

Spreading the wetlands work

By Michelle Nel.

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Wetland rehabilitation is a perfect vehicle for starting wetland conservation outside reserves, says David Lindley of Mondi Wetlands Programme.

Until recently, most government run wetland conservation in South Africa took place in nature reserves and at Ramsar sites. However, most of our wetlands are on private land outside these protected areas. This means there is very little conservation of most of South Africa's wetlands. Apart from the obvious impacts on wetlands (drains, agriculture in wetlands, erosion and so on), four of the biggest threats to wetland conservation are:

- lack of public awareness of the importance of wetlands;
- lack of wetland management training;
- lack of people working in the wetland conservation field outside reserves;
- lack of co-operation - NGOs, government departments, land owners and public should all work together on wetland conservation issues.

To help overcome these problems, Phase Two of the Mondi Wetlands Project (MWP) was started in 1996. The aim was to use wetland rehabilitation as the vehicle to initiate wetland conservation on private land and simultaneously tackle the problems plaguing wetlands in general. Rehabilitation has successfully been used to increase awareness of wetlands, train people, empower them to work outside reserves and foster co-operation between various agencies.

The main task of MWP is to act as a catalyst for getting government departments, non governmental organisations and volunteers involved in wetland conservation (since MWP itself has only five full time staff members). It has been highly successful in achieving this.

To understand why wetland rehabilitation was chosen to initiate much broader wetland conservation initiatives, it is important to remember that rehabilitation has a number of positive spin-offs for holistic wetland conservation. These include:

1. **The development of a basic wetland inventory.** To rehabilitate wetlands one must first know where they are. If you do not have a wetland inventory (South Africa only started to develop an inventory in 2003) you must first identify wetlands from aerial photographs. This is what MWP does each time before surveying a wetland and this is helping the country develop a basic inventory.
2. **Building the capacity of field workers to better understand and manage wetlands.** To rehabilitate wetlands, one must first find out where the problems are. The condition of wetlands must be assessed and the problems identified. Courses are then run to build the capacity of field workers (governmental and non governmental conservation/agricultural staff, as well as volunteers). They are trained in the field on the job; learning while they are helping to gather information needed for the rehabilitation. Two objectives are then achieved at the same time: people are trained in how to assess the condition of a wetland and the basics of wetland functioning, and secondly the problems that need rehabilitating are identified.
3. **Generating an interest and enthusiasm for wetlands amongst field workers.** As most of the work is in the field and lots of fun, a great deal of interest and enthusiasm for wetlands is developed by the people being trained. If people are not enthusiastic about wetlands they will never go on to conserve them. We make sure we pick people with the right attitude to act as volunteers - they must love nature and be prepared to do plenty of mud splattered fieldwork.
4. **Being very practical and producing real, easy to see results that really make a difference to wetland conservation.** For people to work in wetlands and succeed, they must be able produce tangible results. By training the field workers to assess and delineate wetlands within a matter of days, they learn useful, practical

skills which they can apply with confidence. They can immediately begin rehabilitation work and see results. For example, by blocking canals originally dug to dry out the wetlands, it is easy to see the water spreading into a previously dried out wetland, and the wetland vegetation growing back. It is these practical, and easy to see results, that provide field workers with the feedback and confidence to continue their work and catalyse others to do the same.

5. **Getting a variety of organisations and disciplines involved in wetlands conservation.** The Project has involved field workers from the government Departments of Agriculture, Water Affairs and Conservation, as well as from the forestry industry, other conservation based non governmental organisations (NGO's), rural communities, and volunteers from the public. This provides a multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral approach to wetland conservation, which is vital to success. Being an NGO, the MWP can more easily break down barriers between some of the government departments and involve them all. A governmental department would have found it more difficult to break these barriers, as they all too often fiercely protect their area of work from other departments for fear of being shown up.
6. **By raising the media's attention the resulting press coverage educates the masses about wetlands.** The success of the rehabilitation so far has raised a lot of press coverage. Most articles explain what a wetland is and its importance. This in turn educates the public about wetlands in general.
7. **Getting governmental departments and business organisations to pay for the rehabilitation, ensures they take a committed interest in wetland conservation.** To date the Departments of Water Affairs, Land Affairs and Agriculture, together with private timber plantation companies and water utilities have all provided money for wetland rehabilitation. As a result they have taken on a form of "ownership" for wetland rehabilitation and have all become more interested in broader wetland conservation as well.
8. **The creation of jobs and development of skills for the unemployed who did the rehabilitation.** Wetland rehabilitation can be labour intensive, and by creating jobs and providing these people with certain life and job skills, most of the money needed for wetland rehabilitation goes towards helping the unemployed. This always goes down well with government, and gains political support for wetland conservation.