

NOTICE 1311 OF 2009**NOTICE OF INTENTION TO DESIGNATE NTSIKENI NATURE RESERVE AS A RAMSAR SITE IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE RAMSAR CONVENTION ON WETLANDS**

I, Buyelwa Patience Sonjica, the Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs, hereby give notice of my intention to publish the wetland set out in the Schedule below for designation as a Ramsar site in the List of Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar List) as referred to in Article 2.4 of the Convention on Wetlands.

Upon joining the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, each Contracting Party is obliged to designate at least one wetland site for inclusion in the List of Wetlands of International Importance. Sites are selected by the member states, for designation under the Convention by reference to the Criteria for Identifying Wetlands of International Importance. Data on designated wetlands are communicated by the Parties to the treaty secretariat by means of a Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) including accurate data on various scientific and conservation parameters and a map precisely delimiting the boundaries of the site.

Interested persons are requested to submit written comments, inputs and/or objections within 30 days of the publication of the notice to:

By Post: The Director-General
 Department of Environmental Affairs
 Attention: Mr Stanley Tshitwamulomoni,
 Private Bag X447
 PRETORIA
 0001

Delivered to: The Department of Environmental Affairs
 Attention: Mr Stanley Tshitwamulomoni,
 Fedsure Forum
 North Tower (Room 1201)
 315 Pretorius Street
 PRETORIA

By fax to: (012) 320-7539, and e-mail to StanleyT@deat.gov.za

Comments received after the closing date may not be considered.

The full proposal documents for the designation as well as the Ramsar Information Sheets and maps are available at the Department of Environmental Affairs, Room 1201, Fedsure Forum Building, Cnr van der Walt and Pretorius Streets, Pretoria.



BUYELWA PATIENCE SONJICA
MINISTER OF WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS

SCHEDULE

1. NTSIKENI NATURE RESERVE

Ntsikeni Nature Reserve is located in KwaZulu-Natal Province; Umzimkhulu Local Municipality. The nearest large town is Kokstad. The entire catchment of the wetland system falls within the 9200 ha Protected Area boundary which runs along the watershed, the wetland covers an area of approximately 1 070 ha. The catchment is characterised by a central broad flat valley bottom made up of alluvial sediments. These valley bottom areas then rise up into undulating grasslands mostly underlain by Tarkastad Mudstones and sandstones with some Adelaide mudrock and sandstone. The entire protected area is bounded by mountainous peaks which are capped with Karoo Dolerite.

The Nature Reserve falls within South Africa's summer rainfall region, receiving a mean annual rainfall of 911mm. The mean temperature is 11.5°C with a mean maximum of 17.4°C and a mean minimum of 9.5°C. This area receives frequent severe frosts and snowfalls expected most years (Camp, 1998).

The catchment is a palustrine emergent wetland situated in a valley bottom position and dominated by sedges and grasses. The wetland, which is likely to be one of the largest high altitude (>1700 m) wetlands in South Africa, is in good condition and is performing valuable streamflow regulation, and biodiversity support functions. The important breeding habitat it provides for the Critically Endangered Wattled Crane (*Grus bugeranus*) and the Critically Endangered Eurasian Bittern (*Botaurus stellaris*) contributes greatly to its biodiversity value.

The wetland is of natural origin, and its presence is largely owing to several dolerite dykes and a major dolerite sill at the northern outlet of the wetland which form a series of erosion resistant strata across the Lubhukwini River (Begg, 1989).

The main body of the wetland comprises an upper portion, which is largely permanently saturated and lacks a clearly defined stream channel and a lower portion which has a clearly

defined stream channel and "backmarsh areas". Extending out from the main body of the wetland are several tributary "arms" that supply the main body of the wetland with runoff water.

The soils in the wetland are primarily mineral, of the Katspruit form, but some organic-rich soils of the Champagne form, and possibly peat, are also expected to occur in the permanently saturated areas.

The water quality appears to be good based on the fact that: (1) there is a low level of human activity in the catchment; (2) Tricorythid mayflies and Elmids beetles, which are indicative of good quality water, were found in the stream within the wetland (Mangold and Moor, 1996); and (3) anecdotal evidence exists of the high clarity of the water in the wetland (see Begg, 1989).

To be considered for inclusion in the Ramsar List, a wetland needs to comply with at least one of the eight listed Ramsar Criteria as adopted by the Conference of the Contracting Parties. Ntsikeni Nature Reserve qualifies to be listed because it complies with two of the nine Criteria as follows:

Criterion 1

The wetland provides a good example of a high altitude wetland in the eastern coastal slope, Drakensberg region (Cowan, 1995). The wetland, which is likely to be one of the largest high altitude wetlands, is in good condition, as is its catchment, which is also entirely protected within the Nature Reserve. Presently there are no other Ramsar sites in this wetland region. Begg (1988) identified Ntsikeni wetland as one of KwaZulu-Natal's 28 priority wetlands. Following discussions by the Department of Economic Affairs, Environment and Tourism, Eastern Cape with the National Parks Board in 1993-1994, and based on a joint inspection and a literature survey, the Board concluded that the reserve warrants national park status on the basis of its natural features.

The site falls within an approximately 100 km² area that is very rich in wetlands, which includes three other major wetlands, the Kromrivier vlei (Begg, 1989), Cedarville flats wetland and the Franklin vlei (Begg, 1989). None of these wetlands have protected status, making it particularly important that Ntsikeni is afforded adequate protection and sound management. Furthermore, all three of the other wetlands are within intensively used, commercially farmed areas and have been impacted to varying degrees by on-site drainage and dams and off-site land-use activities

in their catchments. The impacts on the Cedarville flats and the Franklin vlei have been particularly high. Ntsikeni vlei is therefore the only one of these wetlands with very low levels of hydrological impact and modification to its ecological character.

Criterion 2

The wetland provides a very important breeding site for the endangered Wattled Crane, the SA population of which is classified as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List (Meine and Archibald, 1996). Two to three pairs of Wattled Cranes breed in the wetland out of 80 active breeding pairs throughout the country (McCann K, 1999. *Pers. comm.* Eskom/EWT National Crane Conservation Project). Based on the presence of three breeding pairs in 1986, Begg (1989) in a report on the priority wetlands of KwaZulu-Natal considered Ntsikeni wetland to be second only to Mgeni vlei in terms of its importance as a breeding site for Wattled Crane in South Africa. Adding to its importance is the fact that the Wattled Crane is a conspicuous "flagship species". The wetland is also likely to support further Red Data species, notably the Long-toed Tree Frog (*Leptopelis xenodactylus*).