

International World Wetlands Day,2024

World Wetlands Day 2024 is themed '*Wetlands and Human Wellbeing*'. This theme underscores the critical role wetlands play in enhancing wellness for humankind. It is important to point out that a wetland is an area where 'water covers the soil, or is present either at or near the surface of the soil' throughout the year or for varying periods during the year, including during the growing season. These areas are referred to by various names such as marshes, mudflats, swamps, floodplains, mangroves, estuaries, lagoons, lakes, and rivers. They are the link between the land and water, a transition zone characterised by soils, vegetation and water, thus a unique ecosystem, and watershed feature.

Due to many factors, the wetlands have been diminishing globally. Africa and more so Kenya have seen a decrease in these important ecosystems over the years. Wetlands are important for many purposes that make for human well-being; they contribute to flood protection, clean water, biodiversity and recreational opportunities for mankind; they provide natural products and aesthetics useful for the health and prosperity of life on earth.

Much as our wetlands mean the world to us, they are threatened by various anthropogenic activities. The major culprit is high levels of pollution such as industrial effluents and household sewage discharge, agricultural nutrients and pesticides, siltation from agricultural areas, unpaved roads and footpaths and some of the flora and fauna that are introduced to such critical 'watersheds'. The expansive population increase, urbanisation and industrialization (even as cities and municipalities expand) have introduced toxic loads of nutrients, heavy metals, pesticides and contaminants. The result is health impacts on this ecosystem with ripple effects on the well-being of man who relies on the same.

Human well-being encompasses the physical, mental, emotional and social states that are impacted by the environment they deal in. With our wetlands being compromised the populations that live in the surrounding are faced with poor quality of life, strongly affecting their happiness and life satisfaction. Often the focus on physical health overshadows the other complex aspects of health leading to poor diagnosis and deteriorating health coupled with the increase of the disease burden at the household and national levels. The emotional effects such as anger, shame, hopelessness, apathy and helplessness that human expresses due to the destruction of their environment pose psychological ill health that exacerbates physical illnesses and vice versa. There is a Knowledge gap on the pivotal role that wetlands play in our well-being and it needs to be raised to all, for posterity.

As society celebrates this day, making meaning of the importance of these vulnerable ecosystems advances community engagement in their protection and conservation. It calls for gender inclusivity, and empowerment of women, youth, the elderly and the marginalised in wetland protection.

By Dr Rosalind Nkirote, Executive Director ACCRCC