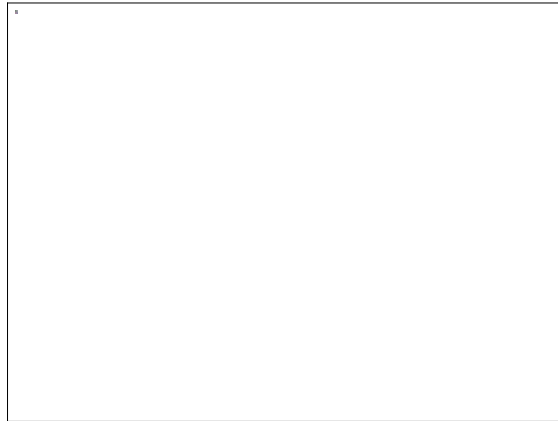


COMMUNITIES URGED TO SUSTAIN ENVIRONMENT.

A call made at the World Wetlands Day Celebration for 2007.



ENVIROFOCUS: MEC Madala Masuku and environmentalists looking focused during the celebration.

Wakkeestroom - The future looks bleak for the world's environmental standing and heritage if improper consideration continues to prevail. This and others are concerns that emanated at this year's World Wetlands Day Celebration held at Wakkeestroom recently (2/2/07). Environmentalists charge that the world has lost a substantial number of wetlands over the last decade through neglect. This as they submit can still be saved only if proper environmental care can be considered.

This year's event was celebrated under the theme - "**Wetlands support fisheries...keep them healthy**" and fish for tomorrow. Again, government departments, non-governmental organisations and various groups at all levels of the community took the advantage of the opportunity to undertake actions aimed at raising awareness of wetland values and benefits in general. Local pupils recited poems and demonstrations about the importance of wetlands. Gugu Nkosi (**12**) and Nomsa Ndaba (**13**) believe wetlands are critical for the survival of both animals and humans. In their words, "Wetlands assist us to get water for drinking and other amenities".

The demise of wetlands in some parts of the province has been attributed to number of factors ranging from, grazing to urbanisation. Wetlands Specialist from the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency, Anton Linstrom, argues that such activities encroach on protected areas and compromise protected species. He is, however, not opposed to such, but feels it should be done in a sustainable manner. Wakkeestroom is one of the five demonstration sites in Africa .

As wetlands are pivotal in protecting communities against floods, provision of resources and water supply, it is critical that they are preserved. A community based biodiversity conservation NGO – BirdLife South Africa – the world has lost half of its wetlands in the last century, hence, critical to conserve them. Programme Manager, Daniel Marnewick, they are involving communities in a form of skills development, capacity building and understanding the tourism industry.

The conservation of wetlands can go a long way in reflecting the environmental richness of the province, says MEC Madala Masuku. Masuku mentioned that the celebration comes at a time when the country is looking ahead to the World Cup 2010 showpiece. As a result, the country takes issues of sustainability seriously. "People have begun speaking in unison against environmental degradation," quipped Masuku. He assured people that environmental protection is taken into account, particularly during developments like the building of the soccer stadium in Nelspruit.

The celebration focused on wetlands and fisheries in recognition of the following:

The needs of the one billion people who rely on fish as their primary source of protein, the state of world's fisheries where 75% of commercially important marine and most inland water fish stocks are either over fished or being fished at their biological limit, the important role that inland and coastal wetlands play in supporting fish and fisheries at all levels, from large-scale, commercial fisheries to subsistence fishers.