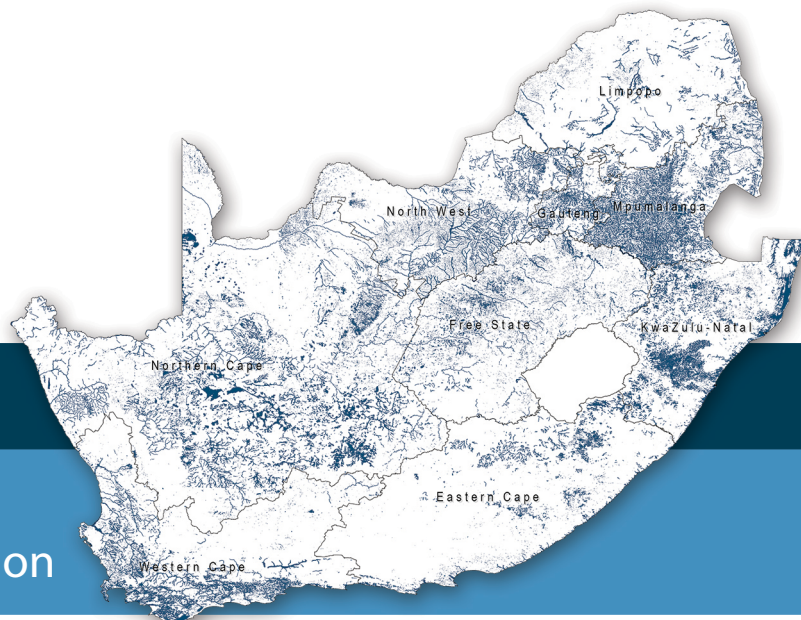




National Wetland Map

South Africa's official map of wetland extent, type and condition

Wetlands are ecosystems that are periodically covered with shallow water or the water table is near the surface. They support vegetation that is specially adapted to life in saturated soil. Although covering only a small part of South Africa, wetlands provide vitally important benefits to people, like improving water quality and controlling floods. Wetlands are some of the most threatened ecosystems, so South Africa is committed to protecting, wisely using and restoring its wetlands. The National Wetland Map provides information on the location, size, type and condition of wetlands across the country. It is built up from a range of different data sources using consistent mapping standards. Many different people use the information from the National Wetland Map to create awareness, report the status of wetlands and make decisions about development or land-uses that may impact on wetlands.



How is the National Wetland Map developed?

The National Wetland Map is a nationally important base dataset for South Africa. The South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) freshwater programme is the custodian of the map under the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act (Act 10 of 2004) and the Spatial Data Infrastructure Act (Act 53 of 2003). Its duty is to capture, maintain, manage, integrate and distribute the dataset.

The first National Wetland Map was released in 2006. Since then, there have been several updates and each version improves the accuracy of the map. The National Wetland Map is built up from a range of different data sources, from fundamental in-field mapping to digitising of satellite images. Submissions from stakeholders make an important contribution to the dataset. Since 2023 the National Wetland Map has also incorporated information from an automated wetland probability map. It uses topographic modelling to estimate where wetlands are likely to occur. The probability map helps to map a larger area in a shorter amount of time and fill in unmapped areas.

Given that the data comes from multiple sources, the National Wetland Map team have developed a framework for combining the different data into one consolidated dataset. Mapping standards make sure that the methods are consistent and reliable. The team is supported by the National Wetland Map committee, a group of experts who guide the development of the map.

What do the map categories mean?

Wetland extent

The National Wetland Map shows the location and size of wetlands. The boundaries of wetlands are delineated on the map, and the size is recorded in the attribute table. Importantly, the National Wetland Map maps the historical extent of wetlands prior to human modification. This makes it possible to assess trends in wetlands over time.

Wetland type

Wetlands are first classified according to hydrogeomorphic type based on location in the landscape and hydrology, mainly floodplains, valley-bottom wetlands, depressions, seeps and flats. These are further divided into different regional wetland types. Aligning with the Global Ecosystem Typology allows reporting towards global processes.

Wetland condition

The condition of wetlands is assessed using the WET-Health 2.0 protocol that assigns wetlands to condition categories from A to F. A semi-automated tool has been developed to apply wetland condition using national land cover data. Detailed condition assessments are included where field work has been carried out.

What are some key statistics?

The most recent update is National Wetland Map 2025.

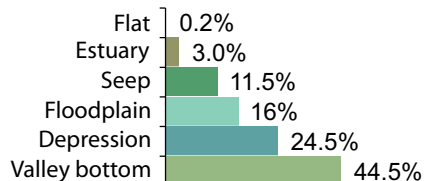
Wetland extent

3 million hectares

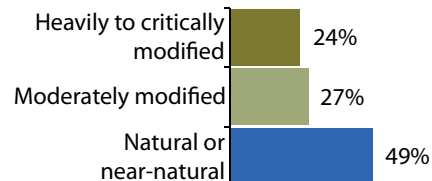


2.4%
of South Africa's
mainland area

Wetland type



Wetland condition



These statistics are based on what was assessed in National Wetland Map 2025. They will change when a new version is released, as the data gradually become more accurate and extensive, thanks to the assistance of those who contribute.

How should the National Wetland Map be used?

Maps are necessary for virtually all activities involving wetlands. Wetland maps are essential tools for wetland management, protection and restoration, as well as land use and catchment planning. Wetland maps support local, regional, provincial and national decisions and planning, and are also used by non-governmental organisations, consultants, businesses, and civil society.



Awareness: The National Wetland Map helps to raise awareness about the vital importance of wetlands, showing where they occur across the country, and improving understanding about the types and condition of wetlands.



Reporting: The National Wetland Map is used to analyse wetland status and trends, reported at regular intervals as part of the National Biodiversity Assessment and in reporting towards South Africa's global commitments towards wetlands.



Decision-making: The National Wetland Map is a primary input in environmental authorisations, like Environmental Impact Assessments and Water Use Licence Applications, to assess the potential impacts of developments on wetlands and water resources. Information on status and trends in wetlands also informs national strategies for protection, wise-use and restoration of wetlands.



Planning: The National Wetland Map can be included in spatial plans required by local authorities to guide future development that retains the important ecosystem services provided by wetlands, and to locate the best sites for intervention and investment.

The National Wetland Map is always improving. However, it is not yet comprehensive, and conditions may have changed since mapping. It is essential for the data to be verified in the field by a wetland professional.

Where can I get more information?

Spatial data and information about the latest National Wetland Map can be accessed at: <https://bgis.sanbi.org/Projects/Detail/217>. For more information about wetland types, condition, pressures, threat status and protection levels, visit the National Biodiversity Assessment at: https://nba.sanbi.org.za/content/freshwater/fw_overview.html.

How can I contribute?

The National Wetland Map relies on contributions from lots of different partners. You can assist by providing data (even just the GPS co-ordinates of a wetland), doing field assessments, getting involved in citizen science or by giving expert advice. If you have any information to improve the National Wetland Map, get in touch at n.job@sanbi.org.za

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