

WETLANDS

Municipalities receive support to manage their wetlands

*ICLEI's Local Action for Biodiversity: Wetlands SA project is drawing to a close, having achieved great success in encouraging municipalities to value and protect their wetlands.
Article by Sue Matthews.*



The acronym no longer applies, but ICLEI originally referred to the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives. It was founded in 1990 by 200 local governments from 43 countries, who convened for the first World Congress of Local Governments for a Sustainable Future at the United Nations headquarters in New York. Given that its activities addressed broader sustainability issues rather than only environmental aspects, its name was changed in 2003 to ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability. Today, more than 1 500 cities, towns and regions make up this global network.

The ICLEI-Africa secretariat, based in Cape Town, hosts the Cities Biodiversity Center, which for the past few years has been implementing a wetlands project under ICLEI's Local

Action for Biodiversity (LAB) programme. The LAB: Wetlands SA project, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), aimed to protect wetlands so that they can continue to provide important ecosystem services to cities within South Africa, while also increasing the resilience of cities to the impacts of climate change. It sought to achieve this by improving local government knowledge and understanding of the value of wetlands, initiating the process of integrating wetlands and ecosystem services into local government planning and decision-making, and piloting wetland projects within the participating municipalities.

The project was rolled out in nine district municipalities and two metropolitan municipalities countrywide. Starting in



Project manager, Kirsty Robinson (front), with participants at the iLembe District Municipality's wetland strategy and action planning workshop.

September 2015, wetland awareness-raising workshops were held for each of the municipalities, with representatives from local municipalities lying within the district municipalities boundaries invited too. The participants generally included planning, disaster management and environmental officials, as well as other key stakeholders from environmental NGOs, water boards, parks boards and even traditional leaders in some cases. Representatives from Working for Wetlands, SANBI, SALGA, the Department of Water Affairs and Sanitation, and the national and provincial environmental departments attended where possible to provide additional input.

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The participants learned that wetlands provide vital habitat for flora and fauna, as well critical ecosystem services such as flood attenuation, water storage, erosion control, and natural filtration for improved water quality. Given that climate change is predicted to increase the incidence of extreme events in the form of droughts and floods, wetlands clearly have an important role to play in terms of both climate change resilience and disaster risk reduction. The participants were also sensitised to the threats facing wetlands, which were found to be the most threatened of all South Africa's ecosystems in the most recently published National Biodiversity Assessment. Key pressures include urban development, agricultural practices, pollution, sedimentation, and changes in water flow due to dams, water abstraction and invasive alien plants.

“During those wetland awareness-raising workshops, the municipalities all expressed a real need for information,” says project manager, Kirsty Robinson. “They understood the need to do planning around wetlands, but didn't know where all the information was housed, or how to access it.”

The project team therefore engaged with stakeholders to gather all the existing and readily accessible information on wetlands within the various municipal areas and collate it into a Wetland Report for each municipality. The reports were structured according to a standard Table of Contents that included chapters on wetlands and biodiversity, disaster management and climate change, governance and management, and communication and awareness. Apart from being valuable tools for awareness-raising, the reports could be used to inform initial land-use planning, identify gaps in knowledge and set priorities for wetland management.

“The next step was to address the second project objective – to initiate the process of integrating wetlands and the services they provide into local government planning and decision-making,” says Robinson. “For that, we convened two-day Wetland Strategy and Action Planning Workshops for each of the municipalities.”

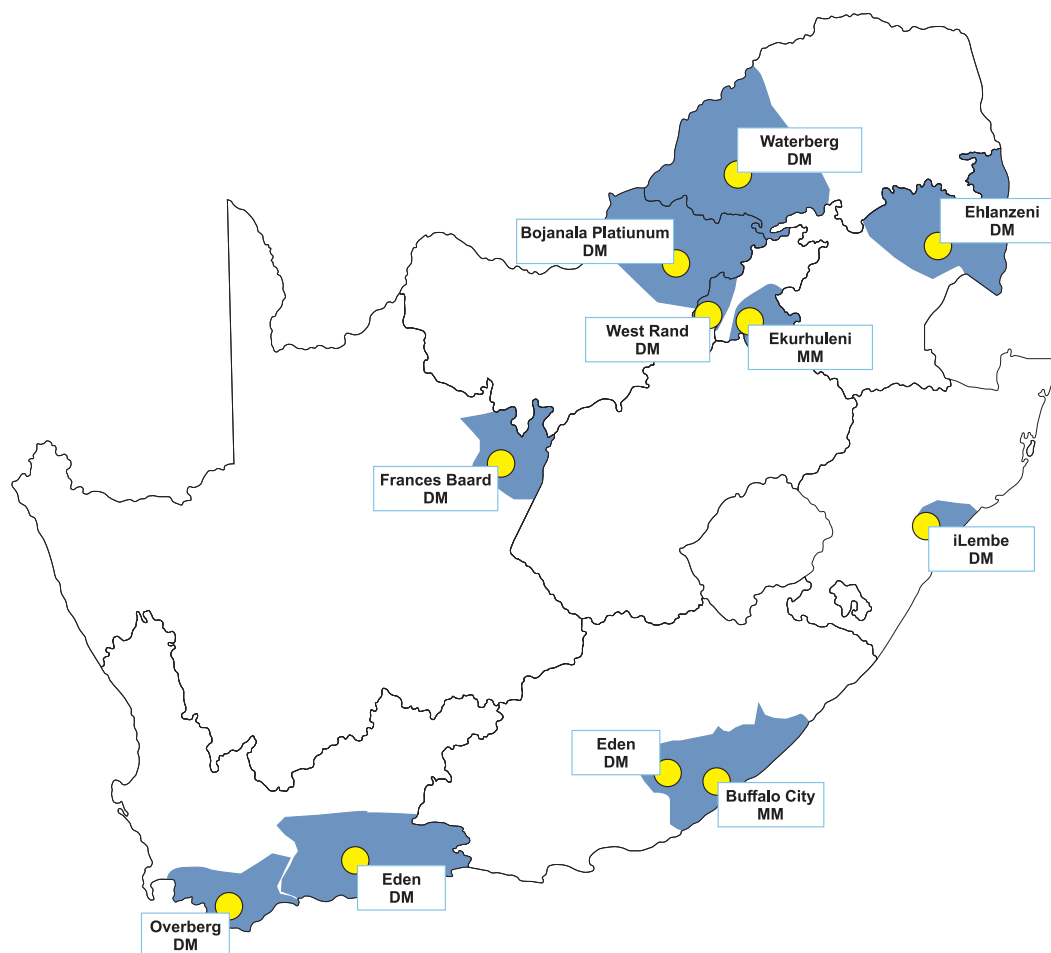
The stakeholders came together again and – based on the information in the Wetland Reports – identified a number of focus areas as strategic priorities. Typically, these included aspects such as wetland research and monitoring, awareness-raising and capacity-building, planning and management, wetland rehabilitation, and funding. Goals were then listed for each of the focus areas, and those were further broken down into key actions to achieve the goals. After the workshops, the inputs were written up into a Wetland Strategy and Action Plan for each municipality.

“We realised though that it's all well and good capacitating the technical staff, but if there isn't buy-in from the political level you're never going to have approval for any projects or other interventions,” says Robinson.

The project team therefore organised a series of Political Leaders Workshops to increase understanding of the value of wetlands among Mayors, Councillors and portfolio committee members. At the end of each workshop, the Mayors were encouraged to sign the Durban Commitment – a non-binding commitment and model to protect and enhance biodiversity at the local level. It originates from an international Local Action for Biodiversity workshop held in Durban in 2008, when it was signed by all of the 21 local governments represented.

These efforts evidently paid off, because – as of mid-April – 10 of the municipalities have incorporated their Wetland Strategy and Action Plan into their respective Integrated Development Plans. The IDP is the overall framework that ensures municipal services are provided in a coordinated way, responding to the needs of people and taking available resources into account. In essence, municipal projects cannot be funded unless they are identified in the IDP, although including potential projects in an IDP does not necessarily mean they will be funded from municipal coffers. The IDP merely informs municipal budgeting and resource allocation.

Nevertheless, as a result of the LAB: Wetlands SA project some of the municipalities have now included wetland-related work in their budgets, or demonstrated their commitment in other ways. The iLembe District Municipality, for example, has established an environmental department for the first time, while Frances Baard



Wetland Map – The Local Action for Biodiversity: Wetlands SA project was implemented in nine district municipalities and two metropolitan municipalities across the country.

District Municipality revived the Provincial Wetland Forum and will host the 2018 Wetlands Indaba in Kimberley in October.

As for the project’s third objective – to support the implementation of pilot projects – a sum of R1.2 million of the USAID funding had been set aside for this. Since that wouldn’t go far if shared between 11 municipalities, it was decided to hold a competition to select three project proposals for funding. “We received 33 project proposals, which just shows how much the need was highlighted to municipalities,” says Robinson. “They really wanted to do the work now that they’d seen the value of rehabilitating wetlands and doing other wetland-related projects.”

The three pilot projects selected rely on consultants or NGOs with specialist expertise to perform the work within the time constraints of the LAB: Wetlands SA project, and to allow for transfer of funds with minimal red tape.

Prime Africa collaborated with the West Rand District Municipality in Gauteng to develop a detailed wetland spatial layer for the municipal area, a clear need for which had been identified in the Wetland Strategy and Action Plan. Historically, many of the area’s wetlands have been degraded or destroyed through the direct and indirect impacts of rapid development

and mining, yet municipal officials lacked sufficient spatial data for proper assessment of trade-offs between development and sustainable management of wetlands. Once the wetland spatial layer had been finalised, all identified wetland features were classified based on their hydrological, climatic and geomorphological characteristics, as well as their significance in the socio-economic and environmental landscape. Selected staff within the municipality were then given training to ensure the wetland spatial layer and additional information would be used for effective and informed decision-making relating to land use, zoning, building plans and new developments, and also for providing detailed input on provincial or national government processes for environmental authorisations and mining permits.

Eco-Pulse Consulting has partnered with Amathole District Municipality in the Eastern Cape to evaluate the potential for wetland rehabilitation in the district. Initially a desktop regional prioritisation exercise was undertaken, which indicated that the wetland-rich catchment upstream of Xilinx Dam was an important area for investment as a means of enhancing the district’s water security. A field trip was then conducted to assess potential sites for rehabilitation and initiate the process of wetland mapping. A report identifying priority sites for rehabilitation will be compiled, followed by the development of a detailed rehabilitation plan for one of those wetlands.

The Endangered Wildlife Trust has been granted funds to conduct a project focussing on community involvement in wetland monitoring in Ilembe District Municipality on the KwaZulu-Natal north coast. The endangered Pickersgill's Reed Frog, for which a Biodiversity Management Plan was gazetted in June 2017, is endemic to the coastal wetlands here, and is known to occur at just 25 sites. Through this project, 14 local people from rural communities have been trained as 'bio-officers' to monitor wetlands and streams in Groutville, KwaDukuza and Nyoni. An alien invasive plant eradication plan will also be developed with the aim of protecting the wetlands and providing local employment opportunities.

During the close-out phase of LAB: Wetlands SA, the project team has largely focused on developing guideline documents, as well as case studies that showcase the value the project has had to each of the municipalities.

"We're in the process of developing Wetland Management Guidelines to support municipalities with long-term management of wetlands on the ground," explains Robinson. "These are basically intended to assist the local and district municipal town planners to more effectively plan around wetlands. We're also developing a Finance Mechanism, because many of the municipal officials mentioned during the development of the pilot project proposals that they'd never done anything like that before, and weren't sure what to include. So the Finance Mechanism is designed to support the development of bankable projects and give the municipalities a better understanding of what local, national and international funders are looking for. It will include a list of currently available

funding sources and their objectives, so that project proposals can be tailored accordingly."

These tools complement the Wetland Strategy and Action Planning Guidelines, completed in February 2017, to document the lessons learned from the process of developing the various Strategy and Action Plans.

"The municipalities could use the same process for other systems such as rivers, or even for sanitation planning," says Robinson. "The final thing we're doing is a training workshop towards the end of May, when we're going to bring the key municipal officials to Cape Town to train them on every tool and guideline developed within the project. The implementation project teams will also join us to share lessons learned during the pilot projects."

There is no doubt that the project has enhanced awareness and built capacity within the 11 municipalities to prioritise management of their wetlands, although Robinson notes that changes in personnel and political leadership are a major challenge. Hopefully, these achievements will translate into the full integration of wetland considerations – and biodiversity in general – at all levels of municipal planning and decision-making on a day to day basis.

Further information, as well as all the outputs of the project, can be downloaded from the ICLEI-CBC website: <http://cbc.iclei.org/project/lab-wetlands-sa/>



A breakaway group at the wetland strategy and action planning workshop for Amathole District Municipality.