



For Human Dignity

**ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS THEMATIC WORKING GROUP STATEMENT ON WORLD
WETLANDS DAY 2 FEBRUARY 2024
THEME OF THE DAY: WETLANDS & HUMAN WELLBEING**

Today, on World Wetlands Day, we come together to speak out in support of the preservation and protection of these essential ecosystems, which are often overlooked. This commemoration aims to raise awareness and promote a better understanding of the critical importance of wetlands. Wetlands, with their abundant biodiversity and ecological significance, are crucial for maintaining the delicate balance of our planet.

Wetlands function as giant sponges, soaking up and purifying water that would otherwise be lost as runoff. The water absorbed throughout the rainy season is gradually released during the dry season into the stream and river systems around the city, eventually flowing into the major water sources that supply the city, such as Lake Chivero and Manyame Dam. Without wetlands, these water sources would quickly dry up during the winter months, especially during poor rainy seasons.

Wetlands are not just bodies of water; they are complex ecosystems that support a diverse range of plant and animal species. They play a vital role in mitigating floods, supporting biodiversity, providing habitat for various fauna, filtering nutrients and pollutants, and supplying us with clean drinking water. We must acknowledge their inherent value and commit to their conservation.

Wetlands are vital ecosystems that face a range of threats from human activities, these include urbanization, pollution, and climate change. Agricultural practices are a leading cause of wetland loss, as they involve drainage and infilling. Additionally, many wetlands located near cities have been polluted by human activities. As urbanization continues, wetlands are increasingly threatened by encroaching development, with cities expanding and demand for land on the rise.

Unfortunately, in various parts of the country, some local authorities and the so-called land barons are ignoring the importance of preserving wetlands. They continue to approve housing developments on wetlands, even though there are many domestic and international laws against such conduct. This has caused a lot of problems for residents, particularly those living in the Common Vision Area and Budiro 5 B extension. Their homes have been flooded and destroyed due to this reckless behavior.

It is essential to highlight that permits are still being issued for development on wetlands, including those on Ramsar sites also known as The Ramsar Convention. Almost 90% of the United Nations member states, from all around the globe, have acceded to become "Contracting Parties," including Zimbabwe, which signed the convention on 3 May 2013. Although the Ramsar Convention is binding on the State, it has not yet been incorporated into Zimbabwean law. At present, Zimbabwe has seven wetlands recognized as Ramsar sites, namely Victoria Falls National Park, Driefontein Grasslands, Mana Pools National Park, Lake Chivero, Monavale Vlei (Harare), Chinhoyi Caves, and Cleveland Dam.

Communities in Zimbabwe often rely on wetlands for water supply, agriculture and other resources. Any environmental harm to these areas can disproportionately affect vulnerable populations potentially leading to violations of their right to access clean water and adequate food as provided for in sections 77 (a) and 77 (b) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe respectively. Furthermore, sustainable management of Zimbabwe's wetlands is intricately linked to the right to a healthy environment. The deterioration of these ecosystems could lead to environmental degradation thereby negatively impacting the well-being of communities and violating their right to a sustainable and balanced environment as provided for in section 73 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe.

As responsible custodians of the environment, it is our duty to ensure the sustainable management of ecosystems, including wetlands. Therefore, we need to put a stop to the current destruction of wetlands and encourage actions that will conserve and restore these vital ecosystems. Let's pledge to raise awareness about the importance of wetlands, and urge the government, communities, and individuals to take concrete steps in their preservation. The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission (ZHRC) Environmental Thematic Working Group urges all stakeholders to take heed of the call to protect wetlands.

Some of the ways in which wetlands can be protected include the following: increasing awareness about the importance of conserving wetlands through educational campaigns and media coverage, the city and rural councils should immediately stop the allocation and approval of housing developments on wetlands, and domesticating the provisions of the Ramsar Convention and Convention on Biodiversity. These provisions should be incorporated into Zimbabwe's national laws to uphold the country's obligations under international law to maintain Wetlands of International Importance.

Let World Wetlands Day be a call to action—a call to protect and cherish the intricate web of life that thrives in these waterlogged wonders. Together, let us commit to safeguarding wetlands for current and future generations, recognizing that their conservation is not just an environmental imperative but a moral responsibility.

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