

## LOCAL ACTION FOR BIODIVERSITY: WETLANDS SOUTH AFRICA



### Supporting Ehlanzeni District Municipality identify their wetland management gaps

Raising awareness around the value of wetlands and identifying gaps in wetland information required to improve wetland management within Ehlanzeni District Municipality

Wetlands have the ability to provide a wealth of ecosystem services which can support municipalities with providing essential services to local communities within their jurisdiction. A historical lack of recognition of the value of wetlands, coupled with limited access to wetland information available for the area, has meant that Ehlanzeni District Municipality (EDM) has been curtailed in its ability to effectively and holistically plan around wetlands. This has led to wetlands within EDM, historically becoming degraded or even lost as a result of decision making that does not take wetlands into consideration. Loss of wetlands puts EDM at risk of decreased water quality and quantity and increases EDM's vulnerability and disaster risk to the impacts of climate change.

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

targeted wetland awareness raising workshops, networking with stakeholders working with wetlands throughout EDM and developing a Wetland Report. The Wetland Report pulls together all the available wetland information into one place resulting in a document that acts both as a standalone report as well as a one which highlights where there are gaps in wetland information, which need to be addressed to improve wetland management going forward.





A photograph of two crowned cranes in a wetland. The cranes have grey bodies, black heads, and a distinctive golden crest. They are standing in a grassy area with water visible in the background.

**“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 Ehlanzeni District Municipality (EDM) are considered to be high value ‘ecological infrastructure’ in that they can support municipalities with providing essential services to local communities within their jurisdiction. Such services include, water filtration and purification, water storage and stream flow regulation as well as flood attenuation. These services directly increase water security within the district whilst reducing EDM’s vulnerability and disaster risk to the impacts of climate change.

Historically, the value of wetlands within the municipality has not been recognised and as such, wetlands have not been comprehensively considered in municipal planning and land use development within the district. This has meant that wetlands within EDM have been continually threatened or even lost as a result of deliberate draining of wetlands to make way for inappropriately located urban or rural developments, afforestation and mining. As a result, wetlands within the district have become increasingly degraded and limited in their functionality and ability to provide valuable ecosystem services to support the municipality.

Municipal officials working within EDM are increasingly recognising the critical need to protect wetlands in order to ensure the continued provision of ecosystem services to support the municipality. However a lack of understanding of what wetland information is available to utilise for planning purposes, coupled with a lack of internal capacity and support, has resulted in effective and holistic wetland management being curtailed within EDM. To begin to address these concerns, EDM joined the Local Action for Biodiversity: Wetlands South Africa (LAB: Wetlands SA) project in 2015.

## WHY WETLANDS ARE IMPORTANT TO EHLANZENI

The wetlands within Ehlanzeni District 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:

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- Flood attenuation
- Water filtration
- Erosion control
- Water storage
- Food provision
- Supply of raw materials
- Clean drinking water

The wetlands within the municipality also play a pivotal role in disaster risk management as well as reducing the impacts of climate change within the district.



## What makes Ehlanzeni District Municipality unique?

Ehlanzeni District Municipality is located within the Mpumalanga Province of South Africa and covers an area of 27 896 km<sup>2</sup>. Of the nine vegetation biomes found in South Africa, three of these biomes occur within the Ehlanzeni District Municipality (Grasslands, Forests, and Savannah). As a result, numerous wetlands can be found throughout the municipality, including one RAMSAR site of international importance which provides crucial habitat for the unique flora in the region as well as for a variety of critically endangered flora and fauna species.

### THE STORY

#### Raising the profile on the value of wetlands

During the initial stages of the LAB: Wetlands SA project, EDM indicated that one of the reasons that wetlands are not carefully considered in land use planning is due to the fact that technical municipal staff such as town planners and water services staff have a limited understanding of the value of wetlands and the services that they provide the municipality; and therefore do not extensively consider them in their day to day planning. Additionally, a similar lack of understanding at the political level hampers the ability of local leaders to make informed decisions and results in decisions being made that discount environmental considerations.

To address this, EDM, in collaboration with ICLEI, held several workshops during the course of the LAB: Wetlands SA project with both the technical staff as well as the political leaders of the municipality to raise awareness of the value of wetlands. During these wetland awareness raising workshops, presentations were given by numerous external experts, including representatives from the Working for Wetlands Programme as well as a number of local stakeholders. The workshops were highly successful and resulted in one Councillor commenting:

***"Today I learnt something. Now we need to make sure that our precious wetlands are sustained and well-managed for the benefit of our people."***

*-Councillor Johan Mavuso of Ehlanzeni District Municipality*





## Developing the 'Ehlanzeni District Municipality Wetland Report'

A second concern highlighted by EDM during the course of the LAB: Wetlands SA project was 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 municipality 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 EDM for planning and decision-making purposes. As a result EDM 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), Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Board, the Mpumalanga Wetlands Forum and a number of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in the area, ICLEI Africa and EDM collectively gathered all of the freely accessible information on wetlands and wetland work currently available for the district. All this information was then collated and captured in the ['Ehlanzeni District Municipality Wetland Report'](#). The significance of this report is that for the first time EDM officials were able to have an overall view of what information was out there for them to access to inform planning going forward.

## Highlighting gaps in wetland management

Critically, the Ehlanzeni District Municipality Wetland Report also highlighted gaps in wetland management and brought to light the areas where future work needs to be focused to ensure increasingly integrated and holistic wetland management across the district.

### Key management gaps identified by EDM through the development of the Wetland Report are summarised below:

- Lack of detailed, ground-truthed maps indicating the location and state of wetlands within the district;
- Lack of a specific, designated wetland management authority with EDM;
- Lack of specific local policies or by-laws guiding the management of wetlands within the district;
- Wetland management is undertaken separately by each of the four local municipalities within the district, resulting in a fragmented approach.
- Wetlands are not included in the district or local municipal Integrated Development Plans (IDP)
- Lack of public awareness and education initiatives highlighting the value of wetlands; and
- Lack of funding towards developing and implementing wetland rehabilitation and monitoring plans;

To address these gaps in wetland management, EDM, with the support of ICLEI and local stakeholders who provided input into the Wetland Report (see above), developed a Wetland Strategy and Action Plan (WSAP) to support the improved wetland management within the district. The WSAP includes time-based actions that effectively address the identified gaps in wetland management.



## Mainstreaming wetland management into the EDM Integrated Development Plan (IDP)

Through the LAB: Wetlands SA project, EDM has successfully identified their gaps in wetland management and subsequently developed a WSAP to begin to address these gaps. The project has also resulted in EDM officials gaining increasing confidence in pushing for wetland management objectives to be included in the EDM IDP. Towards the end of the project, EDM officials presented the WSAP to the EDM Mayor and Council. This resulted in wetlands being included in the 2018 IDP review. Additionally, for the first time in EDM, significant funds have also been committed towards wetland management and money has been allocated to addressing one of the objectives of the WSAP; namely raising public awareness on the value of wetlands.

This is significant as it represents a shift in thinking around wetlands within EDM and the first steps towards more holistic and sustainable wetland management within EDM going forward.

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

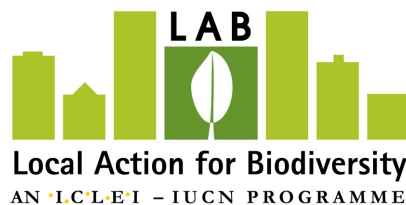
The LAB: Wetland SA is being implemented by the ICLEI's Cities Biodiversity Center, which is coordinated by the ICLEI Africa Secretariat

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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