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FROM POLICY TO GLOBAL IMPACT: ZIMBABWE'S NATIONAL WETLANDS POLICY AS A BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION AT THE UPCOMING RAMSAR COP15

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Through Mist to Momentum: Ramsar COP15 Finds Its Home in Victoria Falls City

In July 2025, Zimbabwe will take center stage as it hosts the 15th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (COP15). This landmark global gathering, focused on the protection and sustainable use of wetlands, comes at a pivotal moment as the world intensifies efforts to halt and reverse the degradation of these vital ecosystems. For Zimbabwe, this is more than a moment of international recognition, it is a powerful opportunity to showcase its leadership in wetland governance, rooted in progressive environmental and conservation laws, forward-looking policies, and on-the-ground conservation initiatives.

The host city, Victoria Falls, stands as a symbol of natural splendor and environmental significance. Nestled beside one of the world's largest and most awe-inspiring waterfalls, the city lies within the heart of the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA), the largest transboundary conservation area in the world, renowned for its vast biodiversity and rich ecological resources. This extraordinary environmental context makes Victoria Falls an ideal setting for environmental diplomacy and dialogue. Notably, the city is home to a designated Ramsar site the Victoria Falls National Park, signifying its ecological importance on a global scale. Further affirming its commitment to wetland stewardship, Victoria Falls was recently awarded the prestigious Wetland City Status Accreditation by the Ramsar Convention, cementing its role as a model for sustainable wetland management.



Zimbabwe's Moment on the Global Stage: Ramsar COP15

Hosting COP15 is not only a diplomatic milestone for Zimbabwe. It is a strategic platform to shape regional and global discourse on wetland governance. As the first African nation to host the conference in over two decades, Zimbabwe has a unique opportunity to spotlight its national Wetlands Policy, share successful conservation models, and advocate for greater international ambition on wetland restoration.

This moment also allows Zimbabwe to reaffirm its commitment to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 15 (Life on Land) positioning the country as a leader in aligning local wetland conservation with global sustainability targets.

Zimbabwe's Wetlands Policy in a Nutshell: A Step Forward for Wetlands Conservation and Sustainable Use

At the core of Zimbabwe's environmental governance on wetlands is the National Wetlands Policy, which came into effect in November 2021. This policy is implemented through various national strategies and operates in close coordination with the Environmental Management Act. It is further strengthened by the Ramsar Convention, an international treaty specifically focused on wetlands to which Zimbabwe became a party in May 2013. Together, these instruments form a cohesive legal and policy framework for wetland conservation and sustainable use.

The National Wetlands Policy is a landmark framework that recognizes wetlands as vital natural infrastructure. It highlights their critical role in water purification, nutrient and toxin retention, flood control, soil erosion prevention, climate resilience, research and education, as well as their religious and cultural value. Crucially, the policy grants wetlands legal protection and mandates their integration into land use and development planning processes.

Emphasizing an ecosystem-based approach, the policy champions the "wise use" of wetlands a core principle of the Ramsar Convention. It calls for coordinated action across government, civil society, the private sector, individuals, and communities to ensure that wetlands are not only preserved but also sustainably managed for current and future generations.

Objectives and Guiding Principles

The Zimbabwe National Wetlands Policy blatantly incorporates objectives and guiding principles which are comprehensive and multifaceted. The objectives include guiding wetlands mapping and gazetting of ecologically sensitive areas, establishment of an effective and efficient institutional and legal framework for integrated management and wise use of wetlands and enhancement of capacity building within relevant institutions involved in management of wetlands.

The guiding principles include wise use of wetlands, the adoption and implementation of the precautionary principle in managing wetlands and the use of a collaborative and participatory approach in wetlands conservation and management. Additionally, the guiding principles include recognition and consideration of the global dimension of environmental impacts of actions and policies. Lastly, the polluter pays principle forms part of the guiding principles where persons who pollute wetlands should meet the cost of restoration, cleaning them up and meet the cost of the pollution to resource users.

Building Blocks for Wetlands Conservation: Core Pillars of the National Wetlands Policy

The Zimbabwe National Wetlands Policy is premised upon five foundational pillars that collectively guide the conservation, management, and sustainable use of wetlands. These are the Wetlands Identification, Wetlands Management, Wetlands Utilization, International Obligations, and Cross-Cutting Issues pillars. The **Wetlands Identification Pillar** serves as the starting point for national programming and ecosystem management. It supports the systematic identification, mapping, and classification of wetlands, which informs the selection of appropriate management approaches. The **Wetlands Management Pillar** focuses on the practical aspects of wetland conservation. It emphasizes the implementation of targeted interventions and the mainstreaming of wetland management into all levels of national development planning.

The **Wetlands Utilization Pillar** sets out the policy framework for how wetlands can be used sustainably. It defines the terms, conditions, and mechanisms for utilization, including the requirement for Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) EMA certificates before undertaking any developments in ecologically sensitive areas. The **International Obligations Pillar** ensures that Zimbabwe's wetlands governance aligns with its under international agreements, particularly the Ramsar Convention, which the country acceded to on 3 May 2013. This pillar promotes the designation of Ramsar Sites, encourages the "wise use" of wetlands, and supports international cooperation on transboundary wetlands management and related development projects.

Finally, the **Cross-Cutting Issues Pillar** highlights the importance of integrating broader social and environmental considerations into wetland governance. It emphasizes the mainstreaming of issues such as climate change, gender equality, the inclusion of vulnerable groups, and the participation of persons with disabilities. This pillar ensures that wetland policy implementation is inclusive, equitable, and responsive to both environmental and human development needs.

Zimbabwe's National Wetlands Policy and the Ramsar Convention

Zimbabwe acceded the Ramsar Convention on 03 May 2013 and its commitment rests on three main pillars of the Convention: the wise use of all wetlands, the designation and management of Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar sites), and international cooperation on transboundary wetlands, shared wetland systems, shared species and development projects that may affect wetlands. Zimbabwe's policy strongly aligns with these commitments.

The country has already designated seven Ramsar sites, including the iconic Mana Pools, Chinhoyi Caves, Lake Chivero, Victoria Falls National Park, Monavale Vlei, Driefontein Grasslands, Chinhoyi Caves, Manyame Dam and has shown interest in adding more. With the Wetlands Policy in place, Zimbabwe has a foundation to systematically identify, monitor, and manage wetland ecosystems in line with Ramsar's vision.Policy in Practice: Success Stories and Innovations

The implementation of Zimbabwe's Wetlands Policy has made notable strides across several key areas. Led by the Ministry of Environment, Climate and Wildlife, in collaboration with the Environmental Management Agency (EMA), significant progress has been made in mapping and classifying wetlands nationwide. This work has been instrumental in identifying ecologically sensitive areas and monitoring wetlands under pressure. At the community level, citizen-led wetland restoration and protection initiatives are gaining momentum, supported by the government, EMA, Global Environment Facility (GEF), private sector, local authorities and non-governmental organizations. These grassroots efforts reflect the policy's emphasis on local stewardship and participatory governance. Encouragingly, some urban authorities have begun integrating wetlands into their spatial planning frameworks, an important step toward promoting sustainable land use. Collectively, these developments signal that the policy is moving beyond rhetoric and into meaningful, action-oriented implementation.



Empowering Communities and Harnessing Indigenous Knowledge



A critical strength of Zimbabwe's policy is its recognition of community involvement. Wetlands have long supported livelihoods from smallholder agriculture to traditional medicines and the policy seeks to harmonize modern conservation practices with indigenous knowledge systems. Across rural Zimbabwe, communities have set up local wetland monitoring committees and are participating in wetland rehabilitation initiatives. When local custodians are empowered with knowledge, legal support, scientific support, and resources, the results are impactful and sustainable.

Challenges and the Road Ahead

Despite its strengths, implementation of the Wetlands Policy has faced challenges. Rapid urban expansion, weak enforcement of regulations, limited financial resources, and gaps in public awareness continue to threaten wetland integrity. In some cases, short-term economic interests have overridden long-term ecological value. Albeit that, the country through various government departments complemented by efforts from NGOs and private sector are working flat out to ensure that the efficacy of the policy is upheld through continuous monitoring and strengthening of enforcement agents' capacities.

Be that as it may, Ramsar COP15 presents a valuable opportunity to address these gaps. With international attention and support, Zimbabwe can strengthen its policy implementation, attract technical and financial partnerships, and scale up community-driven wetland conservation models.

Conclusion: Rising with the Tides

Zimbabwe's Wetlands Policy is a powerful tool in the fight against ecosystem degradation. It lays a strong foundation for the country to conserve, and sustainably manage its wetlands. As the world turns its attention to Ramsar COP15 in July 2025, Zimbabwe has the chance to lead by example, transforming policy into action and setting the pace for wetland protection in Africa and beyond.

Now is the time for all stakeholders, government, civil society, communities, and international partners to rally behind this vision. A sustainable future for Zimbabwe's wetlands is within reach, and Ramsar COP15 could be the turning tide that makes it possible.


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