

8. Wilderness Lakes

Geographical Coordinates 33°59'S 22°39'E

Area 850ha

Location About 30km west of the town of Knysna, on the south coast of Cape province of Cape, southern South Africa.

Date of Ramsar Designation 28 June 1991.

Other International Designations None.

National Designations National Park (Wilderness, 1,300ha); Nature Reserve^P (Lakes, 212ha).

Principal Features A series of three shallow, permanent, interconnected coastal lakes (Eilandvlei, Langvlei and Rondevlei) linked with the Indian Ocean via the 4.5km long Serpentine channel and the river Touw. The site includes a dune system, with associated thicket and woodland, coastal fynbos (vegetation dominated by the shrubs *Metalasia muricata*, *Passerina* spp. and *Rhus* spp.), marshes (dominated by *Juncus kraussii* and Cyperaceae), and reed beds (dominated by *Phragmites australis*, *Typha latifolia* and *Scirpus litoralis*). The lakes' submergent vegetation is dominated by *Ruppia cirrhosa*, *Potamogeton pectinatus*, *Chara globularis* and *Lamprothamnium papulosum*. The site supports important numbers of locally seasonal migrant water birds, including *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, *Podiceps nigricollis*, *Phalacrocorax carbo*, *P. capensis*, *P. africanus*, *Anhinga melanogaster*, *Platalea alba*, *Thalassornis leuconotus*, *Plectropterus gambensis*, *Alopochen aegyptiacus*, *Anas undulata*, *A. erythrorhyncha*, *A. smithii*, *Netta erythropterna*, *Oxyura maccoa*, *Fulica cristata*, *Himantopus himantopus*, *Charadrius pecuarius*, *C. tricollaris* and *Chlidonias hybridus*. Resident water birds include *Ixobrychus minutus payesii*, *Rallus caerulescens*, *Amaurornis flavirostra*, *Porphyrio porphyrio*, *Vanellus armatus*, *Gallinago nigripennis* and *Larus dominicanus*. Staging water birds include *Pluvialis squatarola*, *Limosa lapponica*, *Numenius phaeopus*, *Charadrius hiaticula*, *Tringa stagnatilis*, *T. nebularia*, *T. glareola*, *Arenaria interpres*, *Calidris alba*, *C. minuta*, *C. ferruginea*, *Philomachus pugnax*, *Chlidonias leucopterus* and *Sterna hirundo*. Breeding birds include *Anhinga melanogaster* and *Tyto capensis*. The site supports 285 native plant species, 32 fish species (several of which use the site as a nursery area), and a diverse marine invertebrate fauna. The coastal macchia vegetation supports the endemic plants *Satyrium princeps* and *Gladiolus vaginatus*, and two formerly undescribed species (*Silene* sp. and *Herschelianthe* sp.). (1a,2a,2b,2c,2d,3a,3b,3c)

Conservation Issues State owned and managed by the National Parks Board. Increasing abstraction in the catchment area has caused a significant decrease in the amount of water entering the system. Natural flooding should result from the intermittent blocking of the Touw estuary mouth by mobile sand bars. However, the connection between the estuary and the sea is now kept open permanently through artificial means (dredging) to prevent flooding of lowland farm areas. However, further agricultural development in these areas is prohibited. The lakes provide a major form of flood control and their interconnecting channels are dredged to prevent blockage through siltation and growth of aquatic macrophytes. To prevent excessive falls in water level as a result of dredging, a sluice gate has been installed along the Serpentine channel. However, this disrupts the migration of fish to the lakes, and control of water levels via the sluice gate is now thought to be unnecessary. Increased siltation is being caused by deforestation and cultivation in the lakes' catchment area. 35 introduced plant species occur within the site; these include *Acacia cyclops*, *Sesbania punicea* and *Albizia lophantha* which pose the greatest threat to the native flora, and which are controlled accordingly. The introduced fish *Oreochromis mossambicus* also occurs at the site. High levels of DDE and Dieldrin, derived from pesticide use, have been found in tissue samples of the raptor *Circus ranivorus*. Potential threats include eutrophication caused by nutrient input from surrounding agricultural land. The lakes form an important recreational area in the summer and zonation of activities has been implemented successfully. However, there is a proposal for a canoe trail through Langvlei and Rondevlei which could cause significant disturbance. An aquatic biologist and education officer are employed at the site, based at Regional National Park Centre in Rondevlei, and there is a proposal to establish an information centre.