



**Water  
KIDZ**

## *Urban wetlands – prized land*



When you think about a city, you usually think about skyscrapers, busy roads and bustling sidewalks. But many cities are also home to some very special water ecosystems – urban wetlands.

Every year, the world celebrates its wetlands with special events held on or around 2 February. The theme for this year's World Wetlands Day is urban wetlands. The theme is decided by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, an international organisation which promotes the conservation and wise use of all wetlands.

What are wetlands? Commonly referred to as marshes, bogs or vleis, wetlands are land areas that are flooded with water, either seasonally or permanently. Urban wetlands are those wetlands that are found in and around cities. As cities expand and demand for land increases, the tendency is to encroach on wetlands. Thousands of urban wetlands around the world have been polluted, filled in and built upon.

Yet, when left intact or restored, urban wetlands makes cities liveable. First of all, wetlands reduce flooding. Wetlands act as giant sponges that absorb flood waters. Wetlands also filter waste and improve water quality – the silt-rich soil and abundant plants in wetlands function as water filters, which absorb some harmful toxins, agricultural pesticides, and industrial waste. Urban wetlands also help treat sewage from households.

Did you know that wetlands can also help improve urban air quality? Wetlands radiate moist air thanks to their high water levels and lush plant life. This naturally cools the air in the local surroundings; a relief both in tropical cities and in extremely dry climates.

When preserved as green spaces in cities, wetlands offer residents a space for recreation and access to diversity of plant and animal life. Studies confirm that interacting with nature

reduces stress and improves our health. South Africa has many urban wetlands that play an important part in the way people live and work in our cities. Here are just a few of them.

### Rietvlei wetlands, Pretoria

Hidden in the Rietvlei Nature Reserve, an urban nature reserve owned and managed by the City of Tshwane, lies an important wetland. The Rietvlei wetland is a rare example of peatland in South Africa, and plays an important part in purifying water that enters the Rietvlei Dam. This dam provides around 15% of Pretoria's water. A few years ago the government, through its Working for Wetlands initiative, launched a project to rehabilitate the Rietvlei wetland special peatland, which was drained decades ago for peat mining, dryland cropping and irrigation purposes.

### Blesbokspruit, Ekurhuleni

Located on the East Rand of Gauteng in Ekurhuleni Municipality, the Blesbokspruit is one of the largest wetlands on the Highveld. This wetland has especially known for its birds, and more than 220 species have been recorded. In the past the wetland has supported up to 20 000 waterbirds, and for this reason Blesbokspruit has been designated a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance.

The Blesbokspruit is valuable to the ecosystem of the area because of its ability to purify industrial and domestic discharge from local industries, sewage works and mines. This reduces the amount of pollution entering the Vaal River, one of the most important rivers in the country. Unfortunately this pollution has degraded the wetland, leading to a reduction in bird populations.

### Colbyn valley, Pretoria

Located just 5 km from the Union Buildings in Pretoria, the Colbyn Valley wetland is another rare example of a peat wetland in South Africa. The peat layer in Colbyn has been estimated to be about 7 000 years old. The wetland plays a vital role in groundwater retention, which helps to ensure year-round flow in the Hartbeesspruit. Despite being situated next to busy roadways and a railway line, the wetland is home to at least 150 bird species, and animals such as genet, duikers, hedgehogs, elephant shrews, water mongooses and even red rock rabbits (a threatened species) have been spotted there. Voluntary organisation, Friends of Colbyn, have worked tirelessly over the years to protect the wetland against potential development, and hold regular walking tours and other activities to make people more aware of the value of the wetland.

### Klip River, Soweto

Stretching over 25 km, the Klip River wetland, south of Johannesburg, has proven one of Gauteng's most valuable natural assets through its ability to treat heavily polluted water. This poor wetland receives water that has been contaminated by acid mine drainage, industrial sources and from sewage treatment plants. The purified water flowing out of the wetland eventually enters the Vaal River, making this one of the economically most important wetlands in the country. You can make a difference to South Africa's wetlands all year round in a number of different ways. The Endangered Wildlife



*The Rietvlei wetland is home to many animal, bird and plant species.*



*The peat in the Colbyn valley wetland is an estimated 7 000 years old.*

Courtesy Tamsyn Sherwill

Trust, who does much around the protection of wetland habitats for threatened bird and animal species, suggest the following:

- Plan a wetland clean-up in your community.
- Reduce your waste, reuse bottles and containers you would normally throw away, use reusable shopping bags and recycle!
- Report any illegal dumping in wetlands and rivers to your municipality.
- Find a 'friends' group near you and volunteer your services to protect wetlands and river ecosystems.

#### Want to know more? Here are some Web resources

- Ramsar Convention, [www.ramsar.org](http://www.ramsar.org).
- What is a wetland?, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E\\_EBcJy335s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_EBcJy335s)
- Working for Wetlands, <https://www.environment.gov.za/projectsprogrammes/workingfowetlands>
- Friends of Colbyn Valley, <https://www.facebook.com/Friends-of-Colbyn-Valley-113301492142149/>
- Friends of Rietvlei, [www.friendsofrietvlei.org](http://www.friendsofrietvlei.org)