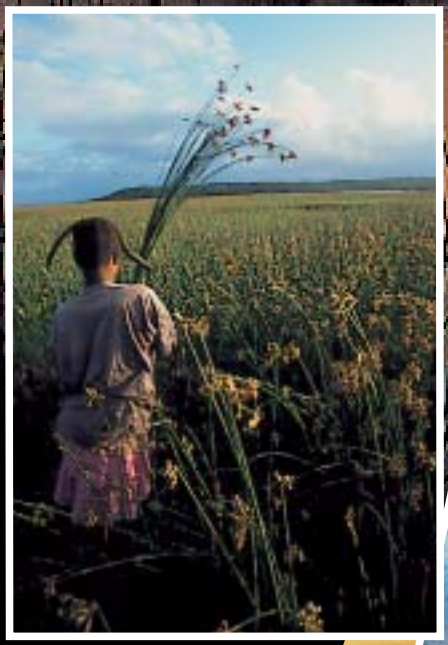
WETLANDS

· Water · Life · culture ·

WORKING FOR WETLANDS

Wetland (English); ixhaphozi (isiZulu); mogobeng (Setswana); mahlangasi (Xitsonga); mohlaka (Sepedi); matzhasa (Tshivenda); mokhoabo (Sesotho); umdzwelene (Ndebele); umgxobhozo (isiXhosa); ummxopo (siSwati); vlei (Afrikaans).



WORKING FOR WATER

Patron in Chief:
Nelson Mandela

IKE E: /XARRA //KE

DEPARTMENT: ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS AND TOURISM
DEPARTMENT: WATER AFFAIRS AND FORESTRY
DEPARTMENT: NATIONAL DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Mondi Wetlands Project

Working for Wetlands is a public-private partnership promoting the conservation and wise use of wetlands and is backed by the Poverty Relief Fund. The partnership provides jobs, skills and opportunities to previously disadvantaged people through wetland rehabilitation projects across the country.

WORKING FOR WETLANDS

Explaining the cultural riches of wetlands

A cow walking to the river to drink passes through an area where the reeds grow tall and the ground is muddy. With each step we hear a sucking, squelching sound (pronounced xha in isiZulu) as it pulls a foot out of the mud. This is the sound of the wetland! And it is from this sound that the Zulu word for wetland, ixhaphozi, was derived.

What other words can you think of to describe wetlands? How many place names can you find in your area with wetland-related words? Ixhopo, Rietvlei - there are many more you may possibly encounter!

When people think of wetlands they often only think of water resources, wildlife and nature conservation. In addition, however, wetlands contain a rich cultural wealth that is often ignored. Some of the earliest recorded history speaks of people's close relationships with wetlands. To the Egyptians, for example, the Nile and its fertile floodplain represented life itself. Today, industrialized cultures have lost the close links they once enjoyed with wetlands.

Through a series of South African 'case stories', this booklet encourages us to learn about and share some of the cultural links that still exist with wetlands. This will help us to appreciate the worth of wetlands and discover exciting opportunities for future management of these valuable systems. In South Africa, we are privileged to have an extremely rich cultural fabric that contributes to our understanding and feeling towards wetlands. In return wetlands enrich many aspects of our culture.

Photo courtesy KZN Wildlife

- Crafts and woven construction
- Cultivation, food and health
- Religion and spirituality
- Celebrations

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Key contacts

WESSA: sharenet@futurenet.co.za
DEAT: www.environment.gov.za
Working for Wetlands: www.dwaf.gov.za/wfw/
Mondi Wetland Project: www.wetland.org.za

WESSA

Crafts and Woven Construction

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Sleeping mats

This woman is hard at work, cutting the stems of a coastal wetland sedge called qumbe. Across many rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal, you will find women harvesting wetland sedges, and weaving traditional sleeping mats (singular icansi, plural amacansi) from this harvested material. Many different sedges are used for weaving, including incema (Juncus kraussii) and induli (Scirpus spp.) harvested in coastal wetlands and ikhwane (Cyperus latifolius) harvested inland. In the Eastern Cape, imisi (Cyperus textilis) is very widely used for making traditional sleeping mats. Link: see Celebrations.

Photo courtesy KZN Wildlife

Did you know? Wetland sedges are generally well adapted to regular harvesting, and rapidly re-grow after they have been cut.. Sedges are grass-like plants which are especially common in wetlands.

Beer strainers

In wetlands of the Eastern Free State you may find women busy cutting a sedge (Cyperus marginatus) called lodi in Sesotho. Once harvested, the stems of this plant may be rolled into a durable twine. One of the items traditionally woven from this twine looks like a very large sock! It is designed to trap the grains of sorghum from the brew as it is poured into the beer serving container. Today, industrially produced sieves have largely replaced these traditional beer strainers.

Craft production from wetland plants takes place in many other areas of South Africa and a great diversity of crafts is produced. What plants are used for making these crafts? For what purpose are the crafts themselves used?

Photo courtesy KZN Wildlife

Reed screens

In the rural areas around Pietersburg in the Northern Province, some traditional homesteads may still be found surrounded by a reed screen called a lefao. These are said to provide a link to assist people in communicating with their ancestors. Today many safari camps include reed screens which help to create a more authentic African experience for tourists staying in the camp.

Photo courtesy KZN Wildlife

Waterblommetjies and their starchy rhizomes were food for the Khoi and San in early times. Today, it is a well established traditional Cape dish that often includes potatoes, onions and lamb, depending on the particular recipe used. The waterblommetjies are usually cooked to a pulp with the other ingredients to give a distinctive subtle flavour and thick sauce. This tasty meal is popular in both homes and restaurants, and is even grown and canned commercially.

What other wetland plants do you know of that provide us with food? Some of you may eat these almost every day!

Fish trapping

Photo courtesy KZN Wildlife

If you visit Kosi Bay in northern Zululand, you will see a network of wooden fences in the lake. These fences are fish traps built and maintained by the local Tsonga fishermen. Although there has been a steady decline in the number of traps over the last fifty years, these traps still play an important role in the culture of the local Tsonga people. The majority of the fish caught in these traps originate in the sea and migrate up past the traps as juveniles, they are caught as adults on their return journey to the sea. The traps' design ensures that few small fish are caught, allowing them to pass through the traps and back into the sea. About 40 000 fish, which weigh on average 1 kg, are caught annually and are bought and eaten by local people.

This is a good example of how indigenous South African people use knowledge developed over generations to utilise wetland resources sustainably.

From the last three case stories we see that a variety of foods are obtained from wetlands, including crops, edible flowers and fish. These vary from area to area. In the Northern Province the Makuleke and Batlokwa people eat African bullfrogs. The French also enjoy eating frogs! What foods are obtained from wetlands in your area?

Photo courtesy Wits University Press and V C Carruthers.

The River Pumpkin: a healing plant

Iphuzi lomlambo, as it is known in Xhosa, grows in the wetlands of the Eastern Cape and other eastern parts of South Africa. Also known as the river pumkin or Gunnera perpensa, it is used to ease childbirth and promote the expulsion of the after-birth in both humans and livestock. It is also used with other plants to treat kidney and bladder complaints. Western medicine is increasingly recognising the contribution that indigenous South African medicine can make to the world.

There are many other wetland plants used in medicine. Which plants are used in your area?

Matjiesgoed

Maitjiesgoed sedges (Scirpus species), which grow in some wetland areas of Namaqualand, have been used by the Nama people for centuries to make a traditional dwelling called a matjieshuis (mat house). The harvested stems (culms) of the tall-growing matjiesgoed sedge are stitched together with a thread and needle pierced and passed through the culms. The mats, which last for many years, are wrapped over curved poles and tied down. The maitjieshuis was ideally suited to the nomadic lifestyle of the Nama people. When one needed to move to better grazing it was simply a matter of rolling up the mats and moving to a new area.

Did you know? Sedge mats can be used as natural air-conditioners. Matjiesgoed are ideally suited to the desert conditions. In hot dry weather, the culms shrink, leaving gaps which allow air to move through the house. In cold, wet weather, the culms swell, thereby closing the gaps, offering protection from cold and rain.

Photo courtesy Briza Publications

Other sedges used for making mats, such as Cyperus textilis, may also be referred to as matjiesgoed. Although the matjiehuis has become much less common as the lifestyle of the Nama people has changed, such houses can still be seen occasionally at the annual religious gathering of Oktobernagmaal held in Niewoudsville.

Collection of water

Without water there is no life. This has been recognized by cultures across South Africa, and there are many customs and traditional practices surrounding water collection. For example, if a spring or seep was for human use, it was often protected by a circle of stones with a small outlet, and cattle were made to drink elsewhere. Today, because human and livestock numbers have increased greatly, many catchments have become degraded and rivers polluted. Consequently, in degraded catchments, even the best indigenous practices for water collection would not prevent people from getting diseases from the water. By learning more about these traditional practices, however, we can help build respect for our cultural heritage as well as enhance our understanding of water quality issues.

Photo courtesy KZN Wildlife

Did you know? The traditional practice of brushing off the surface film of water before collecting water from a pool is supported by scientific evidence. Surface waters generally have higher numbers of bacteria (that may potentially cause disease) than the water lying below.

Cultivation, Food and Health

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Amadumbe

During summer, if you visit wetlands in the Nsikazi area of the Sabie River lowveld near Nelspruit, chances are you will see women hoeing patches of a crop called amathapu or amadumbe (Colocasia esculenta) with large elephant-ear shaped leaves. This is one of the most widely grown traditional crops in Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal. It is grown mainly for its underground starchy corms, which have small starch grains and are easily digestible. Leaves are also used as a spinach, providing a useful supplement to maize. Amadumbes are also part of Indian cooking and in Durban one can find a tasty delicacy called puripatha that is contained within a delicate wrapping of amadumbe leaves.

Did you know? Amadumbe originated in Asia, and is thought to have spread across tropical and subtropical Africa via Egypt, where it is recorded over 2 500 years ago.

In South Africa, amadumbe cultivation practices have developed over countless generations. Amadumbe has a high soil water requirement and, under low rainfall conditions, farmers are very dependent on wetlands for madumbe cultivation. Amadumbe is tolerant of the very wet conditions found in wetlands and does not require a high level of artificial drainage. If it is restricted only to the less sensitive parts of the wetland, amadumbe cultivation does little harm to the wetland, provided that pesticides and articficial fertilizers are not used, tillage is by hand, and large-scale drainage and cultivation is not applied.

Photo courtesy Briza Publications

Waterblommetjies

In some parts of the Western Cape, you will find people wading through still water picking the white flowers of an indigenous aquatic plant, the Cape waterblommetjie (Aponogeton distachyos). These are not used for flower arrangements but are one of South Africa's truly indigenous vegetables! They are used to make a very tasty traditional Cape dish called waterblommetjie bredie (stew).

Waterblommetjies have spear-shaped leaves lying on, and just below, the water surface. In winter and spring, flower stalks appear above the water surface, each bearing a forked flower cluster which is white and sweet smelling. It is these flower clusters with their large fleshy bracts and small inconspicuous flowers that are eaten.

Religion and Spirituality

The sacred Lake Fundudzi

Lake Fundudzi in the Northern Province is a unique inland lake of great mythical and cultural importance to the Vhavenda people. The lake is considered sacred and is inhabited by the ancestral spirits of the Vhatavatsindi tribe. Annually, the chief performs a thanks-giving ritual, where sacred beer is presented to the ancestors as an offering. In other indigenous South African cultures, such as in some Seswati communities, traditional beer is poured into the waters of a wetland as an offering to one's ancestors. The fullness of Lake Fundudzi and its water colour indicates the mood of the ancestors and predicts the coming rainy season. It is believed that the water of the lake has healing properties and the Zion Christian religion uses the water for rituals, ceremonies and cleansing. In South Africa, there is a large following for independent churches such as the Zion Christian faith, which combine Christian practice with respect for ancestors.

The serpent spirit of the wetland

At Mbongolwane wetland near Eshowe in KwaZulu-Natal, the local people speak with respect of Nkanyamba, the many-headed serpent who is guardian of their wetland. Failure to respect the wetland and the serpent is said to result in a catastrophic storm. So what is the significance of this spirit? Let us try to understand it more. Wetlands are effectively the transition or meeting place of land and water and it is here that an abundance of reeds and other wetland plants grow and emerge through any shallow water. For many indigenous cultures in South Africa, wetland areas also represent a transition between the material and the spiritual world where one's ancestors have a central place. Health and well-being depend strongly on respect for one's ancestors who can cause both good and bad fortune. The traditional mat woven from wetland plants is an essential item used by many traditional healers and is directly linked to water, healing and creation. According to one myth, the original Zulu people emerged from a bed of reeds. These areas remain important locations for ancestors who may manifest themselves in the form of a serpent with many heads. This mythical serpent appears in many southern African cultures and beautiful examples of it may even be found in San rock art.

Whatever your religion may be, what reference does it make to wetlands or wetland plants? Remember, for example, Moses in the bulrushes? And the Lotus flower, an important symbol of purity and beauty for Hindus, is a wetland plant.

Nature experience

Photo courtesy KZN Wildlife

If you visit the Marievale Bird Sanctuary in Johannesburg, Gauteng, you will see what looks like a small house in the wetland. This is a bird hide, and from time to time people visit the hide to watch birds. Through bird watching, people living in cities can connect in some way with wetlands and other natural systems. Even wetlands that have been greatly modified and are found in large cities may provide valuable habitats for large numbers of birds. The Marievale Bird Sanctuary is one such wetland area that attracts many bird watchers every year. The Sanctuary forms part of a bigger wetland system, the Blesbokspruit Wetland, a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention.

Celebrations

Traditional weddings

The mother of the bridegroom unrolls a mat she has just received from her future daughter-in-law. "What a beautiful mat - so well made from the finest incema!" The bride has clearly done well in the eyes of her future mother-in-law. Sleeping mats (amacansi) are one of the customary gifts which the bride gives to the groom's family in a traditional Zulu marriage settlement. The gifts are collectively known as umabo, and incema has the highest status of all the materials used for making amacansi. Link: see traditional sleeping mats.

Photo- R de la Harpe

Annual reed ceremony

In October every year at the King's Enkoyeni Palace in the Nongoma area in northern KwaZulu-Natal, thousands of young women gather in traditional clothing and jewelry, each holding a tall reed. The ceremony, which passes in front of the King, aims to promote pride in virginity and respect for young women. The reeds are then placed down at the new building site, where they are used in the palace building. These reeds are said to symbolize the willingness of the young women to work together. Link: see reed screens.

Picture courtesy KZN Tourism Authority

Conclusion

This booklet shares a great variety of case stories drawn from a wide range of cultural settings in South Africa. They clearly demonstrate that many aspects of South Africa's diverse cultural heritage (including crafts, unique foods, weddings, cultural events and even our spirituality) have developed from, and remain closely linked with wetlands. I am sure that some of you have been able to add to these stories from your own experience. Thus, further destruction of our wetlands and the loss of traditional management practices is not only threatening our water and biological resources but also threatening some of the cultural wealth of our country. Concider also that tourism, which is seeking cultural aspects of wetlands, does boost local economies. When developing wetland management plans, do not forget the cultural aspects. They may be extremely valuable tools for achieving wise and sustainable use of wetlands. Many local communities have, over countless generations, developed traditional practices and belief systems for regulating the use of wetlands. For example, the respect afforded to some wetlands which are home to "water spirits" has helped ensure that these wetlands remain in good condition. These traditions and beliefs have stood the test of time for sustaining people and conserving wetlands. However, as human populations and urbanisation increase, many of these traditions are under threat. The challenge, therefore, is to adapt these cultural practices to current needs and pressures, while continuing to make use of traditional knowledge and values. And it is through dialogue amongst key role-players, including local people and government and non-government organizations, that we will find innovative ways of achieving this. Always remember, culture is never static.