

LOCAL ACTION FOR BIODIVERSITY: WETLANDS SOUTH AFRICA



Raising awareness at the political leader level of the value of wetlands in Waterberg District Municipality.

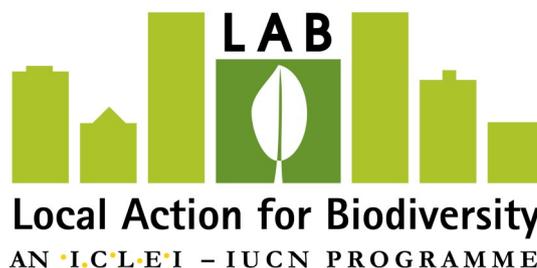
Supporting the political leaders of Waterberg District Municipality with effective decision making around planning for wetlands through awareness raising, capacity building and creating political leader buy in.

Waterberg District Municipality is located in the Limpopo Province in the northern part of South Africa; and has a rich array of natural resources including the internationally renowned Waterberg Biosphere Reserve, the Nyl River and the Nylsvlei Wetland (RAMSAR accredited), making it one of the most naturally beautiful districts in the country. The wetland systems within Waterberg District Municipality provide an array of services including clean water and habitat provision for flora and fauna as well as support the municipality with disaster risk reduction and ecotourism possibilities.

The responsibility of conserving and preserving these natural resources rests with Waterberg District Municipality. However, pressure from the political sector to grant mining applications to boost the local economy places these natural resources under pressure. To ensure that the natural resources are conserved for the benefit of current and future generations whilst developing the economy, coordinated efforts of all relevant stakeholders

throughout the district is vitally important. Additionally, unconditional support and commitment from the decision-makers and political leaders is critical.

The LAB: Wetlands SA project aimed to (1) support Waterberg District Municipality with raising awareness of the value of wetlands at the political leader level; (2) build on the municipality's existent coordinating efforts by enhancing the wetlands focus of the Waterberg Environment & Biodiversity Conservation (WEBC) Forum; (3) and create a platform to foster political buy-in.





“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 in Waterberg District Municipality are of international importance and the municipality is at the centre of ensuring these features remain in the landscape. The entire district is characterised by numerous waterbodies including the Nylsvlei Wetland and Nyl River Floodplain, which are Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs) and are crucially important to the district in terms of water provision, disaster risk reduction, habitat provision for flora and fauna and for sustaining livelihoods of local communities.

The technical staff of Waterberg District Municipality are aware of the importance of conserving and protecting the wetlands within the district. However, there is considerable political pressure to grant mining applications to support local job creation and boost the local economy. Mining and associated activities, particularly excavating and stockpiling, irreversibly damages the natural environment, including wetlands, and subsequently impacts Waterberg District Municipality’s water quality, reduces habitat for flora and fauna and threatens local communities’ ability to rely on local natural resources for livelihood support.

WHY WETLANDS ARE IMPORTANT TO WATERBERG

The wetlands within Waterberg 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
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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.

SETTING THE SCENE

As Waterberg District Municipality is rich in natural beauty, the technical staff of Waterberg District Municipality realise the endless possibilities and opportunities facing the region, particularly from an ecotourism perspective, which would both boost the economy and protect natural resources. For Waterberg District Municipality to realise these opportunities however, their natural resources need to be adequately managed and protected. For this to happen, political leaders need to understand and be informed of the value of the rich natural resources within the district, Secondly, there needs to be integrated and coordinated decision making between the technical staff of the municipality and political leaders. Thirdly, there needs to be political commitment to protecting the local natural resources and water bodies in order to stimulate and support local ecotourism opportunities as part of the local economic development strategy for the municipality. The LAB: Wetlands SA project aimed to support Waterberg District Municipality with raising awareness of the value of wetlands at the political leader level and creating a platform to foster political buy-in.

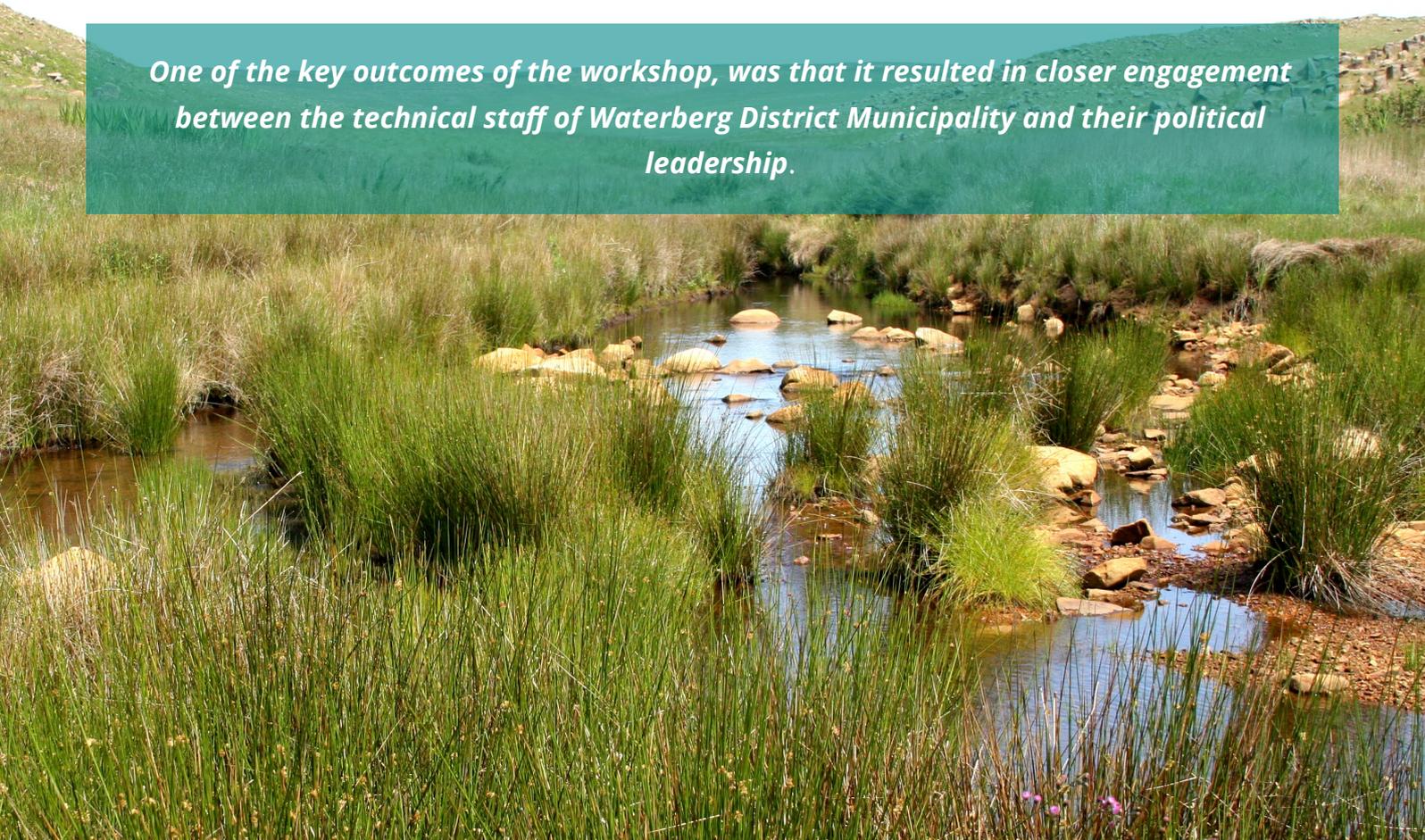
THE STORY

Raising awareness on the value of wetlands at the political leader level

South African municipalities' political leaders determine the future of their municipalities through the day to day decisions they make. To ensure that political leaders make informed decisions around natural resources and the environment is managed effectively, municipal technical staff need to work closely with their political leaders to provide them with up to date, accurate and relevant information.

During the inception phase of the LAB Wetlands SA project, wetland awareness raising workshops were conducted with each of the project municipalities at the technical staff level. During initial engagements with Waterberg District Municipality, it was apparent that the technical staff had a good understanding of the value of wetlands, however there was a real need for awareness raising of the importance of wetlands in the region at the district and local political leader level. To address this need, the wetland awareness raising workshop held in Waterberg District Municipality aimed to inform the Councillors and

One of the key outcomes of the workshop, was that it resulted in closer engagement between the technical staff of Waterberg District Municipality and their political leadership.



What makes Waterberg District Municipality unique?

The Waterberg District Municipality (WDM), situated in the north-eastern province of Limpopo, South Africa, has an estimated total population of 679 336. The vegetation in the district is dominated by different veld types, the two dominant forms being sour Bushveld and mixed Bushveld which are typical savanna vegetation types. A large number of wetlands are found throughout the municipality, each of which provide critical habitat for flora and fauna endemic to the region.

Mayors from the district and local municipalities about the importance and benefits of wetlands at a local level. Additionally, the workshop aimed to highlight how wetland conservation in Waterberg District Municipality specifically can support the district with enhancing economic development.

The initial wetland awareness raising workshop held in Waterberg District Municipality was hosted by Mogalakwena Local Municipality in September 2015 and was attended by approximately 50 district and local Councillors, together with the Mayors of Waterberg District Municipality, Mogalakwena Local Municipality and Modimolle Local Municipality. The event provided the perfect platform for participants to learn about the importance of wetlands, whilst at the same time engaging with local and national experts around making the links between wetland conservation and issues such as local economic development.

The importance of follow up to ensure continued political buy in

In 2016, local government elections took place resulting in a change in political leadership at both the district and local level. Initially this resulted in a loss of momentum in the LAB: Wetlands SA project and a loss of political commitment to protect natural resources within Waterberg District Municipality. Following the successes of the initial Waterberg District Municipality political leader workshop held in September however, Waterberg District Municipality

requested that the LAB: Wetlands SA team return and undertake a second round of political leader awareness raising on the value of wetlands to support the municipality with re-establishing connections and re-establishing political commitment for protecting wetlands. At the same time, several other project municipalities expressed a similar need, prompting the LAB: Wetlands SA project team to develop and design a suitable and politically appropriate awareness raising format for political leader wetland awareness raising workshops. The workshops were designed in such a way so as to raise awareness at the political leader level about the benefits and importance of wetlands, and to promote opportunities for interactive and open discussion.

The second Waterberg District Municipality political leader awareness raising workshop was hosted by the newly amalgamated Modimolle-Mookgopong Local Municipality at the Nylsvlei Nature Reserve in September 2017. The workshop was extremely well attended by both technical staff and Councillors from Waterberg District Municipality as well as the local municipalities: Modimolle-Mookgopong, Thabazimbi, Bela-Bela and Mogalakwena Local Municipalities. Other participants included the national Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) and the Limpopo Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism (LEDET).

The workshop provided the ideal opportunity for strategic political engagement by not only raising

awareness of the value of wetlands in Waterberg District Municipality, but also provided a platform to get the new optimistic and energetic leadership involved in planning around wetlands from the early stages of their terms of office. The workshop also provided an excellent platform for the new Mayors of the district and local municipalities to formally pledge their verbal commitments to protect wetlands by signing the Durban Commitment and join local governments from across the world in protecting and enhancing biodiversity at the local level. Both the Waterberg District Municipality and Modimolle-Mookgopong Mayors signed the Durban Commitment, thereby formally ensuring that they take the lead in protecting their environment for their tenure.

Outcomes of raising the profile of wetlands at the political leader level

Waterberg District Municipality boasts a rich array of natural resources as well as several RAMSAR sites. During the political leader workshops in Waterberg District Municipality, political leaders learnt about the



Figures 3 & 4: Cllr Rosina Boloka, Waterberg Acting Executive Mayor (left) and Cllr Marlene Van Staden, LIM 368 Municipality Mayor (right) demonstrate their commitment to protecting biodiversity through signing the Durban Commitment.

value of wetlands and how wetlands can support Waterberg District Municipality achieve a number of its mandates, including clean water provision, jobs



Figure 5: Cllr Marlene Van Staden, LIM 368 Municipality Mayor participating in the tree planting ceremony to symbolise Waterberg District Municipality's commitment to protect biodiversity.

through ecotourism and disaster risk reduction.

Following the political leader workshops, relationships between the technical staff of Waterberg District Municipality and their political leadership were strengthened and the political leaders across the district started taking a greater interest in supporting the Waterberg Environment and Biodiversity Conservation Forum (WBECF), a forum designed to support the municipality with coordinating resource management and ensure alignment of stakeholders interests. Additionally the political leaders also started taking an interest in the Limpopo Wetlands Forum (LWF), which seeks to keep members informed with the latest research and news related to wetlands, as well assist stakeholders with wetlands work.

As a result, of becoming more involved in both the WBECF and the LWF, the political leaders have increased access to information about the natural resources of the district and have a better ability to connect to relevant stakeholders. *This directly improves the position of the political leaders to make better, more informed decisions when making decisions that may affect the natural environment.*

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.

