

Wild about wetlands

On 2 February South Africa joins the world to celebrate World Wetlands Day. This is the day that the Ramsar Convention was signed for the first time back in 1971 when several countries promised to take care of their wetlands. This year's theme is 'Wetlands and agriculture: partners for growth'.

Why this theme? People have been using wetlands for thousands of years to plant their crops and graze their animals – think of the ancient Egyptians using the Nile floodplain, for example. Today, around 2.5 billion people depend directly

on agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting for their livelihoods. Agriculture is also an important economic activity, providing important income and jobs in many countries, including South Africa.

Wetlands provide food and other agricultural products, such as fuel and fibre directly through agricultural production activities that take place in them, such as rice paddies, coastal grazing marshes, planting in flooded areas (called recession agriculture) and aquaculture (fish farming) in large floodplains, as well as cropping of small seasonal wetlands. Wetlands also support agriculture indirectly, for example, by providing fertile soils and reliable supplies of good quality wetlands.

Unfortunately, we have not been as good to our wetlands as they have been to us. In many countries around the world, including South Africa, up to half of wetlands have been lost mainly because of bad agricultural practices. As populations grow and more people need to be fed, more wetlands are threatened.

This needs to be prevented. Not only are wetlands important habitats for a

range of plants and animals, they provide important functions to humans as well. Wetlands improve water quality, and regulate streamflow. They also house plants that are used for medicinal or cultural purposes. In addition, wetlands provide benefits to people through provision of grazing, direct water abstraction, and the production of fibre and animal protein. In many rural areas in South Africa, people make use of their local wetlands to grow traditional crops such as amadumbe to feed their families. For some people wetlands have spiritual or aesthetic value, while others use them for recreational purposes (think, for example, of South Africa's iconic tourist

What is Ramsar?

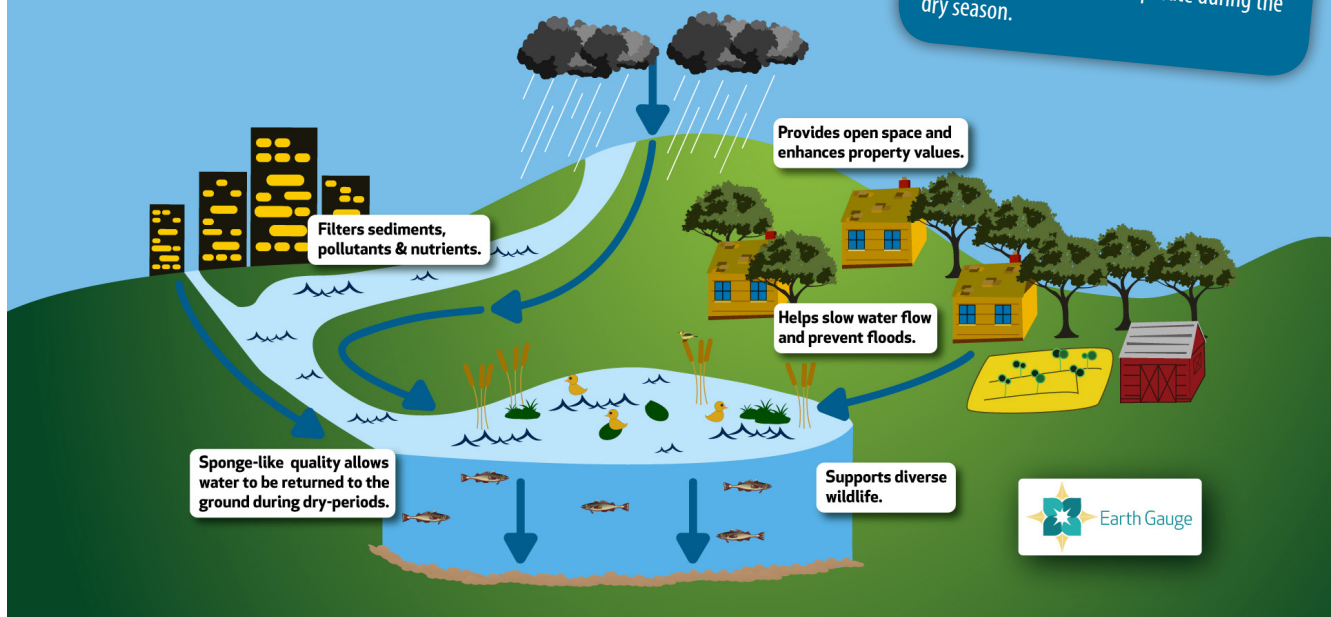
The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, called the Ramsar Convention, is an intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands.

South Africa is currently one of 168 signatories to the convention.

What is a wetland?

Wetlands are areas where standing water covers the soil or an area where the ground is very wet. Wetlands are not connected to the ocean, and can be found along the boundaries of streams, lakes, ponds or even in large shallow holes that fill up with rainwater. Known by many names, such as swamps, marshes, vleis, bogs, mires, fens or sponges, wetlands may stay wet all year long, or the water may evaporate during the dry season.

Benefits of Wetlands





Wetlands provide an important home to many animals and plants.

water through the wetland. Drainage also increases the danger of erosion by concentrating water flow, and so increasing the erosive power of the water.

In many areas of South Africa wetlands are burnt to improve the grazing value for livestock by removing old dead material and for other reasons. This can also be harmful to wetlands, destroying many important plants and animals.

When dams are built for irrigation purposes this may increase river flows or water levels due to dam releases and changes the timing and pattern of river flows (i.e. where before the river was dry in winter there might now be water flow). This can damage the natural character of wetlands. Other impacts come from intensive agriculture, which often leads to increased loads of pollutants, such as pesticides, fertilisers, antibiotics and disinfectants. Not only do these affect the character of wetlands, they also have impacts on human health and the quality of drinking water supplied from wetlands.

What can you do to protect your wetlands?

- Keep lawns and driveways free of pet waste, fertilisers, and motor oil. These pollutants can wash into storm drains and eventually reach a wetland.
- Choose indigenous species when planting trees, shrubs and flowers to prevent alien invasive species from growing in wetlands.
- Use non-toxic products for household cleaning and lawn and garden care.
- If you grow tired of your exotic pet do not release it into the wild where it can harm local wildlife.
- Volunteer to help monitor or restore wetlands in your area.

There are many laws in South Africa that help protect wetlands. Communities must come together to protect and restore their wetlands. If we look after our wetlands they will keep looking after us.

FOOD, WATER AND WETLANDS

www.ramsar.org

Panel 1: Duck: "HEY! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"
Penguin: "SORRY GUYS, BUT OUR TOWN IS GROWING, AND WE NEED MORE FIELDS AND WATER FOR CROPS."
Farmer: "SO WE'LL DRAIN THIS WETLAND IF YOU DON'T MIND."

Panel 2: Duck: "WE DO MIND! THIS WETLAND IS THE ONLY HOME WE HAVE!"

Panel 3: Duck: "HMMM... THIS WETLAND ALSO GIVES ME IRRIGATION WATER FOR THE DRY SEASON AND PASTURE FOR MY CATTLE."
Farmer: "AND IT'S A GOOD FLOOD REGULATOR AND HELPS PURIFY OUR WATER."

Panel 4: Duck: "THINK OF THE WATER THAT IS USED IN THE TOWN. YOU COULD RESTORE THE URBAN WETLAND YOU DRAINED LAST YEAR AND RECYCLE THE TOWN'S WASTE WATER!"
Penguin: "UM... BUT WE CAN'T AFFORD THAT!"

Panel 5: Duck: "OF COURSE YOU CAN! THE WETLAND WILL HELP YOU TO PURIFY YOUR WASTE WATER."
Penguin: "PEOPLE FROM THE TOWN COULD USE THE WATER TO GROW MORE VEGETABLES AND EVEN FLOWERS!"
Farmer: "YOU COULD ALSO GET MORE FISH!"

Panel 6: Duck: "THERE WOULD BE MORE WATER FOR YOU TO USE, AND MORE HABITAT FOR WILDLIFE."
Penguin: "SOUNDS INTERESTING! LET ME CALCULATE..."
Farmer: "YEP, LOOKS REASONABLE. EVERYONE BENEFITS - WE'LL HAVE MORE FOOD AND WATER AND WILDLIFE!"

Panel 7: "LONG LIVE THE WETLANDS!"