

## Special day explores link between WETLANDS AND FORESTS

**W**orld Wetlands Day is celebrated on 2 February every year. This year, the theme for international celebrations is 'Forests for Water and Wetlands'.

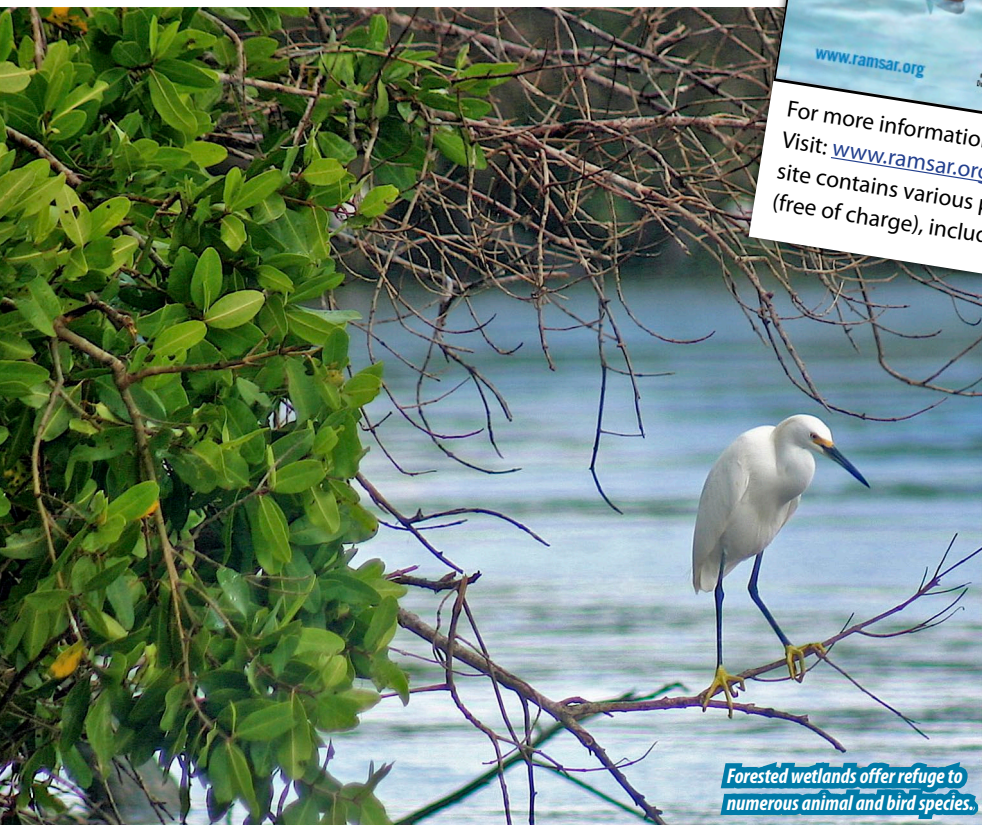
This theme is particularly appropriate since the United Nations has declared 2011 the International Year of Forests. For the wetland community it offers an ideal opportunity to focus on a very particular type of forest – those that are often or always wet. These wetland forests include mangroves, flooded forests, and peat-swamp forests, to name a few.

According to the Ramsar Convention (an international body of member countries focused on protecting wetlands of international importance), a wetland forest or swamp forest can be defined as any wetland with woody vegetation. A total of 825 out of 1 891 Ramsar sites have at least some forested wetlands within their boundaries.

Swamp forests can range in size from one to two metres to as much as 50 m tall. Inland swamp forests protect catchments while coastal swamp forests protect coasts against storms and rising sea levels in some cases. All swamp forests provide fish and many other aquatic foods, both animal and plant, consumed by humans the world over; they provide diverse habitats for an impressive range of animal and plant species, thus contributing significantly to global biodiversity; and importantly, they provide livelihoods for local communities.



For more information on World Wetlands Day 2011 Visit: [www.ramsar.org](http://www.ramsar.org). Apart from valuable information, the site contains various promotional material for download (free of charge), including posters, brochures, and cartoons.



Forested wetlands offer refuge to numerous animal and bird species. [www.sxc.hu](http://www.sxc.hu)

### FORESTED WETLANDS IN DIFFERENT SHAPES AND FORMS

Internationally, three types of forested wetlands are generally recognised:

- Intertidal forested wetlands (e.g. mangrove swamps)
- Freshwater, tree-dominated wetlands (e.g. freshwater swamp forests and wooded swamps); and
- Forested peatlands

Source: Ramsar



A typical mangrove swamp. The world's area of mangrove forests has been reduced by 20% between 1980 and 2005.

www.sxc.hu



In South Africa, forested wetlands can be found at, among others, iSimangaliso Wetland Park, on the KwaZulu-Natal coast.

Unfortunately, just like other wetland types, swamp forests are threatened by a variety of factors. The need for land for urban development, conversion for agriculture and aquaculture, oil extraction, and excessive abstraction of water upstream are some of the threats facing these special wetland types.

Swamp forests are pretty rare in South Africa. Most of the country's remaining swamp forest (more than 60%) lie in the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, a World Heritage and Ramsar Site. Incidentally, the name means 'miracle and wonder' – an apt description for this unique place on the eastern coast of southern Africa.

Unfortunately, South Africa's swamp forests are highly threatened as more areas are cleared for cultivation and the planting of commercial and community woodlots (for more information, see *the Water Wheel*, July/August 2010).

Forested wetlands, just like other wetland types, need to be appreciated and conserved. □

## RAMSAR TURNS 40

The year 2011 is also the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. On 2 February of that year, at an international meeting held in Ramsar, Iran, the delegates of 18 nations agreed to come together for the sake of the world's wetlands.

Ramsar is the first of the modern global intergovernmental treaties on the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources, and it is still the only one that addresses a specific ecosystem. Today, the Convention covers all aspects of wetland conservation and wise (i.e. sustainable) use, recognising wetlands as ecosystems that are vital for biodiversity conservation, for water management, and for the well-being of human communities. Ramsar boasts 160 contracting parties and 1 910 sites designated for the list of wetlands of international importance. These designated sites cover an area of close to 187-million hectares. South Africa is a proud signatory of the convention, and boasts 20 Ramsar sites.

SA Tourism

## EXAMPLES OF FORESTED WETLANDS AROUND THE WORLD

- **North-Livonian Transboundary Wetland Complex, northern Europe:** These forested and non-forested peatlands cover an area of close to 18 000 ha. These wetlands play an important role in maintaining water quality in the area and in water storage. They are also home to a diverse range of plant and animal species, most notably wolf, brown bear, and elk.
- **Rio Del Rey, Cameroon:** This Ramsar site not only covers half the country's mangrove area it is also home to a number of endemic and threatened species, including the Goliath frog, which weighs in at 3 kg, while providing spawning ground for fishes.
- **Berbak, Sumatra:** This Ramsar site is the largest peatswamp forest in Sumatra. Known for its flagship species of Sumatran tiger (below) and Malay tapir (a large, pig-like mammal), Berbak also plays a significant role in carbon storage and regulation of water flows.

Source: Ramsar

