

Wetlands – Places to play and learn

Every year World Wetlands Day is celebrated on 2 February on the anniversary of the signing in 1971 of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

This year, the special day focused on the relationship between wetlands and tourism.

Tourism is a growing business, with around a billion international tourists visiting destinations across the world every year. With half of international tourists travelling to wetlands, the tourism expenditure linked to these special water ecosystems is

estimated at around US\$925-billion a year. This does not even include domestic tourism and recreational day trips. Truly the economic value generated by tourism to wetlands is enormous.

Wetlands, with their natural beauty and abundance of plant and wildlife offer much in terms of recreation and tourism. In South Africa, as in other parts of the world, many of these wetlands have been declared national parks or protected areas. It is easy to see why our wetlands are so popular with domestic and international travellers. Arguably South Africa's most famous

wetlands area, iSimangaliso Wetland Park, for example, contains three major lake systems and is home to Africa's largest estuarine system, 526 bird species, 1 200 species of fish, and several large animals, including crocodile and hippo.

Another well known wetlands tourist destination is Nylsvley Nature Reserve in Limpopo. The reserve provides protection for about 700 ha of wetland, and is home to hundreds of animals and birds. In the North West, Barberspan Bird Sanctuary is one of the largest waterfowl sanctuaries in South Africa, with over 320 recorded species and bird counts in excess of 12 000 individuals.

Well managed tourism in and around wetlands can bring significant benefits. Recreational activities around wetlands



WEB RESOURCES

www.ramsar.org
www.wetland.org
<http://wetlands.sanbi.org/>
www.wetland.org.za/

Langebaan Lagoon is one of South Africa's 20 Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance.

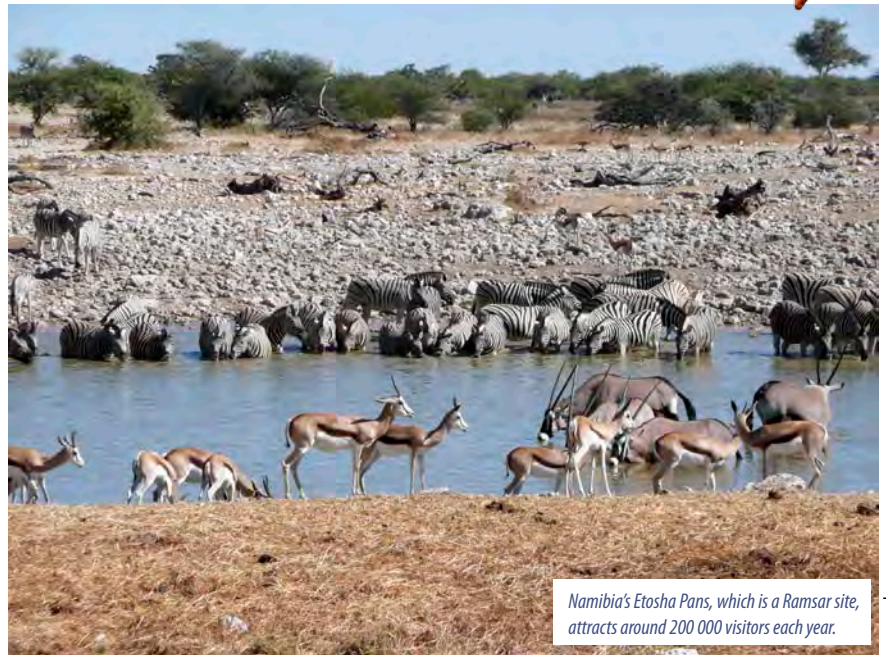
www.sxchu

What is the Ramsar Convention?

The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, or Ramsar Convention in short, is an international treaty for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands. It is named after the town of Ramsar in Iran where it was originally signed in 1971. To date, 160 parties have signed the Convention, and close to 2 000 wetlands have been listed as Wetlands of International Importance. South Africa was one of the first signatories of the Convention.

can generate welcome income that can be ploughed back into conservation. These activities range from boating, snorkelling and other water sports to watching wildlife and even fishing. Many areas also charge entry and user fees, which can be used to conserve wetlands and the species and services they support. Tourism can also benefit local communities in terms of income and employment.

It is worth noting that tourism is only one of the ecosystem services that wetlands



Namibia's Etosha Pans, which is a Ramsar site, attracts around 200 000 visitors each year.

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provide, and ensuring the sustainability of tourism in and around wetlands contributes to the health of the wetlands so that other services can be sustained. Unfortunately, poor tourism practices have resulted in the pollution and degradation of wetlands in many areas.

The continuous rapid growth of tourism puts enormous pressure on the places – and their natural and cultural attractions – that tourists want to visit. The downside of uncontrolled tourism includes, for example, trampling effects of uncontrolled visit rates in sensitive habitats, such as peatlands; excessive disturbance of breeding bird populations; overharvesting of fish and shellfish to supply hotels and restaurants; as well as poor disposal of waste.

It is up to all of us to ensure that we enjoy our wetlands responsibly. Take

some time to learn about the wonder of the wetlands you visit and share this information with others. Take only photographs and leave only footprints. In this way generations of people will still be able to marvel at our wetlands in years to come. ☐



Some wetlands are home to a myriad of plants and animals, making them ideal tourist attractions.

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White-faced and Comb Ducks at Nylsvley.

Dirkie van Rensburg



Courtesy Ramsar