**Let's conserve our**

**wetlands better**

World Wetlands Day, to be observed on February 2, commemorates

a planetary theme that is much less well-known

than, say, World Aids Day, but whose statistics' are perhaps

even more grim than those for HIV infection and certainly

have a much more long-term effect. Wetlands are crucial

stores of freshwater. Wetlands Day is the 27th anniversary of

.the signing in the Iranian city of Ramsar of the Convention on

Wetlands. Some 105 (including Kenya in 1990) have ratified

the Ramsar Convention.

It is appropriate to ponder the issues of Wetlands Day a little

ahead of the event. One of the most chilling of statistics to

do with the sustenance of human life, indeed of all life, on the

planet is the fact that only three per cent of the earth's water is

freshwater. According to the director of the Kenya Wildlife

Service, 97 per cent of our world's water is salty.

On the planetary scale, the amount of freshwater is constant,

the fact that it is in permanent flux and transformation

notwithstanding, but wetlands are being lost irretrievably all

over the world. On the individual/regional scale over much of

the planet, water is scarce in many life-threatening ways.

The KWS points out in a Press statement this week: "Water

is critically scarce in many places and in Kenya the demand

for fresh water far exceeds supply ... Water is a shared

resource, 40 per cent of the world's population live in the

more than 200 -river basins that are shared by two or more

[countries]. A case in point is Lake Victoria, which is shared

~three East African countries but supplies water to Sudan

- and Egypt through River Nile. Thus managing water with a

sound whole-basin approach requires a strong dose of political

will to co-operate for the common good. Otherwise water,

the source of life, could easily become the source of deadly

confrontations." .

Another grim statistic: A billion people lack an adequate

supply of water and 1.7 billion have no proper sanitation. That

is more than half the world's population. As Dr David Western

points out, wetlands were the true cradle of civilisation, \_

from Mesopotamia and Egypt to the valleys of the Niger, Indus

and Mekong rivers. They are also the future of the race.

~Let us conserve and manage the world's wetlanns the better to preserve life.