



Leaders in Environmental Management

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SA winning the battle to save wetlands – WWF

(IOL, 23 March 2006)

South Africa appears to be winning the battle to restore its spoiled wetlands, with more hectares being rehabilitated each year than are lost to urban development and poor land management, says the environmental organisation WWF.

"We're making very slow progress towards recovering the wetlands that have been lost since the beginning of the last century," WWF-South Africa wetlands expert David Lindley told reporters at the Fourth World Water Forum under way in Mexico City.

He said the Working for Wetlands programme - established five years ago and funded by government to the tune of R65-million a year - was rehabilitating about 7 000 hectares of wetlands each year.

However, the rate of loss was "vastly less" than this.

"I would definitely say we are not losing 7 000 hectares of wetlands a year in South Africa; so in this respect I suppose you could say we are winning the battle," Lindley said.

Wetlands were a vital link in South Africa's water cycle, but until about 10 years ago this was not well understood by the department of water affairs.

"They thought back then that wetlands conservation was the responsibility of the department of environmental affairs, as did the department of agriculture."

However, through Working for Wetlands, a "lovely partnership (between agriculture, water affairs and environmental affairs) has been established that provides a good solid foundation to promote the wise use of wetlands in the future".

Lindley warned that the destruction of wetlands had not been halted.

"Wetlands are still being destroyed, predominantly through urban activities, and some agricultural activities."

Asked to put a figure on the rate at which wetlands were being lost, or what the total area of wetlands is currently in South Africa, Lindley said he did not have exact figures, although it was estimated 55 percent of wetlands had been lost since 1900, predominantly through urban development and poor land management in rural and urban areas.

"The department of environmental affairs and Sanbi (South African National Biodiversity Institute) are about to produce the first draft of an inventory, developed from satellite imagery. Until we have that, we do not have a good idea of how many hectares (of wetland) we have in the country."

Asked to explain the apparent contradiction between his reporting a positive recovery of wetlands, and a report last year that highlighted the continuing deterioration of many of South Africa's river systems, he said this was due to many of the wetlands being located mainly in the more protected upper catchments of river systems.

"Most of our wetlands are in the upper catchments, and therefore they are often the areas that are less degraded than further down the catchment, where the cities are. If you look at South Africa's rivers, you will tend to find the upper catchments are generally in better condition than lower down."

Lindley said the biggest single threat to wetlands was agricultural development.

"Our biggest target market that we really want to work with is the agricultural sector. We have very good legislation... but we are unfortunately failing to bring on board, in a meaningful way, the department of agriculture. They are just lagging behind a little bit," he said. – Sapa