

Why are wetlands important?

Flood busters

Wetlands associated with streams and rivers slow down floodwaters by acting as giant, shallow pans. Water flowing into these pans loses speed and spreads out. Plants in the wetland play an important role in holding back the water. The wetland acts as a sponge as much of the floodwater is then stored in the wetland and is slowly released to the downstream areas, instead of it all rushing to the sea within a few days. This greatly reduces flood damage, particularly erosion, and ensures a more steady supply of water throughout the year.

Filters

Wetlands improve water quality as they are very good natural filters, trapping sediment, nutrients (e.g. nitrogen and phosphorus), and even pathogenic (disease-causing) bacteria. In addition, pollutants such as heavy metals (e.g. mercury, lead) and pesticides may be trapped by chemical and biological processes. In other words, the water leaving the wetland is cleaner than the water entering it.

Wetlands and wildlife

Wetlands are filters where sediments and nutrients accumulate, so many plants grow there, e.g. bulrushes, grasses, reeds, waterlilies, sedges and trees. The plants, in turn, provide food and a place for attachment and shelter for many creatures. There is more life, hectare for hectare, in a healthy wetland than in almost any other habitat. These productive places support huge numbers of insects, fish, birds and other animals. Some animals are completely dependent on wetlands, while others use wetlands for only part of their lives. The wattled crane, for example, is dependent on wetlands for breeding. The rich diversity of waterbirds in southern Africa (totaling 130 species) is the result of the many wetlands spread across the subcontinent. The wetlands of southern Africa are of international importance as they are the southern destination for many migratory wading birds.

People and wetlands

Wetlands have been used for centuries as grazing for domestic stock, and as a source of reeds used for thatching, hut construction and basket weaving. They provide opportunities for fishing, hunting and to observe wildlife, especially birds. Wetlands are appreciated for their beauty as open spaces and for their educational value.

Wetlands in trouble

To most people words such as “marsh, swamp, bog and vlei”, conjure up little more than the “four Ds” - dampness, disease, difficulty and danger. Because of this wetlands have been regarded as wastelands to be converted into alternative uses such as cropland, dams, plantations of exotic trees, waste dispositories and pastures. Many wetlands have been “reclaimed” for industry and the construction of airports, harbours and sewage treatment plants. Historically wetlands have been drained in attempts to control malaria. All wetlands in southern Africa are threatened.



The contribution of LandCare South Africa in saving our wetlands

The Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries through the LandCare conditional grant has been contributing to save most of the South African wetlands by providing funds towards their rehabilitation. The LandCare grant helps in the rehabilitation of natural resources and because wetlands are one of the most important natural resources, the LandCare Secretariat has managed to provide fencing, construct gabions and remove alien invasive species for the most eroded wetlands. The purpose of the LandCare intervention is to improve the condition of the wetlands so that there is greater optimisation of productivity within the wetlands and that the wetlands are used in a sustainable manner, leading to greater productivity, food security and better quality of water and life for all.



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