



SOCIETY of WETLAND SCIENTISTS

National Wetlands Indaba: South Africa



South Africa's annual National Wetlands Indaba (NWI) was held at the Swadini Resort in Mpumalanga Province over the period 25 to 28 October 2016, with 200 delegates attending the meeting from all over the country. The word "indaba" is a Zulu word referring to important conferences held by traditional tribal leaders to discuss important matters. The word today has widespread usage in South Africa to refer to a "gathering" or "meeting". Attendees at these meetings include wetland scientists, practitioners, decision-makers, NGO's and other interested parties who gather to talk about wetland matters in the country.

Each province in South Africa has a "Wetland Forum", which comprises volunteers who meet regularly to discuss wetland issues in their province. The national meeting this year was hosted by the Mpumalanga Wetland Forum with the theme "Forward together for the sustainability of our wetlands". Key partners in the promotion of wetland matters in South Africa are 1) the statutory program "Working for Wetlands", which is responsible for wetland restoration programs throughout the country and 2) the "South African Wetland Society", the national body that represents the interests of professional wetland practitioners and scientists. Unlike the SWS, the SAWS is not primarily interested in science, but it works largely in the arena of engaging with practitioners, policy makers and policy implementers towards achieving desirable outcomes for wetland protection, conservation and wise use.

The NWI 2016 was memorable in many respects. Keynote addresses were presented by a range of scientists and practitioners. The meeting opened with a thought-provoking presentation by Anton Linström appropriately entitled "Forward together for the sustainability of our wetlands". The key message was that every person with an interest in sustainable wetland management has a key role to play in the achievement of this outcome. A second keynote address was given by Fred Ellery entitled "The relationship between wetland structure and dynamics and geomorphic history: A case study of Grahamstown's wetlands". The message here was that wetland scientists and practitioners need to incorporate geomorphic understanding into their management plans given that erosion is one of the most serious features of wetland degradation in the region. Two presentations by Johan van der Waals gave rise to much discussion as he spoke about "The Anthropic Shift" of increased wetness associated with urbanisation, which promotes wetland formation in areas that historically have not supported wetlands. The question of how these are treated legally is obviously contentious. In some cases, increased wetness and semi-permanent flooding of homes in areas that

were historically dryland environments, was a second issue he spoke about. The challenge relates to who should take responsibility for supporting the relocation of people who find themselves in such a situation. Wetland mapping was a key point of discussion, particularly as many local authorities have little idea of where wetlands are distributed in their municipalities. The lack of knowledge of this kind is leading to decision-making that is often illegal and leads to location of public and private infrastructure in poorly suited locations. Many scientists presented papers on the subjects of hydrology, hydrogeology and wetland geomorphology, and there were a large number of presentations by zoologists interested in the distribution of invertebrate and other taxa in wetlands.

A key feature of the NWI this year was the funding (through USAID and the South African State) to support attendance of many officials that work for local authorities. This was viewed as an important achievement by the organisers as local authorities, through municipal structures, are key decision-makers. Attendance of these officials at the NWI allowed these key decision-makers to express the many and varied issues that confront them regarding wetlands. The umbrella program being co-ordinated by a team of consultants working for ICLEI is called “Local Action for Biodiversity: Wetlands South Africa”, and is designed to promote awareness and improved environmental management in a program “Local Government for Sustainability”.

Several field trips to local wetlands were undertaken on a single afternoon during the Indaba, including walks and a visit to a wetland that has been extensively studied and rehabilitated in order to support agricultural activities that contribute in vital ways to the livelihoods of some of the poorest and most marginalised communities in South Africa. Such activities have important legal and management implications, and were of particular interest to local government officials.

A key feature of the annual Indaba is a number of awards recognising the contributions of individuals to wetland science and management. The awards are sponsored by Mondi Forests, who for many years has made sure that all of its commercial forestry activities are legally compliant in respect of impacts on wetlands, and who have funded the WWF-Mondi Wetlands Program in various forms since 2001. The following awards were made this year:

- **Education & Skills Development:** Sihle Bukhosini.
- **Science & Research:** Hans King – Western Cape Department of Agriculture.
- **Stewardship:** Hannes Muller – Western Cape Department of Agriculture.
- **Young Professional:** Musa Mlambo – Albany Museum, Grahamstown.

One of the most important features of the Indaba is the opportunity to network and foster mutually beneficial relationships, and hosting the NWI at a remote venue such as the magnificently located Swadini Resort, fostered collaboration in a way that seldom happens when people are dispersed at different venues, such as typically happens in a large city. Relationships that were built and new ideas that germinated in the evenings over beer and wine, were singularly important for the wetland community in South Africa. The meeting hosted a number of international delegates, including from Europe and South America. For me, as a regular attendee of these annual meetings, the 2016 meeting will stand out as most memorable.

As an attendee at the meeting, Fred Ellery also had opportunity to talk about the SWS and its vision and goals, particularly as they relate to fostering networks of professionals on the continent of Africa. Africa hosts many of the world’s most significant wetlands, including the Okavango Delta in

Botswana, wetlands in the Lake Victoria Basin, Lake Chad, the upper Niger Delta in Mali, and the Nile Delta in Egypt. The vision of the SWS in Africa should be to build a network of scientists and professionals, who base management decisions on local needs and issues, which are firmly grounded in good science. Perhaps the theme of this year's SA NWI is appropriate: "Forward together for the sustainability of our wetlands".

For the program and presentations, see <http://nwi16.wetlands.web.za/programme.htm>

Fred Ellery

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