

Monavale Vlei Ramsar Site

Introduction

The Monavale Ramsar Site is an urban seasonally flooded short grassland wetland ecosystem situated in northwest Harare, close to the City centre. Harare itself is located within the headwaters of the Upper Manyame Catchment Basin. These vleis or wetlands are the primary water source for the City. They feed water into the streams and rivers which flow down to the City's supply dams 32km downstream to the south west, with that water being pumped back up to the City for its needs. Monavale Vlei is an outstanding example of the once extensive headwater wetland or vlei ecosystems of Zimbabwe supporting a diverse range of plants and animals, many of which are unique and of international importance.

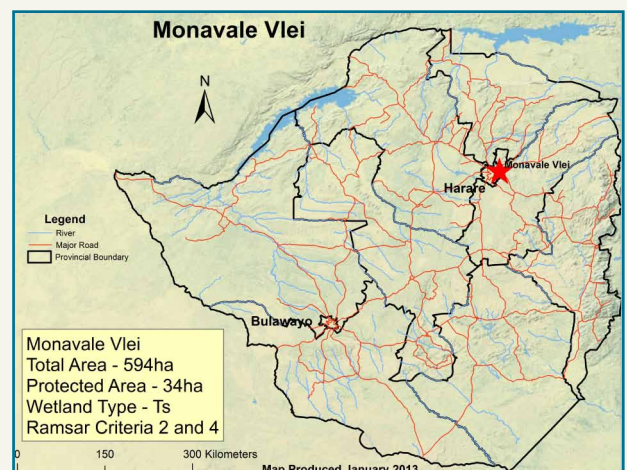
The overall Monavale Ramsar Site is 594 hectares in extent with the protected Monavale Vlei at its centre nestled between the hilly suburbs of Monavale and Meyrick Park. It is a headwater of the Marimba River which flows directly into Lake Chivero. The core protected area is 34 hectares in extent, 1461 metres in elevation and located in the municipal area of Mabelreign in Harare Province. Monavale Vlei is one of Zimbabwe's seven Ramsar Sites. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands provides a framework for wetland conservation and asks that nations promote the sustainable utilization and conservation of wetlands. Zimbabwe became a signatory to the Convention in 2011.

Biodiversity

Monavale Vlei is a grassland that holds an amazing array of plants and animals, 36 species of grass and more than 80 species of other plants with their trillions of kilometres of roots which remove toxic chemicals and hold the spongy clays together. While the gray waterlogged clay soils support this rich biodiversity they also trap silt, Vim, vehicle and human wastes.

Walkers, birders, botanists and passersby admire the lovely flowering plants – lilies, gladioli and blue irises – in spring and summer.

The Vlei's waters not only support plants but also fauna. Over 240 bird species have been recorded, among them small rare migrants which breed in the pools and squelch zones. Striped Crake (*Aenigmatolimnas marginalis*) and Streaky-breasted Flufftail (*Sarothrura boehmii*) are two examples and the fact they still breed in the city is remarkable and a credit to conservationists. On occasion pairs of green legs of Striped Crake and red legs of Crowned Lapwing are found. It's a mystery which animals feed on these birds leaving only their legs behind possibly the Marsh



Map of Monavale Vlei Ramsar site



Left: The Streaky-Breasted Flufftail. Right: *Nidorella auriculata* (yellow) *Orthosiphon schimperi* (purple and white)

Owl, Giant Bullfrog or Mongoose? It is astonishing how many animals are found 3 kilometers from the city centre – Bushpig, Cape Clawless Otter, Large Grey Mongoose, Common Duiker, Giant Rat, Scrub Hare and sixteen reptiles of which three snakes, the Egyptian Cobra, Olive and Three-striped Grass Snake are the commonest. Living in puddles and pools on the Marimba River are 7 amphibians including The Giant Bullfrog (regionally endangered) that eat the numerous insects, tadpoles and fish such as Barbs, Barbel and Catlets.



Left top: Common River Frog Left bottom: Giant Bullfrog
Right: Nidorella auriculata flowering in the vlei

Cultural Values and Tourism

Historically this site has been appreciated for its critical ecological function in the hydrological system of this catchment. Educational values are important culturally, with guided school visits and the long standing weekly COSMO Kids Club ongoing. The area is frequented by walkers and local, regional and international bird watchers. BirdLife Zimbabwe and COSMO carry out monthly bird walks Universities and colleges use the Vlei for research activities. Residents derive benefits from this Vlei in the form of recreation, appreciation of nature, this being a renowned wetland botanical and wildlife sanctuary.



Left: Students from Marlborough School visit. Right: Members of the COSMO Kids Club enjoying the wetland.

Threats

The threats to Monavale Vlei are: construction developments; dumping of wastes and rubbish; fires; stray dogs; illegal farming; alien plants; and loss of biodiversity. Upstream land use changes from wetland ecosystems to infrastructural developments are also a threat to the site. Increased awareness on the importance of Harare's wetland rich biodiversity for the ecological underground and surface water is required as well as coordinated protection of Monavale and other urban wetlands.



An aerial view of Monavale Vlei showing the location of a flooded house in Mayfield Estate

Conservation measures

The community through its organization, The Conservation Society of Monavale (COSMO) and its partners; BirdLife Zimbabwe, the Environmental Management Agency, City Of Harare and initially Environment Africa, undertakes daily management of Monavale Vlei. COSMO initiated its conservation by removing 4 tons of rubbish from the Vlei. Following this they carried out constant patrolling, removal of alien plants and fire fighting. In 2005 they halted illegal cultivation. It is declared a wetland by the Government of Zimbabwe.

COSMO has engaged the expertise of local botanists, mammologists, ornithologists, soil scientists, hydrologists and geologists to document the biodiversity of the Vlei. Many workshops, field trips and conferences were held to make all stakeholders aware of the value of wetlands and water. The Monavale model has assisted in changing the mindset of Harare's residents in favour of urban wetlands and has been adopted for other urban wetlands such as Marlborough. A powerful and invaluable conservation tool has been to employ a vlei scout to monitor the biodiversity, counter threats and guide visitors.



Left: Planning students from the University of Zimbabwe visit Monavale. Right: COSMO Kids Club learn about snakes from the vlei.



Left: The flagship bird species Striped Crake. Right: Lapeirousia erythrantha.

For more information on The Ramsar Convention or Monavale Vlei contact:

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