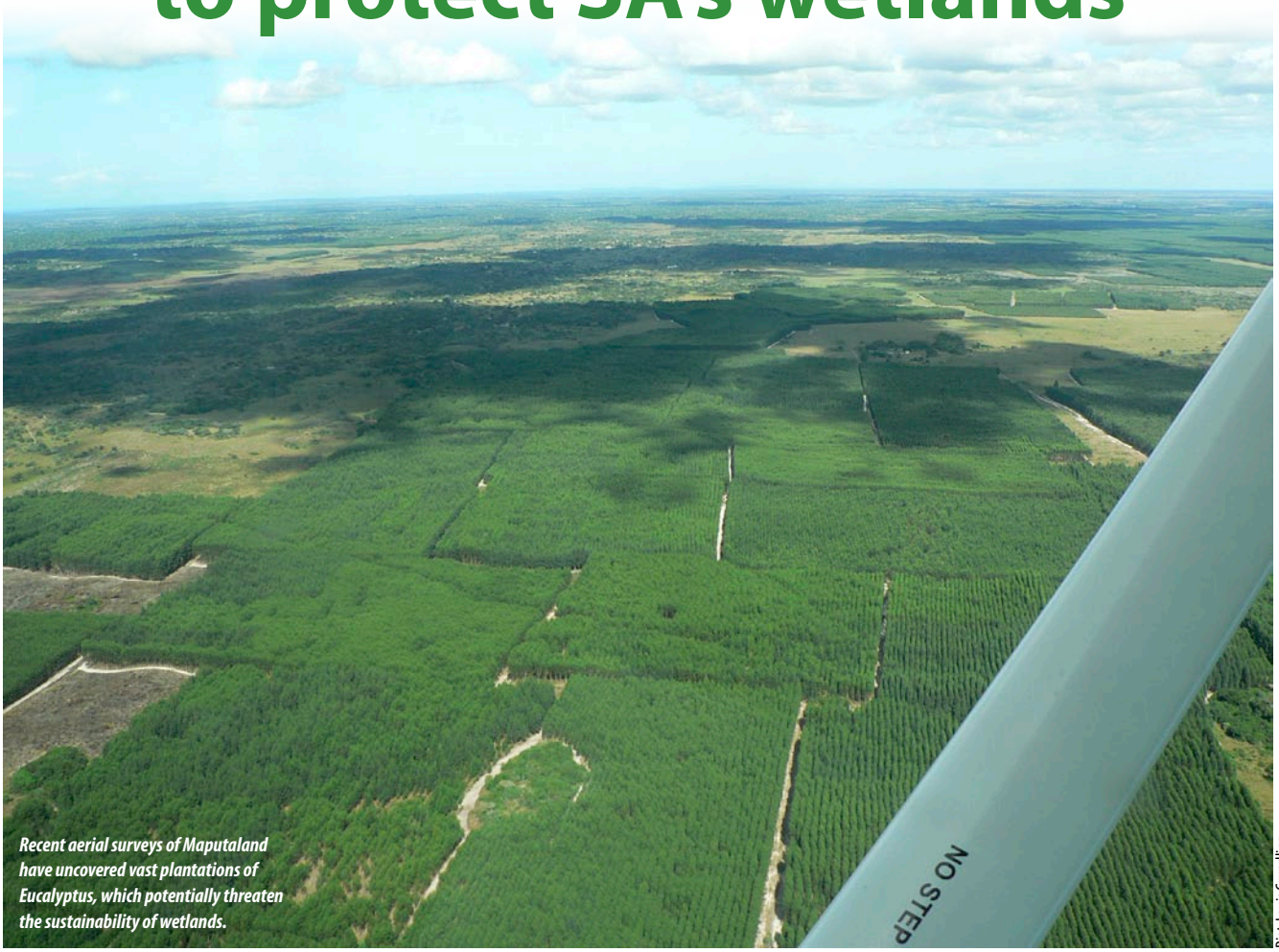
# WORKING TOGETHER to protect SA's wetlands




*Recent aerial surveys of Maputaland have uncovered vast plantations of Eucalyptus, which potentially threaten the sustainability of wetlands.*

Piet-Louis Grundling

***Wetlands remain among the most undervalued water resources in South Africa. But the close working relationship between government's Working for Wetlands and non-government organisation The Bateleurs is helping to ensure that these precious water resources get the attention they deserve. Lani van Vuuren reports.***

Surveying is an important part of identifying and prioritising wetlands which require rehabilitation and conservation. In South Africa, the process is led by Working for Wetlands, managed by the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI). However, due to the extent of some wetlands, as well as their natural inaccessibility, it is not always possible, or logical, to survey an entire wetland, and its catchment, on foot.

Aerial surveys provide a clearer, 'birds eye', view of the extent of threats or problems facing each wetland and are used as precursors to ground surveys conducted during detailed planning by Working for Wetlands. Potentially, the hiring of aeroplanes and pilots to conduct these surveys could cost hundreds of thousands of Rands annually. However, thanks to The Bateleurs, who provides this service free of charge, this money can now be applied to the actual rehabilitation of wetlands.

The Bateleurs was established in 1998 by well-known environmentalist, the late Nora Kreher. It is one of the largest environmental, flying, not-for-profit organisations in Africa. With over 145 volunteer pilots and aircraft, it has coordinated hundreds of missions, throughout ten countries, in support of environmental issues.

## CLOSE WORKING RELATIONSHIP

Both parties agree that the relationship built between The Bateleurs and Working for Wetlands over the last four years has been a fruitful and productive one. "We flew our first mission for Working for Wetlands in August 2006, and since then we have flown a number of missions for them every year," notes The Bateleurs' Joan Cameron.

"Both organisations share a mutual vision of protecting the environment," says John Dini, SANBI Director: Freshwater Programme. "Without The Bateleurs, we would have a tough time establishing an aerial perspective of catchment condition and degraded wetlands that may be candidates for rehabilitation. In addition, the funding that would otherwise be used for aerial reconnaissance is now channelled towards additional rehabilitation work, which allows more people to be employed and the programme's social and environmental benefits to be expanded."

Between six and 15 surveys are conducted across the country each year. Information gathered from these surveys is used to plan rehabilitation projects in succeeding years. In 2010, reconnaissance was undertaken in the Spitskop, Harts and Borakalalo catchments in North West, the Maputaland Coastal Plain in KwaZulu-Natal, the Mutale catchment and Waterberg area in Limpopo and the Maluti catchment in the Free State. The aerial surveys have enabled degraded wetlands to be systematically prioritised for closer investigations, saving planning teams literally weeks of tedious and expensive time on the ground.

## COLLECTION OF CHALLENGES

One of the most significant benefits of aerial reconnaissance it that it gives Working for Wetlands planners a clearer picture of the overall state of the catchment. "Often the source of a problem impacting a wetland may be some distance away, and seeing things from an aeroplane rather than on the ground sometimes makes it much easier to link cause with effect," says Dini. Historical impacts such as old channels dug to drain wetlands also become easier to see from the air. "At times these channels have become overgrown by vegetation and one might never find them on the ground unless one accidentally falls into them."

**"The funding that would otherwise be used for aerial reconnaissance is now channelled towards additional rehabilitation work, which allows more people to be employed and the programme's social and environmental benefits to be expanded."**

By far the most common reason for wetland degradation surveyors come across is erosion, either in the wetlands themselves or upstream of them. While erosion is a natural process, poor land management and badly designed infrastructure can easily trigger or exacerbate the problem, which leads to soil loss many times greater than the natural baseline. As they usually occur at the lowest points in catchments, wetlands are also on the receiving end for sediment and pollutants originating from higher up in the area.

Each region also produces its own challenges. In the swamp forests of Maputaland, for example, slash and burn practices impact heavily on wetlands, while other wetlands are impacted more heavily by overgrazing, agricultural activities, urban development, bush encroachment and/or illegal damming or mining practices.

"It is important to realise that the wetland degradation we see during flights is never because of just one impact, rather it is a fusion of factors and excessive demands placed on natural resources," notes Dini. While Working for Wetlands can rehabilitate the wetlands, it will continue to work with and support other government entities and stakeholders to take action against the factors which caused degradation in the first place. ❑

*From the air the extent of environmental destructive activities such as mining can clearly be seen.*

The Bateleurs