

Floods aid World Wetlands Day focus

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TODAY is World Wetlands Day, the yearly event celebrated around the globe to remind people of the huge biological, social and economic value of these highly threatened ecosystems.

And the recent flooding which caused massive devastation in many places in South Africa and elsewhere in the world, such as Australia, Sri Lanka and Brazil, is a grim reminder of why it's so important to conserve wetlands, say environmental groups Wessa (Wildlife and Environment Society of SA) and WWF-SA.

"We are quick to label such events 'natural disasters', but in reality many such disasters are the result of man's altering of natural systems like wetlands and river banks," warns David Lindley, manager of the WWF WESSA Mondi Wetlands Programme,

World Wetlands Day commemorates the signing of the Convention on Wetlands in the



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Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971.

Now usually just called the Ramsar Convention - its full title is the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, especially as Waterfowl Habitat.

It is the only global environmental treaty that deals with a particular ecosystem.

Although the formal theme of this year's World Wetlands Day celebration is "Wetlands, Forests and Climate Change", South African celebrations are centred on the extensive West Coast wetland of Velorenvlei, the mouth of which is at Elands Bay and which is a proclaimed Ramsar site because of its global importance as a bird habitat.

Water and Environmental Affairs Deputy Minister Rejoice Mabudafhasi will be officiating.

Wessa, and WWF-SA

pointed out that the cost of declaring a state of disaster in seven provinces in the country as a result of the recent flooding could exceed R1 billion.

Noting too that many lives were lost, Lindley said the real tragedy was that many of these incidents could have been avoided.

"Wetlands act like giant sponges, absorbing large amounts of water and then releasing these slowly into river systems over a long period after the rains," he explained.

Similarly, river banks that were still intact slowed down surface run-off, allowing this water to percolate into the existing ground water, which would then be released more slowly into the system.

"Unfortunately, poor land use practices over the past decades in South Africa have resulted in more than 50 percent of our wetlands being destroyed," he said. "Similarly, riparian (river) zones are infested with alien woody species, such as black wattle.

"The combined effect is that we've greatly altered the functionality of these systems.

"When we have heavy rainfall, as we've seen in the central parts, this water simply flows directly off the surface and into the river systems, resulting in rivers breaking their banks and (causing) the disastrous impacts we have recently witnessed."

Another problem was people building within flood lines, he said, and insurance continuing to pay out.

"Engineers should urgently recalibrate these flood lines in urban areas because increased paved surfaces and sewerage works are continually discharging into rivers.

"This results in these rivers and wetlands carrying a greater volume of water than they naturally would have."

Flood lines - and hence building-exclusion zones - should be determined further away from river banks and wetlands to allow for this extra water to spill over.

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