

LOCAL ACTION FOR BIODIVERSITY: WETLANDS SOUTH AFRICA

Supporting Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality with effective wetland management

Identifying gaps in wetland information and developing a wetland strategy and action plan to improve wetland management within Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality

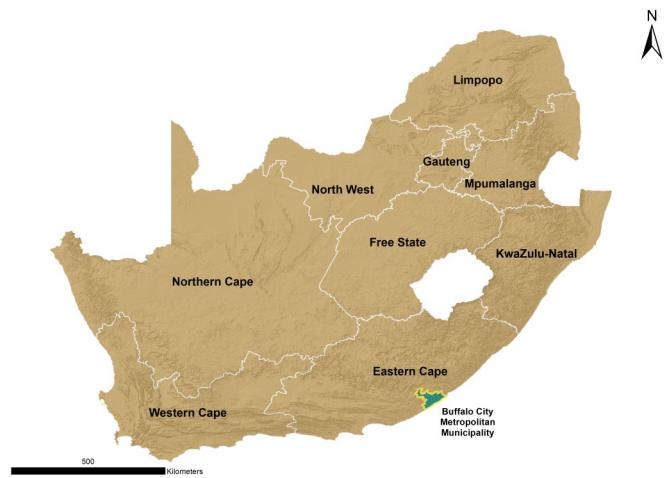
South Africa is currently in the grips of one of the worst droughts in recorded history and water resources have never been more precious. Wetlands have the ability to store water and regulate stream flow, providing local communities with a secure water source, even in times of drought.

A lack of recognition of the value of wetlands at a planning level, coupled with fragmented wetland planning as a result of limited capacity has led to wetlands within Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCMM) historically becoming degraded or even lost. Loss of wetland resources places BCMM at increasing risk to the impacts of climate change.

Recognising this, BCMM joined the ICLEI led Local Action for Biodiversity: Wetlands South Africa project in 2015 and has taken decisive steps towards improving wetland management.

This has been done by (1) developing a Wetland Report, which pulls together all the available wetland information

from within the metro to assist the municipality with identifying their gaps in wetland management; and (2) by developing a Wetland Strategy and Action Plan, which identifies where focused work needs to be undertaken going forward to effectively manage wetlands in the future and increase ecosystem service provision in BCMM.



"Wetlands are the most threatened of all of South Africa's ecosystems with 48% of wetland ecosystems being critically endangered."

- South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), National Biodiversity Assessment, 2011.



SETTING THE SCENE

Wetlands within the Eastern Cape's Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCMM) are considered to be high value 'ecological infrastructure' in that they provide the municipality with a number of critical services which support the functioning of the city. One of the most important services the wetlands within the municipality provide is water regulation as they have the ability to absorb water in times of heavy rain, store it, and then slowly release it outside of the rainy season, thereby supporting the municipality with water regulation.

South Africa is currently experiencing one of the worst droughts in recorded history, with the Northern, Western and Eastern Cape Provinces being most severely affected. In order to mitigate the worst effects of the drought, wetlands should be carefully managed to ensure that they continue to supply critically needed water to the municipality. However, wetlands within BCMM have historically been, and continue to be, threatened by development in and around wetlands, pollution and the spread of invasive alien plants. As a result, wetlands become degraded and are increasingly limited in their functionality and ability to provide BCMM with a secure source of water.

Municipal officials working within BCMM recognise the critical need to protect wetlands in order to secure water in the long term for the metro. However a lack of internal capacity, support and funding for wetland related projects, coupled with a lack of recognition of wetlands within BCMM's Integrated Development Plan (IDP), a limited database of wetland information and a fragmented wetland management style, resulted in effective wetland management being curtailed within BCMM.

To address this, BCMM joined the Local Action for Biodiversity: Wetlands South Africa (LAB: Wetlands SA) project in 2015. Through the project, BCMM gained knowledge and understanding of the gaps in how they manage wetlands in the city and have also developed a Metropolitan level Wetland Strategy and Action Plan (WSAP) to support more effective, holistic wetland management going forward.

WHY WETLANDS ARE IMPORTANT TO BUFFALO CITY

The wetlands within Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality are considered to be high-value 'ecological infrastructure', in that they provide vital habitat for flora and fauna, but also provide critical ecosystem services to the municipality.

These include:

- Flood attenuation and stream flow regulation
- Water filtration and purification
- Erosion control
- Water storage
- Food and medicinal plant provision
- Supply of raw materials
- Clean drinking water

Degraded wetlands are unable to function to the same degree as healthy wetlands and as such ecosystem service provision from these wetlands is severely hindered or even lost altogether.

What makes Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality unique?

Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality is located in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa and covers an area of 2 515 km². The biodiversity within Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality is immense and represented in 2 different biomes; namely Savannah and Albany Thicket. As a result a high percentage of South Africa's rare and threatened ecosystems and species can be found within the region. In addition to rivers, thickets, indigenous forests, grasslands and estuaries, numerous wetlands, of high ecological value and exceptional beauty, are found throughout the municipality. These provide crucial habitat for not only a number of species specially adapted to the various biomes found within the region but also provide habitat for a variety of nationally critically endangered flora and fauna species.

THE STORY

Identifying gaps in wetland information and work

During the initial stages of the LAB: Wetlands SA project, BCMM indicated that whilst it was known that there was a wealth of information pertaining to wetlands within the municipality, none of this information was stored in a single place and instead was housed with multiple different stakeholders across the city, with varying degrees of accessibility. This made planning around wetlands a challenge as it was not known which entities were doing what work and where, and what quantity and quality of data was available for BCMM for planning and decision-making purposes. As a result BCMM relied on its own limited internal information to plan around wetlands.

Through an extensive process of bilateral engagements with external stakeholders, such as the Department of Environmental Affairs Working for Wetlands' programme, the South African National Biodiversity Initiative (SANBI), Amathole Water and a number of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in the area, ICLEI Africa and BCMM collectively gathered all of the freely accessible information on wetlands and wetland work currently available for the city. All this information was then collated and captured in the 'Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality Wetland Report'. The significance of this report is that for the first time BCMM officials got an overall view of what information was out there for them to access. Critically, the report also highlighted gaps in wetland information and areas where work needs to be focused to ensure more integrated and holistic wetland management going forward.

Developing a Wetland Strategy and Action Plan (WSAP)

Following the development of the BCMM Wetland Report, BCMM and ICLEI collaborated to hold a Wetland Strategy and Action Planning Workshop. This two day workshop was held in April 2017 and aimed to (1) identify and prioritise actions for improving wetland management within BCMM and (2) initiate the process for the development of a holistic strategy and action plan to mainstream wetland management into land use planning. All stakeholders who had been involved in the development of the Wetland Report were invited to attend and provide their input in order to streamline the development of the WSAP.

During the course of the WSAP workshop, based on the gaps identified in the BCMM Wetland Report, five key focus areas were established, namely:

1. Wetland Research;
2. Wetland Planning and Management;
3. Capacity Building and Empowerment;
4. Wetland Rehabilitation; and
5. Funding

Once the areas of focus had been established, the ICLEI team guided the BCMM stakeholders to establish clearly defined targeted goals and detailed actions for each of the focus area that would address the gaps in wetland information identified in the BCMM Wetland Report. For example, one of the critical gaps identified in the Wetland

Report was the fact that BCMM has no specific ground-truthed wetland map covering BCMM in its entirety. This meant that in the past BCMM was unable to comment on development applications in detail, which resulted in wetlands inadvertently being filled in or degraded during the subsequent development process. The '*Wetland Research*' focus area therefore included a goal to develop a ground-truthed wetland map indicating the location and state of all wetlands within two years of the approval of the WSAP. An equally important goal included under the '*Wetland Planning and Management*' focus area is to develop a BCMM Wetland Management and Rehabilitation Plan to address the findings of the wetland mapping process.

All inputs received during the workshop were captured by ICLEI and thereafter ICLEI and BCMM worked closely together to develop a comprehensive Buffalo City Wetland Strategy and Action Plan. The Buffalo City WSAP provides comprehensive time-based solutions for all the gaps identified in the BCMM Wetland Report. Following a short stakeholder review process, the WSAP was presented to the BCMM Council and adopted. The WSAP has since been included as an appendix to the BCMM Integrated Development Plan (IDP) during the BCMM IDP review process. This is significant as it means that the wetland work included in the WSAP will now be increasingly prioritised and funded internally resulting in more streamlined, holistic and sustainable wetland management in BCMM going forward.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

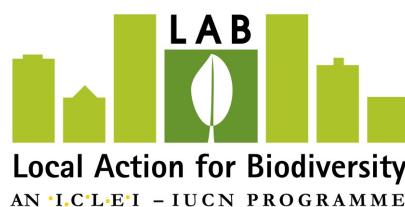
The LAB: Wetland SA is being implemented by the ICLEI's Cities Biodiversity Center, which is coordinated by the ICLEI Africa Secretariat.

Through enhanced awareness of wetlands, and the integration of wetlands and biodiversity considerations into local government planning and decision-making, the project will build the capacity of 11 municipalities to prioritise and effectively manage wetlands and biodiversity at the local level. The project will focus on government departments and working with community stakeholders to increase awareness and community buy-in.

ABOUT ICLEI

ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability is the leading global network of over 1,500 cities, towns and regions committed to building a sustainable urban future. ICLEI promotes local action for global sustainability, supporting cities to become sustainable, resilient, resource-efficient, biodiverse, and low-carbon.

ICLEI Africa Secretariat is the Sub-Saharan office of ICLEI and serves our local and sub-national government members across the region in line with the ICLEI Strategic Plan. ICLEI Africa also hosts the global ICLEI Cities Biodiversity Center.



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