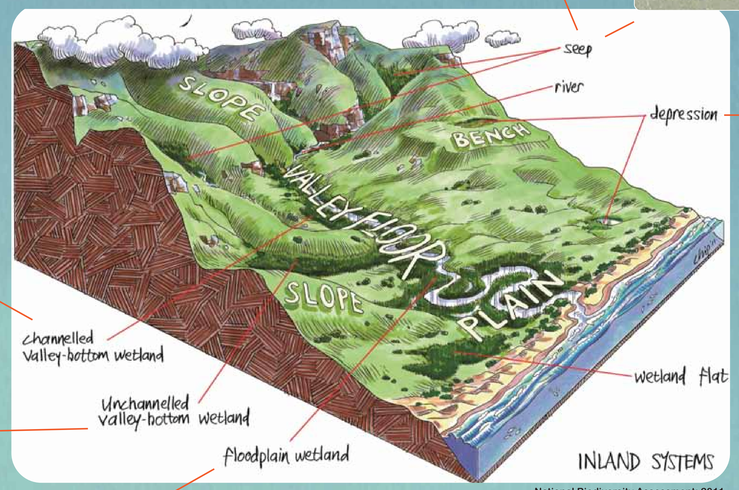
KEY FACTS ABOUT WETLANDS

WHAT IS A WETLAND?

A wetland is defined in the National Water Act (Act 36 of 1998) 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.

TYPES OF WETLANDS



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THE VALUE OF WETLANDS AND ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

Wetlands were referred to as wastelands in the past, but far from being wastelands; wetlands are amongst the most productive ecosystems in the world. Wetlands play an important part in river catchments both directly and indirectly by contributing to flood control, drought relief, water storage, sediment & nutrient retention and export, soil protection, water purification, erosion control, sustained stream flow, food security, fish nurseries, groundwater recharge, reservoirs of biodiversity, wetland products, cultural value, recreation & tourism, climate change mitigation and adaptation amongst others.

STATUS OF WETLANDS IN SOUTH AFRICA

- Wetlands make up only 2.4% of the country's area, but 48% of wetland ecosystem types are critically endangered.
- South Africa has lost approximately 50% of the original wetland area.
- Approximately 300 000 wetlands remain, making up only 2.4% of South Africa's area.
- Of South Africa's 791 wetland ecosystem types, 48% are critically endangered, 12% are endangered, 5% are vulnerable, and 35% are least threatened making wetlands the most threatened ecosystems of all in South Africa.
- Over 70% of South Africa's wetland ecosystem types have no protection and only 11% are well protected.

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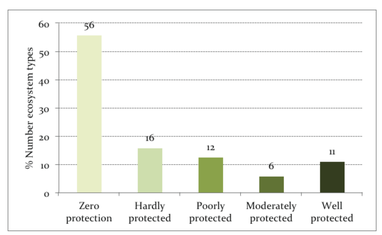
WETLAND PROTECTION LEVELS



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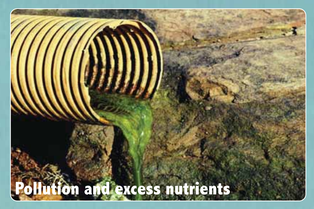
ECOSYSTEM THREATS


Invasive alien plants


Erosion


Developments within and around wetlands and Draining of wetlands


Pollution and excess nutrients


Burning of wetlands


Mining

WETLANDS AND AGRICULTURE

There are many ways in which poorly managed agriculture can negatively impact wetlands. This can lead to changes in the ecological character of a wetland and the possible permanent loss of its benefits to people.

Restoring wetland functions and securing water allocations to maintain the ecological character of wetlands can be viewed as investments in the natural infrastructure that wetlands provide for agriculture. Wetlands on agricultural land can help to manage flood waters in the wet seasons, improve soil moisture conditions, provide more local water storage for irrigation in the dry season, and provide water for ecosystems downstream.

REDUCING IMPACTS OF AGRICULTURE ON WETLANDS

Water re-use and wastewater use in agriculture can reduce withdrawals from wetlands

Integrated water resources planning:
While large dams will remain an option for reducing the vulnerability of farmers to drought and for increasing production, small local storage options such as tanks and farm dams provide local resilience.

Reducing the impacts of agriculture on water quality: Options such as conservation tillage and organic farming practices can reduce the pollution loads reaching wetlands. Integrated pest management and targeted life stage interventions can help to reduce the need for pesticide. Combined production systems can utilise livestock manure to fertilise crops and aquaculture. In small, intensive operations and family farms these strategies can reduce input costs significantly.

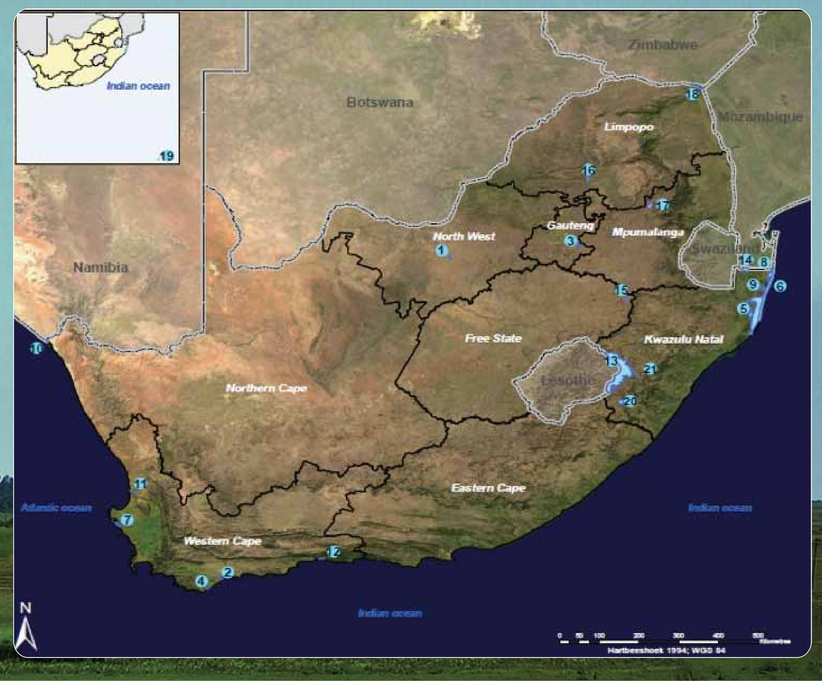
WETLAND REHABILITATION

1. Address the cause of the damage e.g. over grazing or drainage ditches.
2. Attempt to re-establish the natural water flow patterns within the wetland.
3. Consider vegetation of buffer zones and wetland areas.
4. Remove invasive alien vegetation.
5. Follow up as necessary and monitor progress.

RAMSAR SITES IN SOUTH AFRICA (21)

Barberspan (1)
Blesbokspruit (3)
De Hoop Vlei (2)
De Mond (4)
Kosi Bay (8)
Lake Sibaya (9)
Langebaan (7)
Makuleke Wetlands (18)
Natal Drakensberg Park (13)
Ndumo Game Reserve (14)
Ntsikeni Nature Reserve (20)
Nylsvley Nature Reserve (16)
Orange River Mouth (10)
Prince Edward Islands (19)
St. Lucia System (5)
Seekoeivlei Nature Reserve (15)
Turtle Beaches/Coral Reefs of Tongaland (6)
uMngeni Vlei Nature Reserve (21)
Verloren Valei Nature Reserve (17)
Verlorenvlei (11)
Wilderness Lakes (12)

The numbers in the map below correspond to the list of RAMSAR sites listed above



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20 YEARS OF FREEDOM