

# Protect, conserve SA's wetlands

Deputy minister of environmental affairs Barbara Thomson has encouraged South Africans to get involved in protection and conservation of wetlands in the country.



"Wetlands are an important part of the ecosystem, as they provide a number of benefits, not only to the natural environment, but also to people's livelihoods," Thomson said.

These benefits include the reduction of flooding, replenishing of drinking water, filter waste, and provision of urban green spaces. She said the benefits become more crucial as the number of people living in cities continues to increase.

"In urban areas, wetlands act as crucial 'green lungs' for cities by improving water quality and serving as reservoirs, containing run-off from roads, drains, roofs and storm water drains.

"It is recognised that wetlands in urban areas are also important for human-related value, particularly landscape amenity and recreational purposes amongst others. However, for many years, urban wetlands have been regarded as wastelands, with their vital importance and functions not being fully understood," she said.

When wetlands are sustainably managed they are able to reduce the impacts of droughts and floods by regulating stream flow. Furthermore, urban wetlands can provide cities with multiple economic, social and cultural benefits.

The department runs the Working for Wetlands Programme which is implemented through the government's Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) methodology. The programme focuses on rehabilitation, restoration, maintenance and protection interventions to ensure healthy wetlands.

"Through the department's investment, the Working for Wetlands programme has improved and secured the health of more than 80,000 hectares of wetland area, while providing 17,575 employment opportunities.

"Working for Wetlands has also provided 180,753 days of training in both vocational and life skills. Teams that form part of the programme are made up of a minimum of 60% women, 20% youth and 2% people with disabilities," Thomson said.

South Africa will today join the global community in celebration of the annual World Wetlands Day which is held under the theme 'Wetlands for a sustainable urban future'.

World Wetlands Day is an annual event that commemorates the signing of the Convention on Wetlands on 2 February 1971 in the Iranian City of Ramsar. The annual celebration aims to raise awareness on the benefits and importance of wetlands as a natural resource. Thomson will also embark on a public awareness drive in the City of eThekweni on Tuesday.

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