

## FOREWORD

Africa is an arid continent with the lowest river flow per unit area of any continental landmass. Most countries outside of the rainforest zone receive little rain for most of the year. Over large areas the soils are at best of low fertility and vulnerable to erosion. In launching Zimbabwe's *National Conservation Strategy* President R.G. Mugabe drew attention to these issues, noting "More than three million hectares of soil have been classified as severely eroded, resulting in the siltation of our major river systems, particularly the Save and Limpopo catchments. Permanent surface water supplies have disappeared and the levels of underground water tables have been measurably lowered... The time for complacency is long past." Under these conditions wetlands, with their abundant supply of fresh water, generally fertile soils, and high productivity, are therefore of special significance. They play a central role in the economy of all river basins and coastal zones.

Yet wetlands are also amongst the continent's most threatened ecosystems. As water resources come under increasing pressure from urban and industrial use, and the demand for agricultural land has increased, many floodplains and tidal wetlands have been reduced in size and their productivity declined. At the same time demographic change and drought have placed increased pressure upon rain-fed rangelands and agricultural land and, as a result, many floodplains and marshes once used only as dry season refugia have been subject to year round grazing and permanent cultivation.

As these pressures have grown so has wider awareness of the importance of Africa's wetlands and understanding of the consequences of wetland loss. In response national governments with the support of UNEP, IUCN, WWF, FAO, UNESCO, IWRB, ICBP, and other international partners have taken a rising interest in the conservation needs of these valuable ecosystems. Today 15 African countries are Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention, more than in tropical Asia and Latin America combined.

But as wetland conservation efforts have increased, so has awareness of the urgent need for better information on the distribution and values of these eco-systems. In response, the Directory of African Wetlands provides governments, NGOs, and international partners with a major tool to facilitate improved management of the wetlands of the region. In particular, by reviewing the wetland resources on the basis of hydrological units rather than focusing only upon sites of international importance, the Directory will serve both to identify sites for listing under the Ramsar Convention, and as a source book on wetlands of the continent which can guide governments and the development community in identifying both the potential for multiple-use and the need for care in utilising these ecosystems.

The Directory will complement other recent efforts to bring together information on wetlands of the continent. In particular *African Wetlands and Shallow Water Bodies* which was published by ORSTOM in 1987, provides a more detailed insight into the limnology of some of the most important of Africa's wetlands. Similarly the Wetlands Directory published by the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (CIC) in 1989 provides a more detailed review of wetlands which may be of importance for migratory waterbirds.

Production of the Directory is however but part of a continuing process to address the conservation needs of Africa's wetlands. It will serve as a major source of information for politicians, planners and managers, and serve to develop greater awareness of the importance of these resources. However, it needs to be followed by further national and international support for wetlands conservation in Africa. Only in this way can these

resources be maintained and managed sustainably for the benefit of present and future generations.

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