

**SPEECH DELIVERED BY DEPUTY MINISTER OF WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL
AFFAIRS, MS REJOICE MABUDAFHASI
ON THE OCCASION OF WORLD WETLANDS DAY 2011 CELEBRATION
AT VELOREN VLEI RAMSAR SITE, VENTERKLIP, ELANDSBAY**

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Water Research Commission and Working for Wetlands

Senior government officials

Members of the media

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am happy to be joining you today as we celebrate the 2011 World Wetlands Day here in the Western Cape. Ladies and gentlemen, as you are aware the Department of Environmental Affairs and the ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability are hosting this four-day International Local Action for Biodiversity (LAB) Workshop 2011 at Berggrivier Municipality in Cape Town, from 1 - 4 February 2011.

The workshop is dedicated to local governments participating in the Local Action for Biodiversity Programme. This second day of the workshop has been dedicated to the celebration of World Wetlands Day which is an annual event that commemorates the signing of the Convention on Wetlands on 2 February 1971 in the Iranian City of Ramsar.

Today marks the 14th anniversary of the celebration of World Wetlands Day since the inaugural celebration in 1997 and most importantly the 40th anniversary of the Convention, since it's signing in 1971. To this day, wetlands continue to offer great value for biodiversity which human beings depend on for their livelihood.

The significance of this day is highlighted worldwide through a variety of activities aligned to RAMSAR Convention's theme for this year; which is "**Wetlands and Forests**" and the slogan is "Forests for Water and Wetlands".

In South Africa we have chosen to localise the theme to "**Wetlands, Forests and Climate Change**". This is due to the interlinkages between wetlands, forests and climate change. Our department has chosen the Verlorenvlei Ramsar site to obtain first-hand information on the importance of the wetlands as you have seen in the field.

This wetland was designated a Wetland of International Importance in 1991. As you have heard and seen in the field it is one of the largest wetlands on the west coast of South Africa, making it important and unique. This wetland hosts 75 resident and migratory bird species as well as other wetland dependent species such as rare minnow and barbus to mention but a few.

The 1,500 ha vlei is the centre-point of the Sandveld which plays a very important role in The Greater Cederberg Biodiversity Corridor Conservation Initiative implemented by C.A.P.E. (Cape Action for People and Environment) and Cape Nature. The catchment is 198,000 ha but although three rivers feed the vlei, it is mainly groundwater driven which makes it a very slow moving system.

Verlorenvlei has come under severe pressure from agricultural activities, including groundwater abstraction and reduced water quality. Alien vegetation in the upper catchment impacts on water flow. The estuary mouth is frequently closed because of sediment build-up and poor water movement.

In October 2006 Cape Nature and Working for Wetlands embarked on rehabilitation intervention that mainly involves clearing invasive alien vegetation and includes removing impediments to water flow, reducing sedimentation and

conducting an awareness campaign. These interventions made for a slightly different approach to wetland rehabilitation from most other Working for Wetlands projects. Two teams from Elands Bay and Redelinghuys have already made a visible impact on the problem, clearing 140 ha of land of alien vegetation. In 2008/9 42 people were provided with temporary employment and skills development. Most of the work is being conducted on privately owned land and contracts are signed with all landowners.

In November 2007, Working for Wetlands and CapeNature launched the Verlorenvlei bird hide, which offers public access to the vlei for the first time.

About 115 000 wetlands, covering over 4 Million hectares comprising close to 4% of the country's total surface area, have been mapped to date in South Africa. These wetlands are part of our natural infrastructure for gathering, managing and delivering water for human use.

Wetlands are able to improve water quality, reduce flood impacts, control erosion and sustain river flows. Of special importance is the role wetlands play in ensuring a steady supply of clean water for communities and help government save hundreds of millions that would be required to set up purification plants and the labour cost. Therefore, careful consideration should be given to the continued destruction of wetlands.

We need to respect that wetlands are life-supporting systems and use our rivers and wetlands in ways that protect them and ensure they continue to provide goods and services that we depend on. If nurtured to their natural conditions, wetlands could resume their original role to feed the poor and to avert water crises.

They also have significant worth as warehouses of biodiversity and as sites for tourism, subsistence farming, grazing, education, recreation and spiritual activities. Although their contribution to the GDP of the economy is not quantified, they do account for a significant figure.

Despite these values, it is estimated that up to 60% of the wetlands have been damaged or destroyed due to human impact. The continued loss of wetlands due to urban development is also of grave concern to our country. Urban expansion and development seems to be continuing without sustainable urban planning and due consideration of wetlands in urban areas and the flood attenuation, storm water management and recreational functions that wetlands offer.

We are however concerned by mining activities in areas with unique wetlands. Activities in wetlands are taking place without the necessary water-use licences and environmental authorisation from the relevant government departments.

Furthermore, some of those activities that have obtained the authorisation still do not comply.

South Africa is a developing country and most of our rural communities depend heavily on wetlands for cultivation, grazing and water. However, wetlands in these areas are literally eroding downriver as a result of intensive, unsuitable farming practices. Given their importance for the livelihoods of communities living adjacent to wetlands, teaching communities the right farming methods and rehabilitation should be considered of extreme importance.

We need to strengthen our partnerships and educational awareness campaigns such as LandCare championed by our partner: Dept of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and The Working for Wetlands Programme undertaken by SANBI, just to mention but two.

In December 2009 and November-December 2010, governments of the world, organizations and concerned individuals gathered in Denmark and Mexico respectively, to find collective solutions to the problem of global warming or what we call climate change. Even though the meeting in Copenhagen could not yield the intended results, the Cancun meeting adopted quite a number of agreements. As you are aware South Africa will host the seventeenth meeting of the Conference of the contracting Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. There are still a lot of measures we can implement to mitigate the effects of the rise in world temperature. In addition to our efforts, a unique kind of wetland called peatlands play a complex but important role in climate regulation, by influencing the global balance of three main greenhouse gases – carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide.

Wetlands deliver a wide range of ecosystem services that contribute to human well-being, and some wetland types can contribute to climate change mitigation and/or adaptation. Swamp forest is defined as any wetland with woody vegetation. Inland swamp forests protect catchments while coastal swamp forests protect coasts against storms and rising sea levels in some cases. All swamp forests provide fish and many other aquatic foods, both animal and plant, consumed by humans the world over; they provide diverse habitats for an impressive range of animal and plant species, thus contributing significantly to global biodiversity; and importantly, they provide livelihoods for local communities.

Overall, the economic value of the services provided by swamp forests far outweighs the often short-term value of drainage and conversion for other uses. It is clear that forested wetlands are particularly important stores of carbon: their destruction would release vast amounts of carbon into the atmosphere and eliminate the opportunity for capture of carbon ('carbon sequestration') for the future, thus adding to our present climate change woes. What threatens these wetlands? The need for land for urban development, conversion for agriculture

and aquaculture, oil extraction, excessive abstraction of water upstream, and so on; in essence, many of the same threats which face other types of wetlands too.

On a broad forest scale it has been estimated that deforestation and forest degradation account for around 17-20% of the annual greenhouse gas emissions that are known to be fuelling climate change. To put this in perspective, this is more than the emissions from the entire global transport sector. And of course losing or degrading forests is a double loss – since forests absorb CO₂ from the atmosphere as well as storing it.

At the same time forests provide great opportunities for adaptation to climate change (e.g. through reforestation of mangroves) and mitigation of climate change (e.g. through afforestation, reforestation) all of which increase the resilience of ecosystems and people to cope with the challenges posed by climate change.

Ignoring protection of the wetlands can only result in disasters of food insecurity, wiped out biodiversity that would negatively impact on subsistence farming which in turn would result in deepened poverty levels, drastically reduced water supply leading to substantial rise in prices and removed vegetation that would fuel destructive nature of global warming.

There are 20 Ramsar sites in South Africa. The recently designated ones are the following: the Makuleke wetland in Limpopo, Prince Edward Island in the Antarctica and Ntsikeni Nature Reserve in KwaZulu Natal.

Let's work together to secure our Wetlands, forests and Peatlands for the sake of biodiversity and in order to make a meaningful contribution towards mitigating the effects of Climate Change.

Thank you

