



Celebrating the Love and Conservation of Wetlands

It is the month of love and this **Wetlands Month** we extend our love to these vital ecosystems. The Working on Fire-Kishugu Joint Venture, alongside conservationists, continues to raise awareness of the importance of the wetland and is committed to preserving it. Through integrated fire management solutions, our ground teams ensure the continued health of these precious habitats.

In this publication, we show love and shine a spotlight on our firefighting heroes, who are doing their best for the love of the wetland. Let us celebrate their commitment and reaffirm our dedication to protecting our wetlands for future generations.



SAVING LIVES. PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT. RESTORING DIGNITY.



forestry, fisheries & the environment

Department: Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



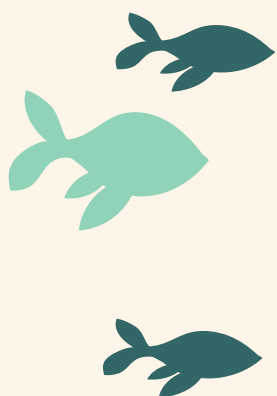
EXPANDED PUBLIC WORKS PROGRAMME



South Africa's

Wetlands Sustaining Life and Communities

South Africa's wetlands are invaluable ecosystems, providing essential services that sustain life and support thriving communities. These biodiverse landscapes act as natural filters, purifying water and regulating floods and droughts, thus safeguarding water security and mitigating climate-related risks. Moreover, wetlands serve as vital habitats for a myriad of plant and animal species, contributing to the country's rich biodiversity.



Cultural and socio-economic importance

Beyond their ecological significance, wetlands hold deep cultural and socio-economic importance for local communities. They serve as sources of livelihood through fishing, agriculture, and tourism, while also playing a central role in indigenous cultures and traditions. Wetlands attract visitors from around the world, generating revenue and employment opportunities for local residents.

The threat to the wetland

Despite their immense value, South Africa's wetlands face numerous threats, including habitat loss, pollution, and climate change. Urgent action is needed to conserve and restore these ecosystems, ensuring their resilience in the face of mounting pressures. Through collaborative efforts involving government, non-profit organisations, and local communities, we can protect these natural treasures for future generations.



Fire's role in wetlands

Fire plays a crucial role in wetland ecosystems, serving as a natural force of renewal and regeneration. Controlled burns help maintain the balance of vegetation, preventing the encroachment of invasive species and promoting the growth of native plants. These fires also clear away accumulated debris, creating open spaces for new growth and providing habitat for a diverse range of species. Fire helps cycle nutrients, enriching the soil and sustaining the intricate web of life within wetlands. While often perceived as destructive, when managed properly, fire is a friend and an essential tool for maintaining the health and vitality of wetland ecosystems.



Working on Fire loves the wetland

A total of 16 WOF teams are stationed in wetlands and have been instrumental in managing fire within these delicate ecosystems. Through our most sought-after integrated fire management solutions, we help regulate vegetation, preventing the spread of invasive species and fostering the growth of indigenous plants. Our teams also engage in extensive outreach efforts, raising awareness in schools and local communities about the importance of a wetland and the role of fire in wetland ecology. By educating the public on the benefits of controlled burns and the role of fire in maintaining ecosystem health, WOF teams empower communities to take ownership of their natural environments.





A 10-year collaboration to preserve the *Wakkerstroom Wetland* with Birdlife South Africa

Nestled in the picturesque landscapes of Wakkerstroom, in Mpumalanga, lies a haven of biodiversity - a wetland nurtured by the efforts of the Wakkerstroom team. This precious ecosystem has been safeguarded through a collaborative approach between Birdlife South Africa and Working on Fire.

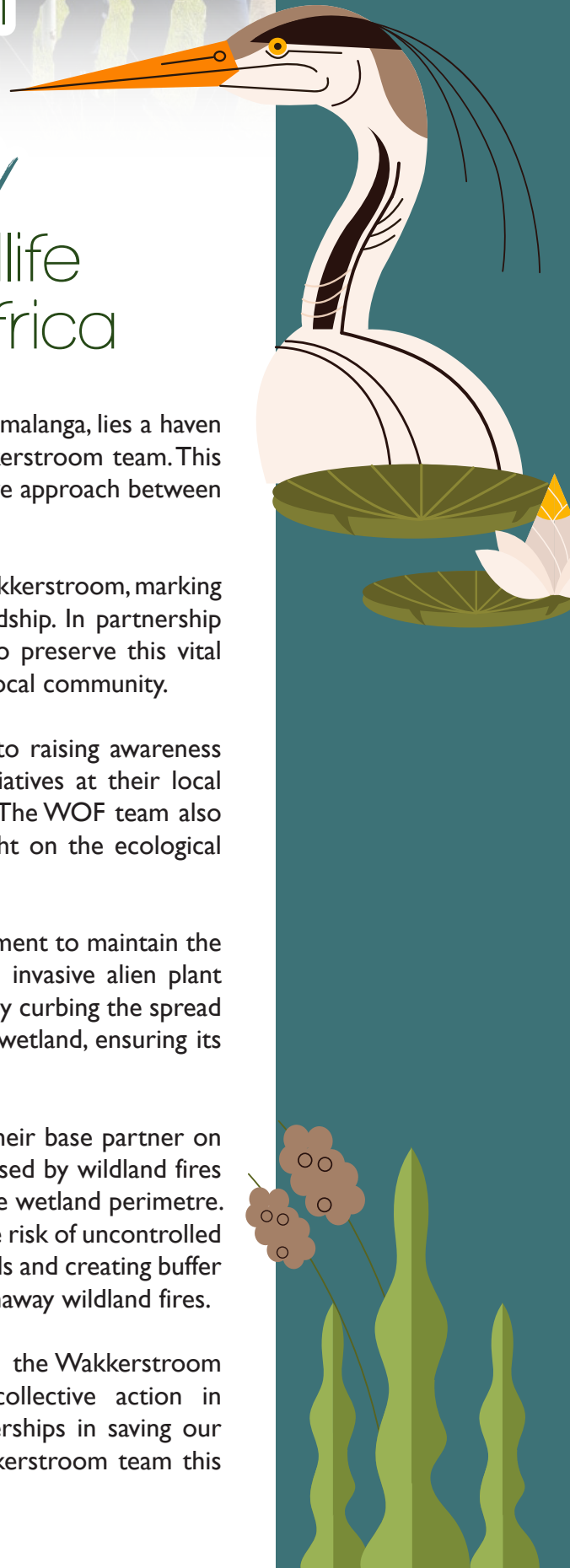
Established on 23 June 2014, the WOF team set up its base in Wakkerstroom, marking the beginning of a journey dedicated to environmental stewardship. In partnership with Birdlife South Africa, they take a multifaceted approach to preserve this vital ecosystem, recognising its significance for both wildlife and the local community.

At the heart of their conservation efforts lies a commitment to raising awareness about the importance of wetlands through fire awareness initiatives at their local schools and the communities of Esizameleni and surroundings. The WOF team also organises educational campaigns on Wetlands Day, shedding light on the ecological value of these ecosystems.

Furthermore, the WOF team actively engages in habitat management to maintain the integrity of the wetland ecosystem. Through initiatives such as invasive alien plant control, they create space for native flora and fauna to flourish. By curbing the spread of invasive species, they preserve the ecological balance of the wetland, ensuring its continued viability as a habitat for a diverse array of wildlife.

The WOF Wakkerstroom team also collaborates closely with their base partner on fire prevention and mitigation efforts. Recognising the threat posed by wildland fires during the dry season, they conduct controlled burns around the wetland perimeter. These controlled fires serve as a mitigation measure, reducing the risk of uncontrolled wildfires encroaching into the wetland area. By managing fuel loads and creating buffer zones, they save the wetland from the devastating impacts of runaway wildland fires.

The 10-year collaboration, steered by Kristi Garland, between the Wakkerstroom team and Birdlife South Africa highlights the power of collective action in conservation. Together, they demonstrate the impact of partnerships in saving our natural heritage for future generations. We celebrate you Wakkerstroom team this Wetlands Month!





Unconditional *Love* for Libode

Former Libode Crew leader, Bukeka Mgxabayi, now the base manager for the same base, shows love to her former team for their efforts in the ongoing battle to save lives and protect the environment. February marks Wetlands Month, a month also synonymous with expressions of love, Mgxabayi takes a moment to honour the young men and women who tirelessly commit themselves to make a positive impact by raising awareness about the importance of a wetland.

The Libode team is based in Umthatha, which is close to a wetland. "Our firefighters consistently engage communities, educating them on the preservation of our wetlands and the role fire plays in the protection of them," said Mgxabayi.

The Libode team, like many WOF teams based in a wetland or near one, exemplifies this commitment through their outstanding community engagement and environmental protection initiatives. From fuel load reduction projects to wetlands awareness activities at daycares to comprehensive door-to-door campaigns across villages, and educational programmes in local schools, they leave no stone unturned in their mission to save lives and ecosystems.

"Firefighters deserve respect for their selfless commitment. As we celebrate Wetlands Month and the spirit of love, let us take a moment to salute these unsung heroes whose actions speak volumes about their devotion to serving humanity and preserving our natural world. Their sacrifices and tireless efforts remind us that, indeed, heroes walk among us, and their legacy will continue to inspire generations to come," Mgxabayi concluded.





uMngeni team's Love for Wetlands shines through



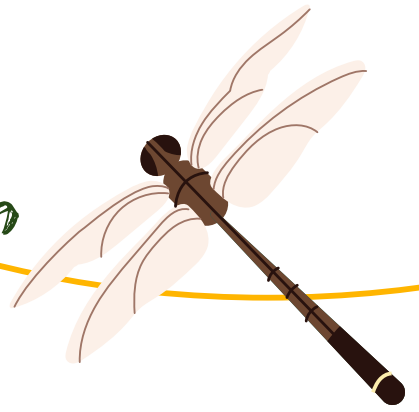
The KwaZulu-Natal uMngeni team, formerly part of the Drought Relief Project, has been a beacon of environmental stewardship since its establishment in 2018. Initially operating under the High Altitude Team, it later transitioned to its current name as part of the Expanded Public Works Programme Working on Fire initiative.

Situated at Fountain Hill, a mere 20-minute drive from Pietermaritzburg and just outside Wartburg, the uMngeni team oversees the maintenance of multiple wetlands in the area. Among these, the team displays a particular affection for the Fountain Hill AC20 Site, where they dedicate their efforts to its preservation and protection.

Central to their conservation efforts is the removal of invasive alien plants, notably the *Nephrolepis* fern, more commonly known as the Sword fern. By clearing these plants from the wetland, the uMngeni team helps to restore the natural balance of the ecosystem, promoting the growth of indigenous flora and fauna.

For the Working on Fire uMngeni team, their love for wetlands is evident in their unwavering dedication to saving these precious habitats. Through their ongoing efforts, they highlight the crucial role that individuals can play in preserving the environment for future generations to enjoy. We salute you Umngeni team!

A love affair



blooming
between
uMtshezi Fire
Protection
Association
and WOF

The Working on Fire-Kishugu Joint Venture in KwaZulu-Natal recently partnered with the uMtshezi Fire Protection Association and established a new team in Estcourt.

uMtshezi team Base Manager, Warren Blaker, who is also the Fire Protection Officer of uMtshezi Fire Protection Association, shows love to our new team. Blaker proudly says he now has his own veld and forest firefighting team to assist landowners and the community at large.

“I am looking forward to working with a great programme such as Working on Fire and the benefits it brings to the community, such as job creation and skills development for unemployed youth in marginalised communities. We are excited to begin working and tackling unwanted fires in the area, as that has been one of our major problems in the previous years,” Blaker said.

The uMtshezi team, consisting of 25 previously unemployed youth, began their employment at the beginning of January, and the base manager has gone above and beyond by furnishing them with a fridge, tables, and a stove to better accommodate them. The Al-Imdaad Foundation also donated beds.

“I am also seeking various organisations to conduct workshops for my team, in not only identifying alien invasive plants but also equipping them in various skills,” he concluded.





Educators
and learners

show love
to Mamabolo team

Since its inception, the Mamabolo team, based at its namesake's plantation, has been dedicated to ensuring the community's safety from wildfires through proactive fire awareness education efforts.

Established in August 2011, the team from Limpopo was created to serve both the plantation, which houses a wetland and the local community. Their commitment has resulted in them being recognised as one of the top-performing teams, earning awards for their hard work.

The principal of Katane Primary School commended the Mamabolo team for their valuable contribution to the safety of the students through their fire awareness activities at the school. Johannes Kgatle, a grade 7 learner, also expressed gratitude to Working on Fire for their educational initiatives on fire dangers and for conducting drills for the learners. Well done Mamabolo team.



Love takes flight in *North West*

In the North West, the Working on Fire-Kishugu Joint Venture manages three WOF teams - Boskop, Barberspan, and Vaalkop - that are strategically located within a wetland. This placement not only enhances fire management efforts but also fosters a deeper appreciation and understanding of wetland ecosystems.

Yvonne Melamu, a Crew Leader at the Barberspan base, shares the impact of this proximity on personal awareness, stating, "I did not know anything about wetlands or the different cultures of birds. I, therefore, thank WOF for placing us in the Barberspan Bird Sanctuary Reserve as I am now well educated about the beauty of the birds and nature around me."

The Barberspan Bird Sanctuary, sprawling over 2,000 hectares between Delareyville and Sannieshof, stands as a cornerstone of ornithological research and has earned recognition as an important national birding site by Birdlife South Africa.

Sophy Dinko and Martha Tepo, Fire Awareness Training Officers in the province, play a pivotal role in disseminating knowledge about wetlands to teams and communities. Recently, in collaboration with the North West Parks Board and various stakeholders, they organised an online webinar to share presentations aimed at raising awareness about the importance, types, and roles of wetlands in the ecosystem.

Further demonstrating commitment to wetland conservation, the North West will host its provincial Wetlands Day celebration on 23 February 2024. This event seeks to educate communities on the significance of wetlands, promote water cleansing practices, and enhance understanding of the diverse types of wetland habitats.

