

KNOWLEDGE SHARING

The South African National Wetlands Indaba – from humble beginnings to a well-established platform

NP Gola, F Eggers and I Bredin provide an overview of the history, success and importance of the National Wetlands Indaba – an annual national gathering of wetland experts and stakeholders.



The National Wetland Indaba grew from a small group of people meeting informally to discuss wetland-related issues. The group formed into the South African Wetland Action Group (SAWAG), which held its first meeting in Nottingham Road, in KwaZulu-Natal, in 1998. The annual meetings later grew into the National Wetland Indaba, which was first held in 2005.

Over the years, participation in the Indaba has increased from a handful of wetland specialists to an annual event which attracts hundreds of people from varying disciplines with a common interest in wetlands. The Indaba allows for a range of people with varying experience and interests, keeping the balance between science and practice, across the country to come together and

share knowledge. The sharing of knowledge has allowed the wetland field of practice to develop and strengthen.

Beyond the Indaba, regional/provincial wetland forums have been active from 2000. The forums serve as platforms where cooperative governance issues relating to wetlands can be coordinated. The forum meetings also serve as a regular convergence of persons involved in the wetland field of practice, including government authorities, consultants, non-profit organisations, and academics. These forums have further taken on the responsibility to rotate the organising and hosting of the National Wetlands Indaba (Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of the various locations SAWAG/ National Wetlands Indaba has been hosted

Year	Host Province	Venue
1996 (Inaugural meeting)	KwaZulu-Natal	KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, Rawdon's Pub
1997	Mpumalanga	Dullstroom
1998	Eastern Cape	Pirie
1999	Free State / Northern Cape	Sterkfontein Dam
2000	KwaZulu-Natal	Vryheid
2001	Limpopo	Nylsvley
2002	Western Cape	Cape Town
2003	North-West	Barberspan
2004	KwaZulu-Natal	St Lucia
2005	Limpopo	Modimolle
2006	Eastern Cape	Stutterheim
2007	Gauteng	Kempton Park
2008	Mpumalanga	Skukuza
2009	Western Cape	Langebaan
2010	Free State / Northern Cape	Kimberley
2011	KwaZulu-Natal	Didima
2012	Limpopo	Bela-Bela
2013	Eastern Cape	Cape St Francis
2014	Gauteng	Lanseria
2015	Western Cape	Worcester
2016	Mpumalanga	Swadini
2017	KwaZulu-Natal	Wild Coast Sun
2018	Northern Cape	Kimberley

The 2017 National Wetlands Indaba

The 2017 National Wetland Indaba, held on 16-19 October at the Wild Coast Sun on the outskirts of Port Edward KwaZulu-Natal, attracted well over 200 delegates. National delegates comprised scientists, students, practitioners, decision-makers and experts from all over the country. In addition, the Indaba also attracted international delegates from institutions in the Netherlands and United Kingdom.

The theme for the Indaba was 'Wetland communities: Networking towards better practice'. The Indaba provided an opportunity for delegates to engage and interact over four days, where sessions included presentations, workshops, field excursions, and panel discussions. The KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Wetland Forum, in partnership with the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) and Water Research Commission (WRC), convened two facilitated panel discussions on the final day of the Indaba. The objective was to elicit a robust debate on a topic that could in many ways be connected to several key themes covered throughout the Indaba. The topic was 'Ecological infrastructure (EI) in the context of water security,

exploring the application of trans-disciplinary approaches to enhance the uptake of the EI message'.

The panellists included representatives from the Institute of Natural Resources NPC (INR), Forestry South Africa (FSA), the National Business Initiative (NBI), the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS), the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA), the Department of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF), SANBI, eThekweni municipality, and the South African Environmental Observation Network (SAEON). The discussions were facilitated by representatives from SANBI and the WRC.

The intention was not to identify the impacts on EI, as these are largely known, but rather to identify ways in which the wetland community can support and thus create an enabling environment for effective management of EI. As such, the primary objective of the panel discussions was to identify collective actions for strengthening support for the role EI plays in enhancing water security.

Ecological infrastructure for water security

The issues covered in the panel discussions were around mechanisms applied for securing ecological infrastructure to improve water security and reduce associated barriers and challenges. The discussions also covered the extent to which the EI message has been taken up and embedded in each of the sectors, and touched on the opportunities for alignment and coordination across the research-policy-implementation continuum. The wetland community considered ways in which it could assist in creating an enabling environment to strengthen the uptake of the EI message.

Key Actions

A list of potential actions was identified:

- *Working towards a common understanding of the definition of EI*

It appears that not everybody understands the term EI and therefore there is a need to adjust and simplify the language used to define this term to align with different sectors. The definition of EI should not only be limited to the ecology but also incorporate nature as an asset which provides specific ecosystem services. Ecological infrastructure should also be defined in the broader context taking into account the benefits it delivers for example in the face of climate change (extreme events such as floods and droughts) and other challenges. The definition of EI should also take into account its contribution to improving people's livelihoods, food security, water security, etc. Defining EI in formal scientific language seems to be easier than explaining it to the general public, using simple terms and language. There needs to be a simpler way of explaining the meaning of EI.

- *Developing effective communication mechanisms*

There is also a need to transform the language to ensure that the EI message is spread across sectors and across all levels of society so that everyone can be on the same page regarding effective management of EI. Communication needs to be broader, using a wider range of mechanisms than just generating



The National Wetlands Indaba was established out of government initiatives, such as Working for Wetlands.

scientific products such as technical reports and journal articles. Researchers and practitioners must step out of their comfort zone towards transformative science that incorporates an understanding of how people outside the environmental sector understand EI. Researchers must engage with the private sector and government officials in order to build trust and find a middle ground and identify shared values when it comes to management of EI.

There seems to be disconnection between the information required (particularly by the private sector) and the scientific information generated. The science community must look at the type and format of data that is produced and align that with the needs of the various sectors including the private sector.

- ***Developing a business case for ecological infrastructure***

It is important to demonstrate the value and benefits of EI, particularly for the private sector. People are more likely to invest and conserve EI if they are aware of the benefits they receive from it. There is a need to engage those with money and power. Building relationships and trust leads to long-term investments that contribute towards adaptation to the 'new normal'. Regulators must also be adaptive and flexible and come up with regulatory mechanisms that incentivise the private sector (particularly industries) in order to balance economic development with environmental management needs.

- ***Developing a shared vision***

It is important that we demonstrate the value of EI and find a shared vision for the public and private sector when it comes to managing EI. There needs to be a common understanding of where we come from and where we want to go. The loss of EI such as wetlands, may have negative impacts on water security. Wetlands enhance water security in a number of ways, including slowing down water during flood events, improving water quality, and maintaining stream flow. People realise the importance of water and the scarcity of the resource, but the investment in water resource management does not adequately

reflect its importance. There is a bias and emphasis on built infrastructure and distribution of water to households, with little focus on catchments as the source of water when it comes to investment (both in terms of human and financial resources).

- ***Using the socio-ecological approach***

There is a need to integrate social and ecological aspects. Ecological issues are intricately linked to social aspects. Ecosystems for the most part do not degrade on their own, they are degraded by people, and the responsibility to restore and rehabilitate remains with people. Social aspects such as rural to urban movement result in land-use change that impacts on EI. Ecological infrastructure can also be linked to resilience and the ability of communities to adapt to climate variability. There is an opportunity to bring EI into the discussions around events such as droughts and floods. People can relate to the impacts of these events.

- ***Improving governance approaches and mechanisms***

Governance mechanisms and approaches need to be adaptive. Some of the challenges we are facing are outcomes of poor governance rather than poor management. There is a need to think of mechanisms that allow for collective and collaborative governance, and do away with the silo mentality. Government needs to not only be a regulator, but also an enabler when it comes to effective management and conservation of EI.

- ***Developing and maintaining strategic partnerships***

There is a need for a strategic approach to create awareness, engage stakeholders, and develop and maintain partnerships to support EI. There is no one-size-fits all-approach. Engagement must take place at all levels, from high level officials to local communities. Partnerships should involve the public and private sector.

The future of the National Wetlands Indaba

While the National Wetlands Indaba has developed into a well-established platform for the sharing of knowledge, there is still much that can be done to strengthen and enhance the Indaba's profile as the primary platform for engaging on all wetland related topics, both nationally and regionally. If we are to see a continued strengthening of the Indaba, then the South African Wetland Society and the provincial wetland forums have some important decisions to make in the coming years.

As a way of reflecting on the growth of the Indaba it would be valuable to review the identified collective actions for strengthening support for the role EI plays in enhancing water security. A review of the implementation of the key actions discussed above, in five years' time, would be a good indicator of the value of the National Wetlands Indaba.

This year's National Wetlands Indaba is taking place from 8 to 11 October in Kimberley.