



water affairs

Department:
Water Affairs
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

**ADDRESS BY HONOURABLE DEPUTY MINISTER OF
WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS, MS REJOICE
MABUDAFHASI DURING THE WORLD WETLANDS DAY
CELEBRATION AT MAKULEKE RAMSAR SITE, LIMPOPO
PROVINCE**

“WETLANDS AND TOURISM”

02 FEBRUARY 2012.

Program Director

Honourable Deputy Minister of Tourism: Ms Tokozile Xasa

Honourable MEC for Agriculture: Ms Dipuo Letsatsi- Duba

Honourable MEC for Economic Development, Environment and
Tourism: Mr Pitso Moloto

Mayor of Vhembe District Municipality: Cllr Florence Dzhombere

Traditional Leaders

Makuleke Community Property Association

SABC Limpopo Regional General Manager: Mr Victor
Ravhuanzwo

Representative from SANBI

Government Officials

Members of the Makuleke Community

Members of the media

Ladies and Gentlemen:

BACKGROUND

Today marks the 15th anniversary of the commemoration of World Wetlands Day since the inaugural celebration in 1997 and most importantly the 41th anniversary of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands since its signing in 1971. So far, wetlands continue to offer great value for biodiversity which human beings depend on for their livelihood.

The significance of this day is celebrated worldwide through a variety of activities aligned to Ramsar Convention's theme for this year; which is "**Wetlands and Tourism**". In South Africa this theme has been localized by adding a slogan "**Enhancing Community Livelihoods**". This is due to the fact that there are linkages between wetlands conservation and tourism.

The department has chosen the Makuleke Ramsar site to

obtain first-hand information on the importance of the wetlands conservation for tourism and how tourism generated revenue can enhance community livelihoods.

The Makuleke Wetlands has been declared a Ramsar site (Wetland of International Importance) on the 22 of June 2007 and is the first Ramsar site owned and co-managed by the community not only in South Africa but worldwide. The proposal for its designation, received much publicity during the celebration of World Wetlands Day in 2002. In that event, I highlighted the fact that, should this site be designated as Wetlands of International Importance, it would be the first community-owned Ramsar site in the country, and as such, represented a new approach to wetland management.

By designating these unique wetlands South Africa was commended for the good work during the Tenth meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention (COP10) at Changwon, Republic of Korea where the certificate for Makuleke Wetlands was handed over to me. I therefore would like to thank all who participated in the process of designating Makuleke Wetlands a Ramsar site. The

Convention encouraged other countries to learn from South Africa.

Wetland ecosystems in a landscape are like kidneys in our human bodies – they play a vital role in sustaining healthy lives of people. Our wetlands are vital for purifying water and regulating water flows, thus acting as sponges that store water and release it slowly, filtering pollutants and easing the impact of droughts and floods in the process.

We are very familiar with the concept of service delivery and the challenges we face while trying to make sure that all citizens receive essential services. What we are sometimes not familiar with is the notion that it is not only municipalities that provide services, but also our biodiversity and ecosystems. While we are aware of our municipal infrastructure like roads, sewers and pylons, and the services they bring to us in our homes, few of us are aware of the services we get from our ecological infrastructures like wetlands, rivers, coastal dunes and vegetation. All these amazing services are called ecosystem services.

Ecosystem services, like municipal services, play an essential role in our day to day lives! This often invisible ecological infrastructure, together with man-made infrastructure, has the potential to generate hundreds of thousands of jobs and eradicate poverty.

Today I want to share a sneak preview of the 2012 State of Biodiversity report with you. What is of interest about this report are the dramatic results it has produced for wetlands, which were included in the assessment for the first time. This assessment clearly shows that wetlands are exceptionally high-value ecosystems that make up only a minute fraction of the country.

Healthy wetlands such as the ones we visited today (Mapimbi and Rietbuck vlei) represent our endowment fund for immediate communities and those further afield – all of whom derive benefits.

We must balance the growth of strong and equitable economies with a development path that will allow our natural environment to flourish and continue to provide us with food, water, economic opportunities and a sense of pride and wonder. By recognizing the importance of both built and

ecological infrastructures, and by bringing together natural and artificial design, restored wetlands show us the possibilities for job creation, service delivery and economic growth in a truly green economy.

South Africa's extraordinary ecological wealth gives us a unique opportunity to capitalize on emerging green markets and help us adapt to climate change. The rehabilitation and proper management of our ecosystems will not only increase our competitive advantage, but help us adapt our economy to become more sustainable and resilient in changing global conditions.

Healthy ecosystems can also be tourism assets and in so doing contribute to local economic development if used sustainably. This is what the theme of this year's global World Wetlands Day celebrations is all about, and is the reason why we are holding our national event here.

The Department is spearheading this process to demonstrate the tremendous contribution of biodiversity to development in South Africa. Through this we are showing that biodiversity is not only a cornerstone of our climate change response strategy, but it is also good for growth and providing jobs.

Making this a reality has required an approach to conservation and biodiversity management which promotes social justice and puts people at the centre, creating opportunities for people to benefit from biodiversity.

One of the best known stories in this regard is government's Working for Wetlands Programme, which successfully combines the creation of thousands of work opportunities nationwide with the rehabilitation of more than 800 wetlands; and the Working for Water Programme that clears invasive alien plants from our catchments to improve water quality and supply.

One such example you might be familiar with is the rehabilitation work that took place in the southern bank of the Luvuvhu River. Although the rehabilitation was just upstream of the Makuleke Ramsar site, it contributed largely to improving the health of the Ramsar site. At the same time, about 40 people from the Makuleke community were employed in this rehabilitation project of R1,8 million which ensured that this wetland remains in its pristine condition.

Government recognizes the value of wetlands not just in the country but also globally and that is the reason why ongoing monitoring is very much important to Ramsar sites such as this.

Our message is simple: our vast wealth of biodiversity - our variety of life from species and ecosystems – is our endowment fund! We must step up our efforts to unlock the potential of our biodiversity to deliver benefits to communities and provide jobs. Healthy intact ecosystems also give us more options for responding to climate change. This message is relevant to all from rural to urban, rich and poor.

With their natural beauty and biodiversity wetlands are ideal locations for tourism. The income can be significant and support livelihoods locally and nationally. Wetlands provide other 'services' , too, such as water, food, water purification, erosion control ,etc., for the benefit of tourists and tourist accommodation. The income generated by tourism for national and local economies in and around wetlands can be substantial.

The Ramsar Convention has signed an MOU with the United Nations World Tourism Organization in recognition of the interdependence between sustainable tourism and the

sustainable management of wetlands. There are now joint projects between the two organizations to promote sustainable wetland tourism and great potential for combining their expertise to further wetland wise use and sustainable tourism on a larger scale. The Ramsar's 11th meeting of the Contracting Parties (COP11) in July this year will have the same theme, thus putting sustainable tourism firmly on the Ramsar agenda.

CONCLUSION

Ignoring protection of the wetlands can only result in disaster 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.

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

The Makuleke community regained the land back in 1998 after a restitution of land rights process. The community then decided to retain the land as part of Kruger National Park to be

co-managed by the Makuleke Community Property Association (CPA) and the South African National Parks (SANParks) through the Joint Management Board (JMB) for the purpose of conservation and related economic development in the area.

In recognition of this partnership and effort of this community's contribution towards conservation, the CEO of SANParks Dr David Mabunda presented the SANParks / First National Bank Kudu Award to the CPA on the 28th November 2011 at Skukuza. The African Safari Lodge Foundation also sponsored five young women from this community who graduated on the 18 November 2011 from the Southern African College for Tourism in Graaf Reinet, Eastern Cape.

I will therefore handover the awards and certificates to the Makuleke Community Property Association and the graduates.

Thank you