

SA urged to preserve wetlands

PORT ELIZABETH: As part of efforts to preserve the country's water quality, South Africans have been urged to assist in protecting wetlands which are crucial in water purification.

Environmentalists, government officials and communities from around the country gathered in the small town of Kareedouw, near Port Elizabeth on Friday to mark the World Wetlands Day which is celebrated on Saturday, 2 February 2013.

They all agreed on the need for new policies to save the nation's rapidly disappearing wetlands.

While most wetlands are privately owned, their protection has become a public concern that is currently focused on the role of wetlands in improving water quality and as a habitat for wildlife.

Authorities say the environmental benefits of wetlands are vast, notably because of their role in protecting water quality by trapping sediments and retaining excess nutrients and other pollutants such as heavy metals.

"Government, communities, business and mining sectors, all of us have no choice but to conceive our water sources," Deputy Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs Rejoice Mabudafhasi said.

She described the call for the protection of wetlands and other water sources as a "catalyst" for economic development.

"South Africa is a water scarce country and we need every innovation to bring this scarce resource to the people. The role of wetlands in this regard cannot be underestimated".

Mabudafhasi said over the past 11 years, 11 large gabion systems and concrete structure have been built at a cost of R10 million to combat erosion that threaten the remaining wetlands.

It was estimated that this work had improved water availability by approximately 32 000 litres of water per day per hectare cleared.

This year World Wetlands Day will be celebrated under the theme 'Wetlands and Water Management'.

Michael Kawe, a senior official in the Department of Water and Environmental Affairs said: "This year's theme highlights the role of these wetlands in the provision of water quality and where we are today. The significance is that the wetlands contribute directly to the supply of quality water to the greater Nelson Mandela Bay area, which is the economic bone of this region."

The wetlands keep several rivers in the province afloat during dry seasons, among them the Kromme River catchment which is a significant source for the Nelson Mandela Bay municipal area.

A number of local people from the Joubertina and Kareedouw area were currently employed by the 'working for wetlands' projects in the region and have received training focusing on technical, business and life skills.

Mabudafhasi challenged the Kareedouw community to emulate the Makuleke community in Limpopo which is actively involved in wetlands preservation and protection.

During the visit to the Limpopo town last year, the department announced that more than 800 wetlands across the country were to be rehabilitated with people already benefited from the Makuleke community where a rehabilitation project worth R1.8 million was undertaken.

Mabudafhasi said nationally, the working for wetlands project had invested R530 million in the rehabilitation of 906 wetlands, saving more than 70 000 hectares of wetland area and creating more than 12 000 employment opportunities.

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