

Namibia joins the world in commemorating World Wetlands Day 2019



The Okavango River, one of the perennial river shared by Angola, Namibia & Botswana

Namibians will join other nations around the world to observe World Wetlands Day on Saturday 2 February. This day marks the signing of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance in 1971 also called Ramsar Convention, after the town in Iran. Namibia acceded to the Convention 24 years ago in 1995. World Wetlands day is celebrated to raise global awareness on the value of wetlands for humanity and our planet. Internationally, this year World Wetland Day is celebrated under the theme “**Wetlands and climate change**”, to help highlight the impacts of climate change on wetland ecosystems.

Climate change, particularly increasing temperature affects the availability of freshwater. An increase in air temperatures will directly increase evaporation reducing the amounts of water stored in our wetlands. All our perennial rivers in Namibia depend on the year round release of water from large wetlands in our neighbouring countries.

How does the impact of Climate Change on wetlands affect us in Namibia? Almost half of Namibia’s population live in areas supplied by water from our perennial rivers that in turn rely on water from wetlands upstream. The Kunene River supplies most of the North Central Regions with water via a scheme of canals and pipelines that supply also Etunda Irrigation Scheme, many villages and towns. In the North-East, the Okavango River supplies large towns like Nkurenkuru, Rundu and Divundu as well as many villages and irrigation schemes along it, while the Zambezi River including the Chobe, Linyanti and Kwando rivers supplies all of the Zambezi Region and Kavango East as well as lake Liambezi with water. In the South, the Orange River brings snowmelt from the highlands of Lesotho to our very dry south, supplying water to Aussenkehr community and the irrigation schemes and mines at Rosh Pinah and Oranjemund. In addition the inland Namibian population rely on damming of ephemeral rivers for water supply, which can be regarded as man-made wetlands.

It is clear that we Namibians depend on healthy wetlands upstream in neighbouring countries to keep our perennial rivers flowing. Therefore all of us in the Southern African region need to work together to protect our wetlands ecosystems and the rich biodiversity they support. We can only do this by maintaining our wetlands and managing them in a sustainable way to increase their resilience to climate change. Good vegetation in our wetlands and along the banks of our rivers will control both the rate at which water is released into our rivers and damage that floods can do to human settlements and lands alongside our rivers, should our rainfall events become more extreme as predicted. On the other hand, by removing alien invasive aquatic plants that increase evapotranspiration, we can reduce the amounts of water lost from our wetlands. We all rely on healthy, resilient wetlands that will continue to provide essential ecosystem goods such as water and fish and ecosystem services such as natural water purification, flood control, groundwater recharge, and habitat for our wetland plants and animals even under changed climatic conditions.

This year, Namibia will officially celebrate World Wetlands Day jointly with World Water Day, with local schools on 19 March 2019, at Oanob Dam near Rehoboth. – *Selma Kanandjembo, Directorate of Water Resources Management*