

Ingula declared as a wetland of international importance

The Minister of Forestry, Fisheries & the Environment, Ms Barbara Creecy, has welcomed the declaration of the Ingula Nature Reserve as a wetland of international importance by the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance.

The Ingula Nature Reserve sits along the northernmost part of the Drakensberg mountain range, between the 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 hill-slope wetlands, pans / depressions and floodplains. This addition brings the number of South Africa's Ramsar Sites to 27 covering a surface area of 571,089 hectares.

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.

Wetlands are indispensable for the countless benefits or 'ecosystem services' they provide, ranging from freshwater supply, food, 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 infrastructure.

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 & the Environment has invested more than R83 million in the rehabilitation and maintenance of at least 75 wetlands in the current financial year.

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

This programme is demonstrating that it is possible to pursue conservation outcomes while at the same time realising socio-economic objectives.

Since its inception in 2004, the Working for Wetlands Programme has rehabilitated over 1749 wetlands countrywide, thereby contributing to increased healthier water supplies that improve the economic benefits of natural and agricultural habitats.

This has created more than 40,274 jobs and skills development opportunities for South Africans.