

INGULA NATURE RESERVE NOW A PROTECTED WETLAND

The declaration of Ingula Nature Reserve in the Drakensberg as a Wetland of International Importance has been welcomed by Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, Barbara Creecy.

The reserve sits along the northernmost part of the Drakensberg mountain range, between Free State and KwaZulu-Natal. The site falls within the Northern Drakensberg Strategic Water Source Area (SWSA) and a National Freshwater Ecosystem Priority Area and is made up of hillslope wetlands, pans and floodplains.

The Convention on Wetlands, also known as the Ramsar Convention, is an intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. The addition of Ingula brings the number of South Africa's Ramsar Sites to 27, covering a surface area of 571 089 hectares.

Wetlands are indispensable for the countless benefits or "ecosystem services" that they provide, ranging from freshwater supply, food and building materials, and biodiversity, to flood control, groundwater recharge, and climate change mitigation, despite managing them being a global challenge.

Despite their significance to human life, wetlands are threatened nationally and globally. The 2018 National Biodiversity Assessment found that at least 79% of South Africa's wetland ecosystems are threatened. The report emphasises the role of rivers, wetlands and their catchments as crucial ecological infrastructure for water security and often complementing built infra-

structure. Major threats to these freshwater systems include over-extraction of water, pollution, invasive alien species, habitat loss, land-use change and climate change. In pursuit of continued efforts to conserve the wetland ecosystems, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment has invested more than R83 million in the rehabilitation and maintenance of at least 75 wet-

lands in the current financial year.

The rehabilitation and maintenance of wetlands is co-ordinated through the Working for Wetlands Programme, an Expanded Public Works Programme that focuses on remedial interventions for maintaining healthy wetlands.

Since its inception in 2004, the Working for Wetlands Programme has rehabilitated over 1 749 wetlands countrywide. — WR.