

Wetlands Our Lifeline

What are Wetlands?

Wetlands are areas where water covers the soil, or is present either at or near the surface of the soil all year or for varying periods of time during the year, including during the growing season. They occur where the water table is at or near the surface of the land, or where the land is covered by water.

The Environmental Management Act (Cap 20; 27) goes further to define wetlands as:

“Areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including riparian land adjacent to the wetland”.

Local Names of Wetlands

In Zimbabwe wetlands are also known as

Matoro(Shona)

Mapani(Shona)

Amaxhaphozi (Ndebele)

Zimbabwe is a Signatory to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of 1971 and has domesticated provisions for the protection of wetlands under the Environmental Management Act (Cap 20;27), Statutory Instrument 7 of 2007 on Environmental Management (Environmental Impact Assessment and Ecosystems Protection) Regulations and Government Gazette 380 of 2013. The Ramsar Convention is an intergovernmental treaty that embodies commitments of its member countries to maintain the ecological character of wetlands and to plan for the “wise use” or sustainable use of all of the wetlands in their territories.

Designated Ramsar Sites in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe seven sites have been designated as Ramsar protected wetlands and these are:

Victoria Falls

Driefontein

Grasslands,

Middle Zambezi/Mana Pools,

Lake Chivero,

Monavale Vlei,

Chinhoyi Caves and

Cleverland Dam.

The Government Gazette 380 of 2013 declares 26 wetlands in Harare as protected areas. World Wetlands Day is commemorated on the 2nd of February every year. Next year's theme is "Wetlands and Agriculture: Partners for Growth."

Ecological goods and services of wetlands

- Provide important habitat for a wide variety of wildlife;
- Ensure food security if sustainably utilized;
- Trap moderate amounts of soil running off nearby uplands before they enter lakes and streams;
- Maintain and improve water quality by filtering contaminants and excessive nutrients;
- Renew groundwater supplies;
- Help and control flooding and reduce flood damage;
- Fire control;
- Provide a source of economically valuable products such as wild rice and commercial fish;
- Support recreational activities including fish, hunting, nature appreciation, bird watching and so much more and
- Provide opportunities to participate in outdoor educational activities and to enjoy the aesthetic qualities of wetlands.

Drivers of wetland degradation

Activities resulting in wetlands loss and degradation include: agriculture; commercial and residential development; road construction; impoundment; resource extraction; industrial siting, processes, and waste; dredge disposal; care and cultivation of forest trees (silviculture); and mosquito control through drainage, channelization and use of toxic pesticides. In Zimbabwe, commercial and housing construction projects are threatening wetlands.

What does the law say?

- The Environmental Management Act (CAP 20:27) and Statutory Instrument 7 of 2007 Environmental Management (EIA and Ecosystems Protection Regulations) govern wetland utilisation in Zimbabwe. Section 113 of the Environmental Management Act (Chapter 20:27) section 113 gives the Minister of Environment powers to “
- declare any wetland to be an ecologically sensitive area and may impose limitations on development in or around such an area."
- prohibit the reclamation or drainage, disturbance by drilling or tunnelling in a manner that has or is likely to have an adverse impact on any wetland or adversely affect any animal or plant life therein.
- prohibit the introduction of exotic animal and plant species into a wetland.

Failure to abide by the law is a crime that attracts a fine not exceeding level eight (\$500, 00) or to imprisonment not exceeding two years or to both such fine and such imprisonment.

The Environment Minister can serve a written order to refrain any development on any wetland.

What are the dangers of building in wetlands?

Many home owners seem unaware of the dangers of building in wetlands. Constructing in such areas comes with a lot of risks; the soil is not the best to build because its structure is weak and mostly made of clay. Building on wetlands directly tampers with the natural flow of the environment by blocking water passage which is naturally instituted by the free flow of water. It directly tampers with natural water collection and leads to flooding. It can also expose you to water borne disease such as cholera and typhoid, worse still the building can collapse as what happened to houses built in wetlands in Chitungwiza early

this year. Last year, houses built in a wetland in Monavale and Dzivarasekwa were affected by flash floods during the rainy season.

What you should do

All this can be avoided by simply seeking advice from the Environmental Management Agency. Before going ahead with developing any structure on a wetland, first apply and get written approval from the Agency. It is a legal requirement to apply for wetland utilisation from the EMA Office that in your province or district.

Please talk to us we are always ready to listen. Email: eep@ema.co.zw or call us on 04 305543/ Toll free 08080028





Photo captions: To what extent can we fight nature?