

LOCAL ACTION FOR BIODIVERSITY: WETLANDS SOUTH AFRICA



Putting wetland management 'back on the agenda' in Frances Baard District Municipality

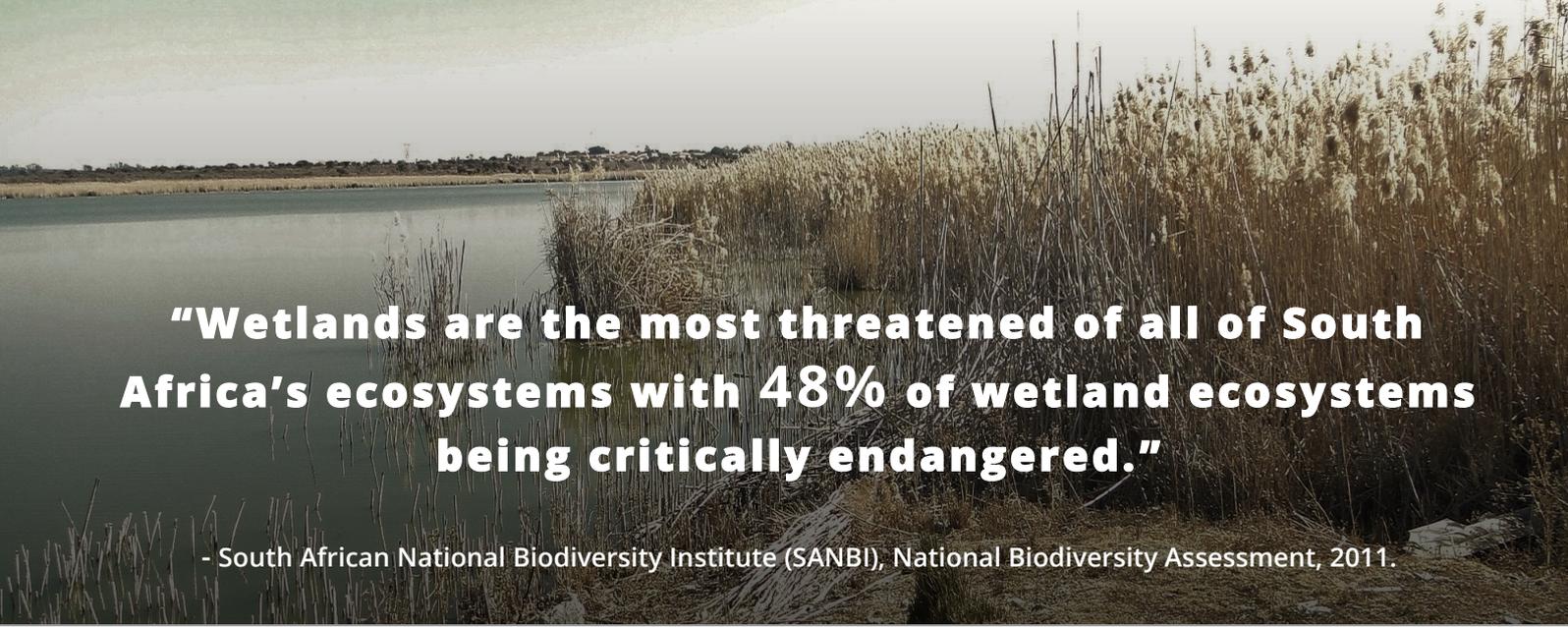
Rekindling wetland management and reviving the Northern Cape Wetlands Forum in Frances Baard District Municipality

Frances Baard District Municipality (FBDM) is located in the semi-arid, eastern part of the Northern Cape Province of South Africa. Wetlands within the area are considered to be unique in that they are largely 'drylands' for most of the year. Yet during the rainy season they become a critical water source for many of the towns located in the region, as well as some of South Africa's most important breeding grounds for a number of bird populations, including the Lessor Flamingo (*Phoenicurus minor*).

Historically wetlands have been well managed and protected within FBDM. In recent years however, due to a lack of capacity within FBDM, limited up to date information on wetlands within FBDM and poor engagement between stakeholders, wetland management has largely fallen off the radar. To address this, FBDM joined the Local Action for Biodiversity: Wetlands South Africa (LAB Wetlands SA) Project in 2015 with the aim of turning this reality around and putting wetland management "back on the

agenda" not only in the district, but also the entire Northern Cape Province. By providing critically needed information, connecting stakeholders and facilitating a collective effort towards establishing a strategic way forward, the LAB: Wetlands SA Project has created renewed interest in the importance of wetlands within FBDM and facilitated greater efforts to manage these resources going forward.





“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

FBDM is located in the semi-arid, eastern part of the Northern Cape Province, meaning that the region for the most part is dry and access to free-flowing water is limited. The wetlands within the municipality have the ability to store water and provide the district with water thereby supporting the water security of the region. In addition, the wetlands within the municipality (including the Important Birding Area (IBA), Kamfer’s Dam) also serve as critical breeding grounds for a number of important South African bird species, including the ‘Threatened’ Lessor Flamingo (*Phoenicurus minor*), which is listed as ‘Threatened’ due to declining populations.

Historically wetlands within FBDM have been well managed thereby ensuring that the municipality benefits from the critical ‘ecosystem services’ that wetlands provide. Additionally, through the Northern Cape Wetlands Forum, stakeholders were able to connect and network, build upon wetland research and share critical knowledge to ensure holistic management of wetlands shared between multiple stakeholders. Due to an increasing lack of capacity within FBDM to address wetlands, as well as other critical basic human needs (such as housing as well as infrastructure and sanitation needs), limited up to date information on wetlands within FBDM and decreasing engagement between stakeholders (including the ceasing of Northern Cape Wetland Forum meetings for a time), wetland management stopped being a priority within FBDM and began to fall off the radar. This resulted in wetlands management becoming increasingly fragmented between municipal departments and wetlands themselves becoming mismanaged and subsequently degraded. The knock on impact of this was decreasing water security in the region and a decline in bird populations as healthy breeding grounds (such as the Kamfer’s Dam) became threatened.

WHY WETLANDS ARE IMPORTANT TO FRANCES BAARD

The wetlands within Frances Baard 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:

- Flood attenuation
- Water filtration
- Erosion control
- Water storage and stream flow regulation
- Food and medicinal plant provision
- Supply of raw materials which support local economies and livelihoods
- 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 Frances Baard District Municipality unique?

Frances Baard District Municipality is located in the Northern Cape Province of South Africa and covers an area of 23 331 km², making it the smallest district in the Northern Cape; however, it accommodates the largest proportion of the population of the province estimated at 382 088. Key environmental features in the district include two of the largest rivers in South Africa, the Orange and the Vaal, which both flow through and meet in the Frances Baard District Municipality. Numerous wetlands, of high ecological value and exceptional beauty, are also found throughout the municipality. Very little is known about these systems however and as a result there is still much to learn in order to incorporate wetlands in municipal governance and planning mechanisms going forward.

FBDM recognised the need to have healthy wetlands within the district and exhibited a real desire to revive wetland work within the district as well as rekindle critical partnerships between FBDM officials and stakeholders such as Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS), Department of Environment and Nature Conservation (DENC) and South African Environmental Observation Network (SAEON). With the hope of providing critically needed information to support wetland management, re-connecting stakeholders and facilitating a collective effort towards establishing a strategic way forward, FBDM joined the LAB: Wetlands SA Project in 2015.

THE STORY

Providing wetland information through the Frances Baard Wetland Report

During the initial stages of the LAB: Wetlands SA Project, through consultation with municipal and external stakeholders, it became clear that there was a real sense of frustration with the current status quo of how wetland management within the district was being undertaken. This was largely attributed to a lack of current available up to date wetland information

resulting in municipal officials having to “work in the dark”.

Through an extensive process of bilateral engagements with external stakeholders such as DWS, DENC, SAEON as well as a number of local researchers working within FBDM, ICLEI Africa and FBDM collectively gathered as much of the freely accessible information as possible on wetlands available for the district. The process took an extensive period of time (over a year and a half) as relevant wetland information, specific to FBDM proved to be difficult to come by. This was due to the fact that (1) stakeholders were fragmented across the municipality and working in isolation, which made them difficult to track down; (2) stakeholders in possession of information were often unaware that the information they had was of value to the municipality and only initially shared what they thought to be relevant; (3) stakeholders working privately did not necessarily want to share the data and some negotiation was required; and (4) up to date information on freshwater ecosystems was only available at a national and provincial scale. Whilst the ‘information gathering’ process took time, it was hugely beneficial as it largely confirmed the “desktop” research that was done beforehand and also

provided useful anecdotal information needed to ensure the report spoke to the real situation within the district.

Once this information had been sourced, it was consolidated into one comprehensive report known as the “Frances Baard District Municipality Wetland Report”. The significance of the report is that for the first time, FBDM officials as well as stakeholders working within FBDM, had access to the same data and information. The report was very well received by stakeholders within FBDM, particularly by the political arm of the municipality as it showed progress being made under the project and also provided them with updated wetland information for decision making purposes.

Rekindling relationships with Frances Baard District Municipality

The process of developing the FBDM Wetland Report proved to be extremely useful in commencing the process of rekindling relationships within the district and bridging the gaps between various stakeholders across the district. Up until this point, stakeholders were largely “working in silos” and the bilateral engagements served as a useful first step to breaking down these barriers.

Through the course of the LAB: Wetlands SA Project, ICLEI Africa and FBDM co-facilitated the ‘Wetlands for Prosperity’ workshop which aimed to provide an initial platform for stakeholders across FBDM to discuss wetlands and their value to the municipality. The workshop also provided stakeholders with an opportunity to network, re-build relationships as well as build new relationships to ensure better, more collective wetland management going forward. The workshop was well received and stakeholders present expressed both relief and optimism of the work of the LAB: Wetlands SA Project in FBDM.

Following on from the workshop, the stakeholders agreed that an important need for the district was the establishment of a relevant wetland related platform, be it new or existing, where stakeholders could continue to engage, discuss challenges and opportunities regarding wetlands and work together to address and address these. Initially, FBDM considered adding wetlands as a focus area to their existing environmental forum, though it was later decided that wetland management needed a unique focus and should be part of a more focused platform. Discussions between FBDM and external stakeholders and researchers working within FBDM resulted in the revival of the Northern Cape Wetlands Forum.

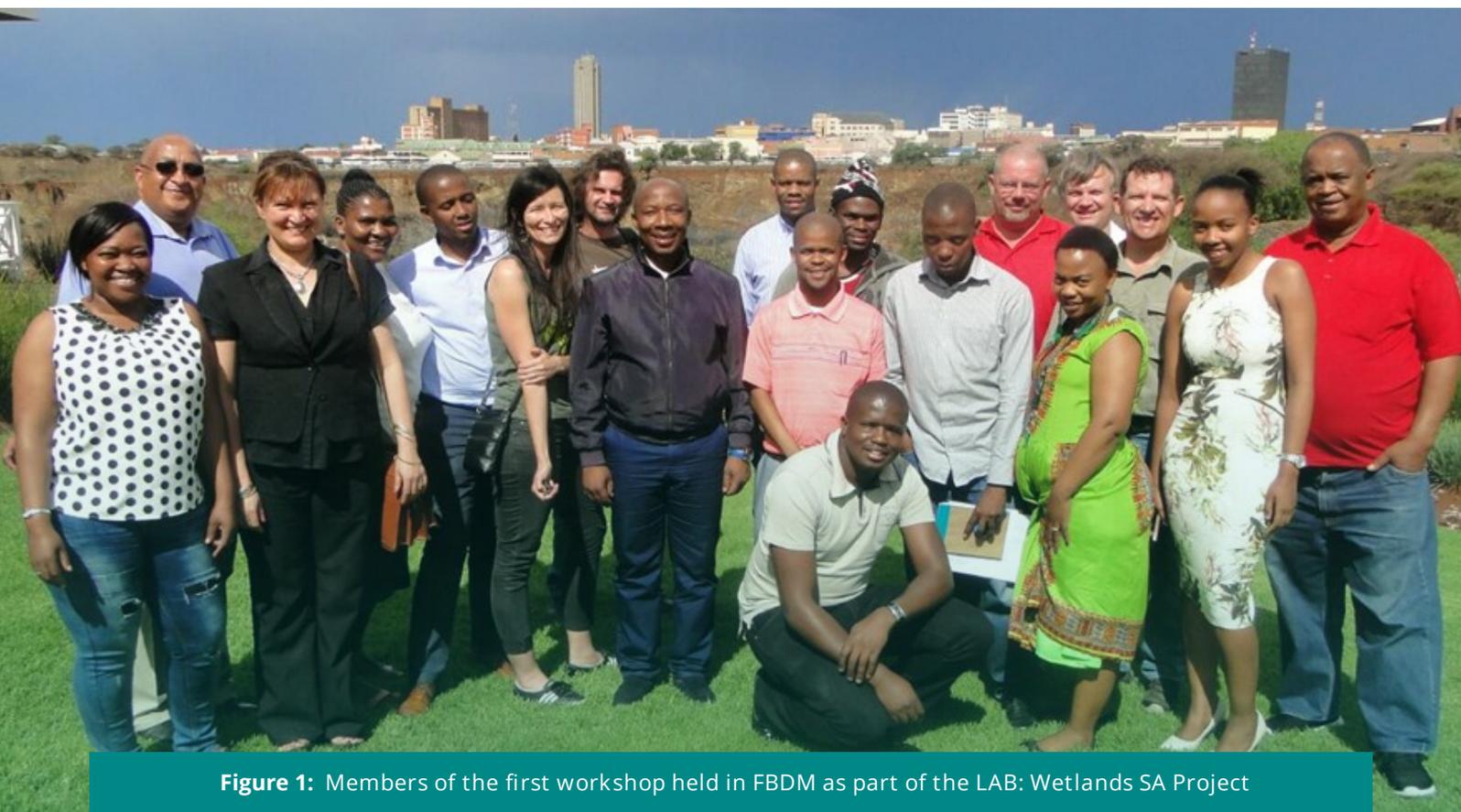


Figure 1: Members of the first workshop held in FBDM as part of the LAB: Wetlands SA Project

Developing a Wetland Strategy and Action Plan for Frances Baard District Municipality

As a final engagement with FBDM before the project came to an end, FBDM and ICLEI Africa co-hosted a 'Wetland Strategy and Action Plan (WSAP) Development Workshop'. The workshop aimed to support the development of a Wetland Management Plan for the entire FBDM.

The WSAP workshop was arguably the most important outcome of the entire project as it was the first time that all stakeholders within FBDM, including not just the FBDM officials, but officials at a provincial and national level, external stakeholders from DWS, DENC and SAOEN as well as members of the Northern Cape Wetlands Forum and private researchers, came together to strategise and plan around wetlands for the entire district. The workshop provided an opportunity for participants to network and collectively develop a Wetland Management Plan for FBDM that spoke to the varied agendas of each of the stakeholders whilst at the same time ensuring coordinated efforts for holistic wetland management in the future which directly support FBDM.

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.

