

## Wetlands are our saving grace

WORLD Wetlands Day is a global event celebrated annually on February 2 to recognise the significance of wetlands.

The National Water Act (Act 36 of 1998) defines wetlands as the land which is transitional between terrestrial and aquatic systems where the water table is usually at or near the surface, or the land is periodically covered with shallow water, and which land in normal circumstances supports or would support vegetation typically adapted to life in saturated soil.

The World Wetlands Day theme for the year 2024 is "Wetlands and Human Well-being". The theme reminds us of how all facets of human well-being are connected to wetlands. Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems in the world. They contribute to flood control as they absorb a significant amount of water and temporarily store it. This is crucial when inundated with excess water.

Wetlands are connected to water underground. They can be a source of water at the surface, but they also help make sure we have sustainable underground water resources during periods of drought.

Another important factor, especially now when we are experiencing climate change, is that wetlands create a cooling effect. They are able to transfer heat from high to low temperatures, reducing the environmental temperature through large amounts of water evaporation.

Wetlands provide access to water for agriculture. They make it possible for farmers to grow crops in dry seasons. Let us not forget that wetlands also provide food for animals, not just humans. Animals use wetlands for part of or all their life cycle. Dead plant leaves and stems break down in the water to form small particles of organic material called "detritus". This enriched material feeds many small aquatic insects, shellfish and small fish that are food for larger predatory fish, reptiles, amphibians, birds and mammals. What would these creatures be eating without wetlands? Some of you might be amazed to learn that some medicines are derived from wetland soils and plants – I hope this makes you look at wetlands with an appreciative eye from now onwards.

People often associate wetlands with wasteland, a place to be drained, or burnt off. But with all these benefits and more, I am urging everyone in Mzansi to please start to appreciate our wetlands. Let us not pollute wetlands. They are resources that deserve our utmost respect.

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