

Title

Under its jointly managed project, Protecting Harare's Wetland Ecosystems for Nature and the City's People, funded by Aage V. Jensen Charity Foundation through BirdLife International, BirdLife Zimbabwe (BLZ) and The Conservation Society of Monavale (COSMO), together with the Eco Schools Programme of Mukuvisi Woodlands, organised this 2014 World Wetland Day commemoration for schools at Marlborough Vlei, Harare.

Harare's wetlands, headwaters of the Upper Manyame Catchment Basin, must be amongst the most misunderstood and overlooked on Earth as the water is hidden from view. They are open grassland wetlands which are seasonally inundated with their waters concealed by wetland adapted grasses and plants. These wetlands are the city's primary source of water. They feed water into the supply dams downstream, with this water pumped back up to the city for its needs. The most successful way to educate people about these wetlands is to take them for a walk in the wetlands during the summer months.

More than 340 people attended this event with pupils and teachers from 26 primary and secondary schools, representatives from 11 civic society organisations, which included members of the newly formed residents group, the Marlborough Environmental Action Group (MEAG), and officials from three government authorities.

Marlborough Vlei was flooded, with the pools filled with water from the heavy rains received the night before, thus providing the most perfect conditions in which to teach the assembled community about the values and functions of these important wetland ecosystems that are under threat from urban development, agriculture and pollution. The school children, their teachers and others were led in parties through the wetland by members of BLZ and COSMO who pointed out the many vlei birds and the wetland biodiversity. The children loved splashing about in the water and were truly fascinated by their first wetland experience, most having never ventured into such a place before. The walks demonstrated the true nature of the wetlands and drove home the concepts of these ecosystems.

After these walks, everyone gathered by the edge of the Vlei for speeches by experts on Harare's wetland ecosystems, the threats to them and the urgent need for their conservation. In between the speeches there was direct interaction with the pupils as they answered questions on wetlands and presented their poems and prepared pieces. Poster displays from various organisations attracted much attention and wetland education materials were distributed. There is no doubt that all left the day having thoroughly enjoyed themselves, never to forget their wetland experience.

Story by Dorothy Wakeling, Project Coordinator