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## Press Release

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### Recent floods a reminder of the importance of wetlands

The recent flooding which has caused devastation in Australia, Sri Lanka, Brazil and here in South Africa emphasizes the importance of conserving wetlands.

“We are quick to label such events ‘natural disasters’,” points out David Lindley, Manager of the WWF WESSA Mondi Wetlands Programme, but in reality, many such disasters are the result of man’s altering of natural systems like wetlands and river banks”.

World Wetlands Day is celebrated internationally each year on 2 February. It marks the anniversary of the signing of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Convention) in Ramsar, Iran, on 2 February 1971.

In South Africa the cost of declaring a national state of disaster in seven provinces as a result of flooding could exceed R1 billion and the loss of numerous human lives.

According to Lindley, the real tragedy is that many of these incidents could have been avoided. Wetlands act like giant sponges that absorb large amounts of water and release this slowly into river systems over a long period of time. Similarly, intact river banks slow down the surface runoff, allowing water to percolate into the ground water, which will then be released more slowly into the system.

“Unfortunately poor land use practices over the past decades in South Africa have resulted in more than 50% of our wetlands being destroyed. Similarly, riparian zones are infested with alien woody species, such as black wattle. The combined effect is that we’ve greatly altered the functionality of these systems. When we have heavy rainfall as we have seen in the central parts of South Africa, this water simply flows directly off the surface and into the river systems, resulting in rivers breaking their banks and the disastrous impacts we have recently witnessed.”

“Additionally people build in flood lines. Engineers should urgently recalibrate these flood lines in urban areas because increased paved surfaces and sewerage works continually discharge into rivers. This results in rivers and wetlands carrying a greater volume of water than they naturally would have. This means the flood lines need to move further away from river banks and wetlands, to allow for the extra water to spill over.”

“But as long as authorities ignore flood lines and insurance companies are prepared to pay out, development will continue in the flood prone areas,” adds Lindley.

This awareness of the importance of wetlands is in no small part due to programmes such as the WWF Mondi Wetlands Programme which has been actively conserving wetlands for the past 20 years. Over the last two decades the programme has catalysed much needed change in the field of wetland conservation and has achieved many successes. The programme has also worked in close partnership with provincial government departments (agriculture and conservation) to support communal wetland users in KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and Limpopo. Since many communities rely on wetland plants for livestock grazing, subsistence agriculture, building materials, and medicinal plants, wise wetlands use is critical for livelihoods. The programme also worked extensively with innovative sugar farmers in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands to develop SuSFarMS (Sustainable Sugar



Farm Management System), a world first sustainable farm management system to support sugar cane farmers to improve their agronomic practices, while reducing their environmental impact especially on water resources.

“Now more than ever, in the midst of the floods experienced across the world and here at home, it is important that we remember the important role that wetlands play in the environment and in our lives. Wetlands provide the natural infrastructure needed to help control heavy erosion and flooding. They also have significant biodiversity value and furthermore, they are of national importance because of their control of erosion, flood attenuation and biodiversity value. They offer a host of goods such as fodder, human food, fish and fibre. So this World Wetlands Day let us all take some time to appreciate and celebrate them!”

#### **Editor’s Notes:**

#### **About WWF**

WWF is one of the world's largest and most respected independent conservation organisations, with almost 5 million supporters and a global network active in over 100 countries. WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the earth's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by conserving the world's biological diversity, ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable, and promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption. Ultimately our aim is to inspire all South Africans to live in harmony with nature for the well-being of our country and its people.

See [www.wwf.org.za](http://www.wwf.org.za) for more information on the organisation’s activities in South Africa.

WWF stands for the World Wide Fund for Nature. The organization prefers to be referred to just by the acronym.

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