) Crane Foundation, also hosted a celebration at Chrissiesmeer on 2 February. About 500 people including project workers, officials and members of the community attended.

For more information, please contact Don Cater on cell: 083 355 6040; e-mail: [dcater@mweb.co.za](mailto:dcater@mweb.co.za)

### KWAZULU-NATAL

In Maputaland a celebratory event took place on 2 February at Inkomo Primary School in Mngobokazi, Mkhuze. The event was initiated by the Working for Wetlands Maputaland Project, implemented by the Eastern Wetland Rehabilitation (EWR) and the Department of Agriculture, Environmental Affairs &

Rural Development. The event received support from the Big Five False Bay Municipality and iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority.

On 7 February, EWR, in partnership with EWT and the KwaZulu-Natal Crane Foundation, hosted the World Wetlands Day celebrations at the Usher Conservation Centre on Nottingham Road in the Midlands.

The Upper Mzintlava and Sneezewood projects will also have events with the dates to be confirmed at a later stage. Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife is also planning a big event to be held at Ntsikeni Nature Reserve on 29 February.

**For more information, please contact Mbali Kubheka on tel: 033 344 3585; cell: 072 819 4895; e-mail: [M.Goge@sanbi.org.za](mailto:M.Goge@sanbi.org.za)**

## WESTERN AND NORTHERN CAPE

### Agulhas National Park Wetlands Month

On 2 February, beneficiaries from the Agulhas Working for Wetlands project celebrated the uniqueness of the Agulhas Wetlands at the De Mond Nature Reserve. The captivating programme included talks on wetland tourism and the value of tourism on the Agulhas plains. Unfortunately, the guided walk in De Hoop Nature Reserve could not take place due to heavy rain.

On 3 February the celebrations took a different shape as visits were organised to view gabion structures and observe the interventions that have been put in place to manage erosion at the Ratel River. This trip also focused on birdwatching in the Ratel River and how wetland rehabilitation in the area has improved visits to this bird sanctuary.

The Springfield Open Day took place on 10 February. The day's proceedings also involved visiting Springfield to observe wetland birds and rehabilitation structures and interventions that have been put in place to manage erosion.

From 2 to 29 February 2012 there is an exciting Wetlands Display at the Project Office in Bosheuwel.

**For more information, please contact Simoné Koert or Patricia Johannes on tel.: 028 435 6216 (09:00–16:00) and Emmerentia de Kock on tel: 028 435 6078 (08:00–16:00)**



From 30 January to 2 February, Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA) embarked on a 3-day educational programme with schools in the Western Cape. A picture below shows the Noluthando Primary School learners in Khayelitsha constructing a wetland model using wetland plants, soil, water, and organic matter. This exercise was aimed at teaching learners the different elements of wetlands and how these interact together to create a well functioning system. This was then used as a basis to educate learners about important services provided by these unique ecosystems.

Another interactive and educational activity was to look at threats to wetlands and this included a designated station where learners learnt about invasive alien plants and the environmental impact that these plants pose to wetlands. This exciting three-day programme was concluded with a talk by Professor Richard Fuggle during an evening event that took place in the WESSA Barn at Kirstenhof. Professor Fuggle shared details on his fascinating work in Tanzania with a special focus on the Malagarasi Wetlands.

Kamiesberg Working for Wetlands Project hosted a World Wetlands Day celebration on 2 February 2012 at the Port Nolloth Bird Park. The event was held in partnership with Port Nolloth RC Primary School, Conservation South Africa, Department Environment and Nature Conservation, Richtersveld Municipality, CWP SANParks Honorary Rangers, University of Cape Town, Department of Agriculture and Skeppies Fund. Activities included a Wetland cleanup, an environmental treasure hunt and the planting of indigenous trees as well as setting up an automated weather station.

The Duiwenhoks project hosted an open day in celebration of WWD at the Duiwenhoks rehabilitation site.

Working for Wetlands' West Coast project hosted a successful open day in celebration of World Wetlands Day on 23 March.

**For more information, please contact Heidi Nieuwoudt on tel: 021 808 5359; cell: 082 877 7911; e-mail: [H.Nieuwoudt@sanbi.org.za](mailto:H.Nieuwoudt@sanbi.org.za)**

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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.**



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