



## MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate use

### **Wetlands and water management: where is South Africa heading?**

**Johannesburg, 4 February 2013.** World Wetlands Day is celebrated internationally on 2 February every year. This year's theme is 'Wetlands and Water Management' and is linked to the United Nations International Year of Water Cooperation.

The words 'Water Management' immediately draw our attention to the current water crisis we are facing in South Africa, says Mark Anderson, CEO of BirdLife South Africa. It is more than eighteen years since South Africa became a full democracy and the basic human right of access to clean and adequate water supply is becoming an increasing challenge to our nation.

Carolyn Ah Shene-Verdoorn, Policy & Advocacy Manager of BirdLife South Africa states that there are many serious threats to water security in South Africa, from the failing or lack of adequate infrastructure, or proper management at a local municipality level, to a lack of enforcement capacity and technical expertise of the Department of Water Affairs at provincial and national levels. Mining has a major impact on our limited fresh water resources and mines consume vast quantities of fresh water, while polluting our natural water resources and compromising our country's rich natural heritage. Some mining companies continue to mine without the required Water Use Licences, while others are in possession of these licences but simply fail to comply with the licence conditions. It is very frustrating seeing government officials struggle to carry out their compliance and enforcement duties because of limited capacity in government departments.

BirdLife South Africa welcomes the National Planning Commission's strategy for water in the National Development Plan (NDP) which starts with the very optimistic words: 'Before 2030, all South Africans will have affordable access to sufficient safe water and hygienic sanitation to live healthy and dignified lives.' The NDP highlights the fact that deteriorating water quality remains a serious problem, with specific reference to the Acid Mine Drainage issue around Gauteng, poorly funded and managed municipal systems, and the dramatic increase in mining activities across the Mpumalanga Highveld.

The NDP further highlights challenges with the implementation of policies and strategies, including the implementation of the draft National Water Resource Strategy 2 which focuses on water priorities and objectives for the period 2013 . 2017. Ah Shene-Verdoorn says 'Greater alignment of processes and collaboration with other government departments, especially the Departments of Environmental Affairs and Mineral Resources, is required. Sourcing the required funding to build the capacity of the Department of Water Affairs is a major problem that has to be urgently addressed.'

'South Africa's current development trajectory appears to be at great cost to our natural environment. Much of our country's mineral resources lie below our wetlands. So it is

imperative that all South Africans take heed of the international message for World Wetlands Day 2013+ says Dr Charmaine Uys, BirdLife South Africa Regional Conservation Manager for Mpumalanga & Free State. Waterbirds are at the greatest risk from wetland mismanagement and destruction. The Wattled Crane and White-winged Flufftail are two of our country's Critically Endangered bird species that depend on wetlands and are at imminent risk of local extinction due to mining applications in key wetland sites.

BirdLife South Africa reiterates its appeals to government to start giving true meaning to the notion of sustainable development, by giving equal recognition to food production, water security, and the conservation of our cultural and natural heritage, especially when assessing development applications and most importantly when assessing mining applications. This will ensure that sustainable development is entrenched as an overarching principle in the growth path of our developing economy.

**End**

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**Notes for the editor:**

1. The mission of BirdLife South Africa is to promote the enjoyment, conservation, study and understanding of wild birds and their habitats.
2. BirdLife South Africa contact details: Lewis House, 239 Barkston Drive, Blairgowrie, P.O. Box 515, Randburg, Johannesburg, South Africa, Tel. +27-11-7891122, Fax. +27-11-7895188, e-mail address: [info@birdlife.org.za](mailto:info@birdlife.org.za), website: [www.birdlife.org.za](http://www.birdlife.org.za).
3. BirdLife International is one of the four international implementing partners of the Ramsar Convention and all BirdLife partners support implementation at a national level. South Africa is a signatory to the Ramsar Convention and has an international obligation to protect and responsibly manage our wetlands. South Africa currently has 20 Ramsar sites . those wetlands of international importance . most of which are also Important Bird Areas because of the threatened, endemic and congregatory waterbirds they support.
4. 2013 represents the fourth consecutive year that BirdLife South Africa has chosen a wetland bird species as Bird of the Year. Lesser Flamingo (2010), Barn Swallow (2011), African Fish Eagle (2012) and White-winged Flufftail (2013) all carry the message of the plight of our wetlands and the urgency with which we should be re-evaluating and addressing our country's water security.