THE LAPALALA RESERVE REPORT

NEWS SNIPPETS FROM AROUND THE RESERVE

VOLUME 4 2025
OCTOBER – DECEMBER 2025

IN THIS ISSUE

AVERAGE TEMPERATURES & RAINFALL

OCTOBER
Rainfall = 72 mm
Min temp = 14.2 °C
Max temp = 28.3 °C

NOVEMBER
Rainfall = 88 mm
Min temp = 15.5 °C
Max temp = 26.2 °C

DECEMBER
Rainfall = 108 mm
Min temp = 16.5 °C
Max temp = 27.7 °C

Total rainfall of 289.2 mm was recorded at Lapalala headquarters from July to December 2025.

A CHALLENGING CHAPTER IN WILD DOG CONSERVATION

By Charli Pretorius

Following months of careful consideration, the wild dog pack on Lapalala Wilderness will be translocated to a larger reserve. This decision marks the end of a challenging yet rewarding chapter for wild dog conservation on Lapalala Wilderness.

Since their arrival in September 2024, the wild dogs have faced pressures that have driven repeated breakouts onto neighbouring properties. Our mitigation efforts – proactive fence inspections, lion scat along fence lines (a natural deterrent), call-ups, and baiting away from boundary areas – have produced no lasting solution. Initially, we suspected that the six yearlings were trying to disperse. However, the pack continued to escape even after the yearlings were confined to the boma; occasionally taking the pups that were born in May 2025 out with them. This confirmed that the entire pack would have to be moved, given that repeated breakouts raise the risk of human-wildlife conflict.

In December 2025, an exceptional veterinary, aviation and capture team was assembled to capture the two alpha adults and their nine pups over the course of three days. Dr Zoe Glyphis conducted aerial darting from a helicopter operated by West Dunes, while Dr Kelsey Skinner managed reversals on the ground once each dog was safe in its transport crate. After the pups were captured without incident, the alpha male and female proved to be far more testing.

The capture of the two alpha adults and nine pups relied on the exceptional coordination of our veterinary, aviation and ground crew.

The male dispersed rapidly, travelling all the way to the Nkwe floodplains before being located via his satellite collar. The alpha female remained hidden in dense thickets until she was flushed out by a carefully coordinated effort on the ground.

Once captured, the dogs were moved to the predator boma where they were closely supervised. The biodiversity team and wildlife protection unit ensured that the pack learned to respect the boma fencing, while preventing injury from the electrified wires or any attempts to dig out. On 6 December 2025, three male yearlings were successfully translocated to Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park, where they will bond with a group of female yearlings to form a new pack. We are finalising arrangements for the relocation of the remaining pack members.

Over the past year, Lapalala Wilderness has grappled with the challenges and cost of containing a pack of wild dogs. The reserve is proud to have facilitated efforts to establish about eight new packs in various locations across southern Africa. Lapalala Wilderness also assisted the Endangered Wildlife Trust by hosting five wild dogs in our predator boma before their release into Liwonde National Park, Malawi.

To date, 27 wild dogs have been translocated from Lapalala Wilderness to reserves across southern Africa, including:

- *Selati Game Reserve (South Africa),*
- *Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park (South Africa),*
- *Rietvlei Nature Reserve (South Africa),*
- *Karongwe Private Game Reserve (South Africa),*
- *Liuwa Plain National Park (Zambia) and*
- *Gorongosa National Park (Mozambique).*

We do not plan to reintroduce wild dogs onto the reserve, however we remain encouraged and committed to support their conservation. By providing a haven for free-roaming Waterberg wild dogs and continuing to assist regional conservation initiatives, Lapalala will remain an important contributor to the future of this endangered species.

The dogs will be confined to the predator boma while they await their translocation.

NURTURING THE FUTURE OF CONSERVATION

By Bridgitte Phillips

Lapalala Wilderness marks an important milestone as the reserve welcomes its first-ever Work Integrated Learning (WIL) student. Bridgeman Maneliso Shongwe joins our biodiversity department in 2026 where he will complete the compulsory WIL component of his Diploma in Wildlife Management through the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT).

A promising young conservationist

At just 22 years old, Bridgeman brings a solid academic foundation and a clear passion for wildlife conservation: His studies at TUT have produced strong results across key subjects such as wildlife science, wildlife management, ecology, and rangeland science, reflecting both dedication and aptitude for the field. Beyond the classroom, Bridgeman has gained hands-on experience during field trips and volunteer work at respected conservation and wildlife institutions. This combination of academic strength, practical exposure, and evident enthusiasm made Bridgeman the top shortlisted candidate for the WIL placement at Lapalala.

What WIL means for Lapalala

Work Integrated Learning is a structured, year-long placement that bridges theory and practice. For Lapalala, hosting a WIL student is about investing in the future of conservation, supporting transformation within the sector, and sharing the wealth of experience and skills we have on the reserve. During his placement, Bridgeman will be exposed to a wide range of biodiversity and conservation activities under the guidance of the Lapalala team. His work will contribute meaningfully to ongoing conservation initiatives, while he fulfils the rigorous academic and reporting requirements set by TUT.

Looking ahead

Bridgeman's appointment is the first of what we hope will become a long and impactful partnership between Lapalala Wilderness Reserve and academic institutions that train conservation practitioners. By opening our doors to students like Bridgeman, we help to equip and inspire the next generation of conservationists.

We warmly welcome Bridgeman to the Lapalala family. His success will reflect our success and investment in the landscapes and species we are committed to protecting.

LAPALALA WILDERNESS CONTRIBUTES TO RHINO REWILDING

By Charli Pretorius

The rhino were released into a temporary boma at Mooimeisiesfontein to the north of Lapalala Wilderness. Here, they could adapt to their new environment without the pressure of intraspecific competition from our existing rhino population before the internal fences were dropped.

Eight southern white rhino have been released on Lapalala Wilderness as part of an ambitious rescue and rewilding project by African Parks.

In 2023 African Parks purchased the world's largest captive rhino breeding operation in South Africa, in a bid to rescue the rhino and rewild them to safe and well-managed protected areas. The initiative, named Rhino Rewild, is a 10-year plan that will see 2,000 southern white rhino translocated to reserves across Africa. More information about the project is available at **www.rhinorewild.org.**

Lapalala Wilderness has a pioneering history in private rhino ownership and conservation, so reserve management engaged with African Parks to assist with the project. The rewilding of eight new rhino supplements the current white rhino genetics on Lapalala.

On 9 November 2025, the rhino were immobilised, notched and processed (fitted with microchips and RHODIS kit samples collected). Individuals that were old enough were fitted with Rouxcel foot collars for post-release monitoring, before being walked into their designated capture crates. Each rhino crate was then lifted with a crane and loaded carefully onto the back of a truck in preparation for their overnight journey from North West to Limpopo. As with many wildlife translocations, there were some unforeseen challenges ahead!

The rhino were destined for a temporary boma that had been constructed at Mooimeisiesfontein to the north of Lapalala. The roads team had prepared the access from Moerdyk Road, however the truck could not make the turn past the entrance through the Nkwe Sliding Gate. Thankfully the roads team was on standby with the grader and TLB to widen the road and pull the truck through the thicker sand... but only after our 'strongman team' attempted to pull the truck through by hand!

The eight rhino were carefully offloaded into the temporary boma, where they were closely monitored for the first 48 hours while their sedation wore off. Once the team was happy that they were all in good condition, the boma was opened and the rhino could explore their new surroundings. We are excited to observe them as they roam free on Lapalala.

Our 'strongman team' was on hand to help the truck through the thicker sand!

FAST, FRAGILE AND WORTH FIGHTING FOR

By Wihan Pretorius

Coalition brothers, CM7 and CM8, pictured here in their prime.

Lapalala Wilderness is home to a predator that delivers some of the most rewarding – and heartbreaking – moments in wildlife management.

As a symbol of speed and elegance, cheetah are unmatched. However, they are constantly vulnerable to other predators, and cub mortality is high even for experienced mothers. Cheetah populations can shift quickly. Keeping their numbers stable requires constant monitoring, tough decisions and a deep understanding of both the animals and the landscape they live in.

This past quarter reminded the team how fragile cheetah conservation can be, as we felt the loss of several individuals from the Lapalala cheetah population.

We suspect that the coalition of CM8 and his brother, CM7, were involved in a fight with another cheetah coalition. The team found CM8 alone, and in a very poor condition. Despite our best efforts, we could not save CM8 and euthanasia was the most humane option. We have not been able to locate CM7 and now assume that he too has been lost.

The cheetah coalition of CM1 and CM2 suffered the loss of CM1 due to his advanced age and underlying health issues. The future of his brother, CM2, is uncertain. Although he is still with us on the reserve, his advanced age and lack of coalition partner is a significant risk. These stories highlight just how unforgiving nature can be, especially for older male cheetah that rely on coalition strength.

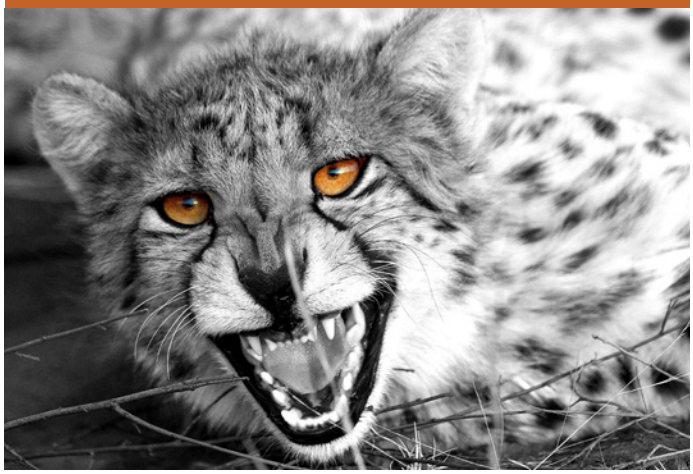
We also lost CF4 after she suffered a serious injury to her Achilles tendon. Despite extensive veterinary care and close monitoring, she developed complications and the team made the difficult decision to euthanize her. It is a small, but meaningful, consolation that her young male cub has since been transferred to Ashia Cheetah Conservation, where he will be raised and eventually rewilded.

Despite these losses, there is encouraging news and real hope for the future. Two of our females, CF6 and CF8, have started denning. We suspect that CF6 may have as many as six cubs, although we have not had direct sightings yet. If all goes well, we could be welcoming up to ten new cubs onto the reserve. For now, we are giving both females the space they need, and monitoring their movements carefully.

We are pleased to report that CF5 continues to do well and is still moving with her two male cubs, CM10 and CM11. As they grow and eventually separate from their mother, they will play an important role in cheetah conservation, either by establishing territories or contributing their genetics to other populations. We have also welcomed a new female cheetah from Welgevonden Private Game Reserve. We are optimistic that she will settle in easily as she is familiar with conditions in the Waterberg.

Lapalala is recognised for its valuable contribution to cheetah conservation. The management team is working with organisations that are actively managing the cheetah metapopulation as we explore the introduction of suitable individuals to further strengthen genetic diversity and long-term sustainability.

Cheetah conservation is never straightforward. It is filled with emotional highs and devastating lows; moments of hope and periods of loss. Every individual matters, every decision carries tremendous weight, and every season teaches us something new.



Complications from an injury to her Achilles tendon sadly led to the euthanasia of CF4 (above) who had successfully raised several cubs on Lapalala (below).

CREATING A SAFETY FRAMEWORK FOR LAPALALA

By Dalene Pitout

The Lapalala health and safety department is currently working on two initiatives that aim to set the benchmark for safety in protected areas.

A comprehensive health and safety management plan

We are in the process of drafting and reviewing a new management plan to address occupational health and safety (OHS) across the entire reserve. This plan creates a practical, living framework that protects our people, wildlife, and environment. The updated plan will align with the latest South African OHS legislation and best practices to ensure that safety is at the core of all our operations.

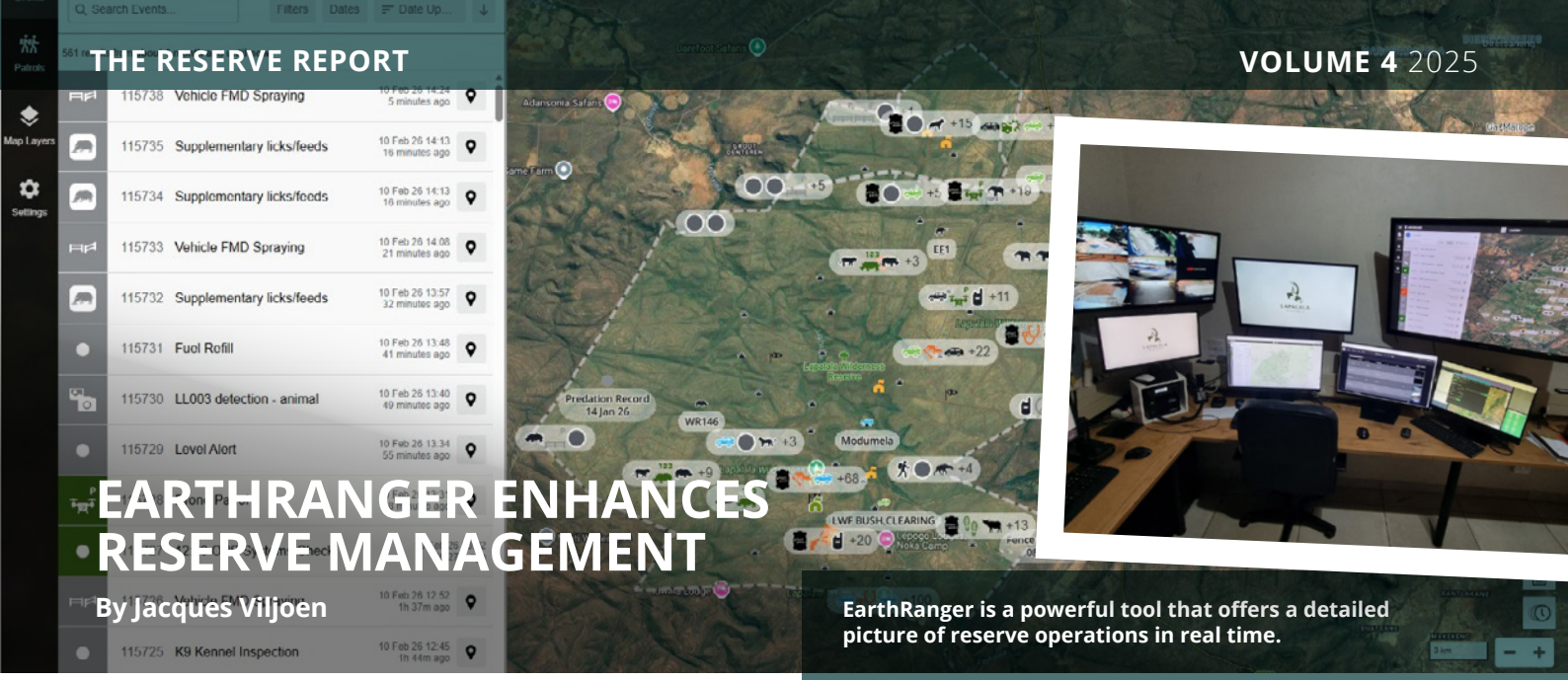
Risk assessments for all operations

The department is conducting a baseline risk assessment across all operational areas, because understanding risk is the first step to managing it. We will be identifying potential risks, whether in fieldwork, vehicle operations, conservation activities, office environments or custodian lodges. Any hazards will be accompanied by a clear outline of actionable steps to minimise risk. By tailoring these assessments to each operation, we can ensure that safety measures are practical, relevant, and effective.

Why it matters

These initiatives are more than paperwork and compliance. They represent a proactive approach to safeguarding lives and infrastructure whilst at the same time reducing risk to the environment and maintaining operational excellence.

The goal is simple yet powerful: to make safety second nature for every person on the reserve.



EARTHRANGER ENHANCES RESERVE MANAGEMENT

By Jacques Viljoen

EarthRanger is a powerful tool that offers a detailed picture of reserve operations in real time.

The Lapalala Wilderness monitoring room records and displays the data that is vital for managing the reserve.

Lapalala Wilderness relies on EarthRanger to integrate real-time data from multiple sources, allowing us to efficiently manage the reserve.

Protected area management requires one to have the right information at the right time, particularly when the landscape is vast and unforgiving. Countless activities take place simultaneously: wildlife requires monitoring and protection; vehicles and people need to be managed; infrastructure and roads need to be maintained; anti-poaching requires coordination; health and safety is a constant concern.

EarthRanger is provided by Ai2, free of charge, to reserves across the world. The software records and displays alerts, events, patrols and incidents in real time, thereby consolidating 'live' data from various sources. The system provides situational awareness that facilitates a quick and coordinated response in an emergency. EarthRanger also generates reports and analysis that allow us to make informed decisions and improve operational efficiency.

RHINO POACHING IN REVIEW

By JP Viljoen

The 2025 rhino poaching statistics are cause for cautious optimism. According to the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, this year saw a 16 percent decline in rhino poaching compared to 2024.

Any reduction in poaching is welcome. It reflects the hard work of rangers, investigators, prosecutors and private rhino owners across the country. There have been several successful interventions, from improved technology and coordination of intelligence to targeted operations and stronger prosecutions.

However, a decrease in poaching numbers does not automatically mean the threat has diminished. There are always questions to consider: How many properties are still carrying rhino? Has the overall rhino population increased or decreased? How many arrests and successful convictions are taking place, and are they disrupting syndicates in a meaningful way?

Provinces and National Parks	2023	2024	2025
SANParks (Kruger National Park)	78	88	175
Gauteng	0	1	1
Limpopo	59	59	36
Mpumalanga	7	4	3
North West	12	18	21
Eastern Cape	17	4	5
Free State	0	6	9
Northern Cape	0	8	5
KwaZulu-Natal	325	232	97
Western Cape	1	0	0
Total	499	420	352

The provincial and national breakdown of statistics for the past three years reveals a steady decline in rhino poaching. In Limpopo, rhino poaching decreased from 59 animals in 2024 to 36 animals in 2025: a reduction of 23 rhinos year on year.

There are also unintended consequences of some interventions. The dehorning of rhino has dramatically reduced poaching. However, even dehorned rhino are at risk as criminals target more animals to make up for the reduced weight and size of the stub of horn that poachers can still harvest.

We cannot look at these statistics and assume that the tide has turned. We should be reminded that the rhino remains under significant threat, and that our efforts need to be sustained.

RESTORING WETLANDS FOR BIODIVERSITY AND ECOLOGY

By Reletile Mokomane

Lapalala Wilderness is making progress in restoring wetlands that sustain biodiversity and maintain ecological processes across the reserve.

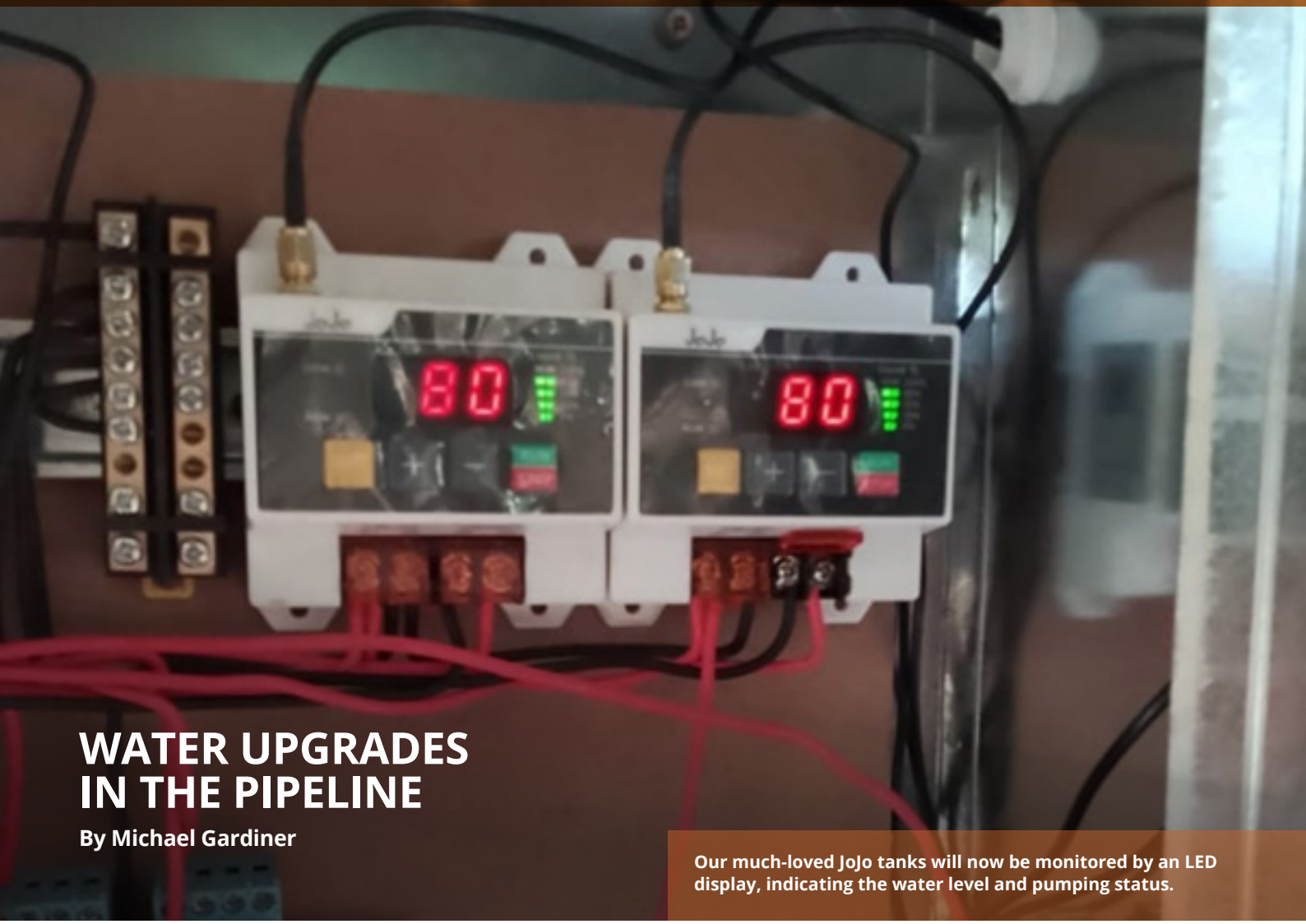
Like many landscapes in South Africa, Lapalala's wetlands have been impacted by historical land use. Past activities have led to varying levels of degradation. We are taking active steps to remove alien invasive plant species and control erosion to stabilise soils and restore natural water flows.

Within Lapalala Wilderness, wetlands form an important part of the landscape. Seep wetlands, channelled wetlands and unchannelled systems contribute to the area's ecological heterogeneity, providing refuge for waterbirds, mammals, invertebrates, and numerous other species.

Wetlands are vital habitats for people and wildlife, yet for decades they have been drained, modified or degraded to serve short-term human needs. In South Africa, wetlands cover only about 2.4 percent of the total land area, and just 11 percent of wetland types receive formal protection, mainly through international designation under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. Many wetlands remain vulnerable to ongoing human impacts. Industrial and mining developments, water extraction, overgrazing, cultivation, and the spread of alien invasive plants continue to drive wetland loss and degradation.

However, there is a growing awareness of the true value of wetlands. At Lapalala, our efforts to restore our wetlands will ensure that they remain functional, diverse, and capable of withstanding future threats, quietly continuing their vital work for nature and people alike.

Wetlands supply essential resources to communities, regulate floods, store and sequester carbon, improve water quality, and support exceptional levels of biodiversity.



WATER UPGRADES IN THE PIPELINE

By Michael Gardiner

Our much-loved JoJo tanks will now be monitored by an LED display, indicating the water level and pumping status.

The technical services department has embarked on extensive upgrades to the technology that supplies water to Lapalala Wilderness.

The reserve will phase out the pressure switches and ball valves that have historically (and often unreliably) managed our water tanks. Liquid level controllers will replace the old ball valve system, seamlessly relaying instructions back to the pumphouse. Gone are the days of running to the pumphouse when the tanks overflow! Overflow pipes will also become a thing of the past, thereby minimising water wastage and lowering power consumption.

Advances in technology and communication allow the automation and remote management of water through the Internet of Things (IoT). Although still in its infancy, it is envisaged that the tank control project will be integrated into the LoRaWan network, allowing seamless monitoring and control of all infrastructure sites on the reserve. The technology will also generate data on water usage, pipe failures, pump failures, etc. that should help to reduce unnecessary travel time and improve response time.

In addition to these technological advances, we have launched our water conservation programme with the installation of auto switch-off faucets in the contractor staff ablution facilities. These will be rolled out to all our public ablution infrastructure. We are also prioritising our response to burst pipes and water leaks, which cause wasteful water loss.

Access to water is critically important. We are constantly looking to improve the way we manage this vital resource, so that our potable water is safe and that usage is wisely managed and controlled.