

De Berg Nature Reserve declared 30th Ramsar site

The Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, Barbara Creecy, has welcomed the declaration of De Berg Nature Reserve as South Africa's 30th Ramsar site under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance.



The Ramsar Convention encourages the designation of sites containing representative, rare or unique wetlands, or wetlands that are important for conserving biological diversity.

“The conservation and restoration of wetlands is crucial to achieving many of our national and global sustainable development goals. Estuaries, marshes and vleis, rivers and lakes, and the biodiversity that they preserve matter for our health, food supply, tourism and jobs.

“Wetlands are vital for humans, ecosystems and our climate, providing essential ecosystem services such as water regulation, including flood control and water purification,” Creecy said on Friday.

Working for Wetlands

Through the Working for Wetlands Programme, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) has invested over R1.4bn in the rehabilitation of 1,873 wetlands and created 43,662 jobs.

The programme commenced in the year 2000 and is being implemented in all nine provinces of South Africa by a

dedicated team of experts working closely with communities.

De Berg Nature Reserve is located along the headwaters of the Dwars River in the highest part of Mpumalanga, approximately 20km north of the town of Dullstroom, and lies adjacent to the Verloren Valei Ramsar Site.

At an elevation of just over 2,300m above sea level, the Ramsar site contains the highest altitude wetlands in Mpumalanga, consisting of numerous valley bottom, seep wetlands and mountain streams, and represents some of the most pristine and habitat diverse watercourses in the South African grassland biome.

“The Ramsar site, which is a biodiversity hotspot, not only supports numerous pristine headwater wetlands but also supports numerous threatened, critically endangered, and vulnerable species of plants and animals.

“The site falls within the Lydenburg and Sekhukhune centres of plant endemism, and has a total of 878 indigenous plant species, which includes 30 plant species that are threatened and near threatened, and includes a new species of Bulbine, (*B. decastroi*) which can be found in the valleys of the reserve.

“This site also has 18 species of frogs, 71 reptile species, 432 bird species and a 120 mammal species, including Vandam's girdled lizard (*Smaug vandami*), various crane species such as blue crane and grey-crowned crane and mountain reedbuck,” the department said.

Vulnerable species

Many of these species are also rare and vulnerable species. They include flocks of up to 30 of the vulnerable Southern Bald Ibis, which roosts on the cliffs above Ibis Falls, one of 10 iconic waterfalls that can be found at the site.

Although wetlands cover less than 3% of South Africa's land area, they offer diverse benefits that enrich human well-being.

The department said wetlands are increasingly regarded in South Africa as socio-ecological systems as opposed to only ecological systems.

Many of the country's wetlands are in urban areas and are often the last remaining open areas for recreational use by the public.

“The South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) – an entity of DFFE - is also actively contributing to wetland conservation through its comprehensive approach to mapping and understanding this critical ecological infrastructure, emphasising that informed action today can make a significant difference for the future of wetlands, human well-being and biodiversity.

“Strategic Water Source Areas (SWSAs) are crucial to South Africa's water security, and various SANBI projects provide insight into land use and protection levels in these strategically important national assets,” Creecy said.

World Wetlands Day

The designation of De Berg Nature Reserve as South Africa's 30th Ramsar Site under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance coincides with World Wetlands Day (2 February) which is commemorated under the theme “wetlands and human well-being”.

Once designated, these sites are added to the Convention's List of Wetlands of International Importance and become known as Ramsar sites. In designating a wetland as a Ramsar site, countries agree to establish and oversee a management framework aimed at conserving the wetland and ensuring its wise use.

“Through the development of partnerships to monitor, protect and rehabilitate wetlands, by ensuring our wetlands are kept

free of litter and invasive alien plant species and by ensuring that we follow best practices to ensure that wetlands are sustainably used for their services, we show our appreciation for and acknowledge the value of wetlands and ensure that they remain in place to provide future generations with the same services,” the Minister said.

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