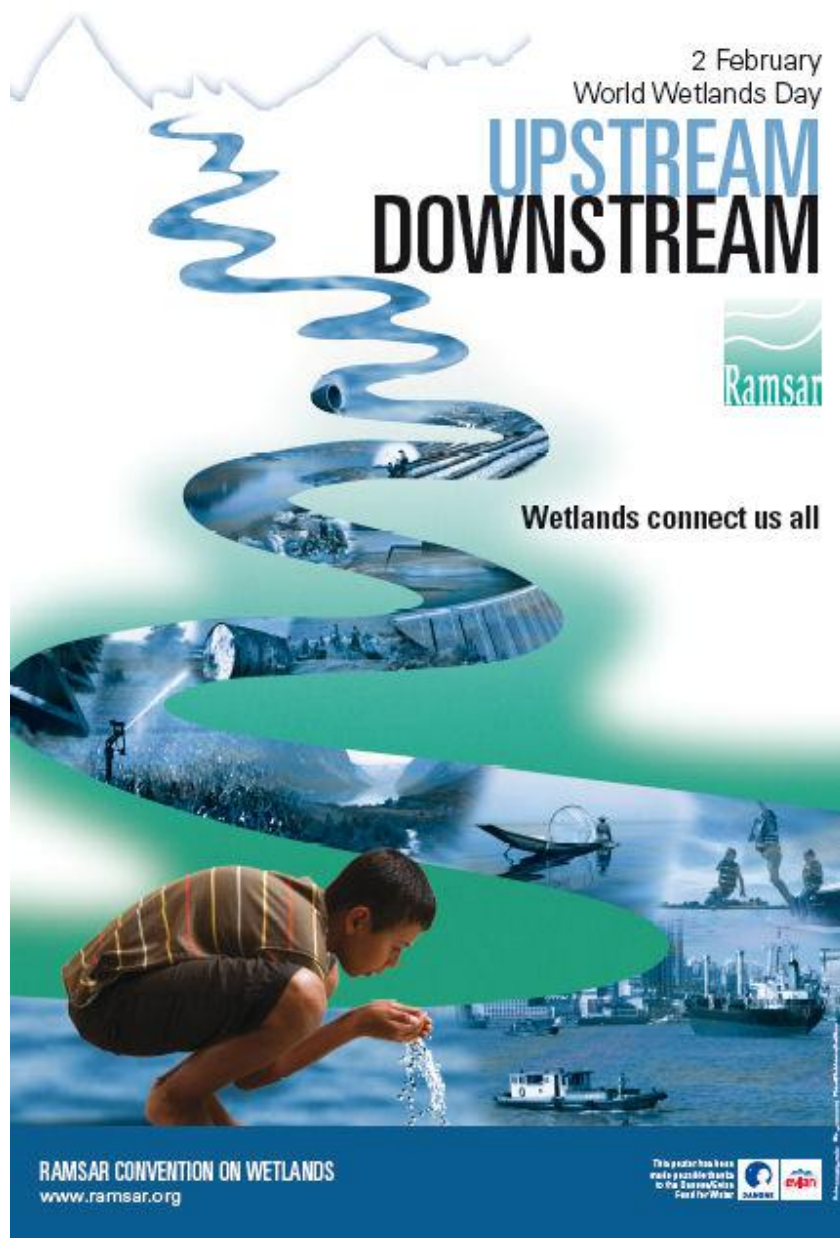


World Wetlands Day 2009

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World Wetlands Day is commemorated on the 2nd of February each year. This marks the date of the adoption of the Convention on Wetlands on 2 February 1971, in the Iranian city of Ramsar on the shores of the Caspian Sea.

Namibia commemorates World Wetlands Day since we are contracting parties to the Ramsar Convention which advocates the wise use of wetlands and associated resources. The theme for this year is: 'Upstream-Downstream: Wetlands connect us all'.

In Namibia, the wetlands day falls within the rainy season when many of our dry wetlands like oshanas, omurambas and other ephemeral water bodies become alive with live-giving water, fish, frogs, waterbirds, insects and other delicacies enjoyed by local communities and beyond. It has always been a challenge to convince communities not to over-harvest resources in wetlands which holds water only in the rainy season like oshanas, vleis, and pans as communities see the fish frogs etc. as a 'temporary resource' which will no longer be there when these water bodies dry up. Fish coming with the well-known efundja is seen as a 'passing resource', which will be caught by communities downstream even if upstream communities try to conserve it.

Besides the delicacies mentioned above, wetlands also provide resources like mud, reeds and thatching grass and trees which are used by local communities to build homesteads, thereby acting as readily available sources of building material. The wise use of these wetland resources is critical since the need for affordable housing is ever increasing.

Wetlands, if wisely managed, can address the food and housing needs of rural communities at the household level. Namibia's aquaculture initiatives, rice cultivation in Lake Kalambeza, the Green Scheme and date and grape plantations along our perennial rivers are excellent examples of the immense contribution wetlands make to food stability in our country.

Rainforests are the world's "lungs" as they filter the air and reduce the amount of carbon dioxide in the air, thereby helping in the fight against global warming. Wetlands, on the other hand, are the earth's "kidneys" as they filter the water and save companies like Namwater millions of dollars in filtering and treating water to make it drinkable. There is an urgent need to conserve wetlands for this essential service so that the millions saved through the free filtering service rendered by wetlands can be re-directed towards building our nation.

Furthermore, wetlands serve as spawning and breeding grounds for fish, birds, reptiles, insects and amphibians. Wetlands also serve as nurseries for crab, shellfish and other water-dependant animals. The economic impact: of wetlands in terms of jobs created through aquaculture, mariculture, commercial & sport fishing, crop production, animal husbandry, trophy hunting of wetland game like waterbuck, lechwe, sitatunga etc. is immense as these activities can only take place where water is available.

Wetlands also act as flood buffers, thereby reducing the severity of floods. We experience floods every year in the Caprivi, but imagine how severe those floods

would be without the rivers ability to hold a huge amount of the water, the ability of the vegetation on the river banks to slow down the flow of water to the human settlements along the banks, and the ability of the floodplains to hold water and letting the water seep underground to minimize surface flow. Destroying vegetation on river banks and floodplains will result in unstable river banks breaking easily and less water retention in the floodplains, leading to fast flowing flood waters destroying property and taking lives.

It has become a tradition in Namibia to jointly commemorate the World Wetlands and World Water Days in March or April since wetlands and water are linked. World Water Day falls on 22nd March and this year's theme is 'Transboundary water' The joint commemoration will take place at the Avis dam in Windhoek at a date still to be decided. Tentative activities are a wetlands theme song competition amongst schools, an exhibition of water and wetland related items, and water sports.