

**Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa  
World Wetlands Day - 2 February 2011 Press Release**

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**Respecting wetlands could have spared lives during floods, says WESSA/WWF Mondi Wetlands Programme**

Last month, floodwaters caused the loss of life and property in South Africa. One of the towns worst hit in KwaZulu-Natal was Ladysmith. Parts of Ladysmith adjoin the floodplain of the Klip River and since the town's establishment in 1847, it has flooded 29 times. Despite the Qedusizi Dam being built in 1998 to protect the town, the recent heavy rains in the region resulted in 100 homes being flooded in the town. The question to ask is what has caused this disaster? Only then can we work towards possible mitigation measures.

Floodplains are the most productive and diverse wetland ecosystems on Earth. Being flat with fertile soils, they are often farmed or targeted for urban development, much like the town of Ladysmith. Unscrupulous or poorly planned developments come at a cost when heavy rains result in flooding. Climate change predictions for South Africa are depicting an increase in intensity of drought and floods and the costs of these natural disasters are not only financial, but impact on peoples' livelihoods and lives. Healthy wetlands play an important role in protecting people and this critical ecosystem.

But what is a wetland? A wetland is *land* that is *wet*, either permanently or for only a few weeks of the year. Wetlands occur generally anywhere in the landscape, from mountain slopes to sea level. The word "wetland" is a broad "family" name encompassing a number of different types of wetlands including springs and seeps, "vleis", marshes, floodplains, swamp forests, mangrove swamps and estuaries. The inundation of wetlands by flood water is a natural phenomenon, playing an important role in supporting floodplain ecosystems by bringing vital nutrients for plants and food for fishes, crabs and other organisms.

Wetlands are able to perform a number of functions, known as "ecosystem services". They are a river's safety valve and are able to reduce the severity of droughts and floods by regulating stream flow. Wetlands spread out the water, slow it down and absorb it like a sponge, preventing the dangerously high peaks from occurring. It is these high peaks which cause most of the damage and wetlands help to reduce these peaks. This is especially important near urban areas. Urban development with its tremendous increase in impervious surfaces (roads, driveways, parking lots, and buildings) and loss of wetlands, cause more water to run off the land during and immediately after rainstorms. This raises the flood peaks, increases the frequency of destructive floods and escalates the cost of damages. Wetlands are able to purify water and regulate streamflow during dry periods. They also provide habitat for critically endangered wildlife such as the wattled crane or vegetation which has a commercial or subsistence value to rural communities. Wetlands are thus vitally important in the lives of people and are worthy of protection.

"What many people may not realise", says Vaughan Koopman, project coordinator for the WESSA/WWF Mondi Wetlands Programme, "is that wetlands are protected by law in South Africa. The National Water Act is one of several pieces of legislation that protects wetlands. The Act states that no one may negatively affect a wetland unless you have a license in terms of the act".

So what can be done to look after our wetlands? The 2<sup>nd</sup> of February 2011 is World Wetlands Day. This event provides an opportunity for government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the citizens of South Africa to contribute actively to raising public awareness of wetlands and their benefits. There are a myriad of actions that you and I can do that will contribute to saving wetlands: If you are a landowner, clear alien invasive species from your wetland. Farmers should not overgraze their wetland, which causes erosion. If you live in a suburb with wetlands, actively engage with your municipality to discourage developments within floodplains and on river banks and join a provincial wetland forum to learn more about wetlands and make a difference on the ground.

For further information, please contact Vaughan Koopman on 083-228 7949.

What is the Mondi Wetlands Programme?

The Mondi Wetlands Programme (MWP) is a joint programme of South Africa's two largest NGO conservation organisations, WWF-South Africa and the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA), together with two corporate sponsors the Mazda Wildlife Fund and Mondi Ltd. Established in 1991, the Mondi Wetlands Programme (MWP) has moved wetland conservation from being a side issue to centre stage. This has irreversibly changed the way government, communities (in the areas the Programme operates), as well as the forestry and sugar industries manage their wetlands. The MWP's mission is to work towards the social change required to care for our wetlands.

2011 marks not only the 20 year anniversary of the MWP, but the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of WESSA. WESSA holds 85 years of proactive engagement with the challenges and opportunities presented by South Africa's unique natural heritage and the social and economic systems that depend on it. WESSA believes that a holistic and integrated approach to water management is the only way to achieve the water quality and quantity needs of South Africa.

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