Wetland Plants - Dr Jekyll or Mr Hyde?

Wetland plants are often considered problematic but research now proves otherwise. **Edith Webster** reports.

Wetland plants are not entirely villainous vegetation – ongoing research into the biology of these plants, as well as conservation efforts, prove we couldn't survive without them.

So says René Glen of the National Botanical Institute in Pretoria.

"Wetland plants are often considered to be problem plants, growing in wet, smelly places that are ideal breeding places for mosquitoes," she explains.

"They are also often referred to as aquatic weeds, which depicts infestations of unwanted plants, causing severe economic losses."

But, continues Glen, "aquatic weeds" are not all bad – these plants (including *Potamogeton* species *pectinatus*, *crispus* and *schweinfurthii*) point out the most prolific bass fishing areas in South Africa, for example.

"Juvenile bass crowd under the thick weed beds to hide from predators while adult bass hide among the weeds to ambush prey.

"The weeds provide homes for insects, which in turn attract small bait fish attractive to feeding bass."

SUPERMARKET

In the USA, the common "cat tail" (*Typha latifolia*) is considered "the supermarket of the swamp" as the pollen can be used as a flour substitute, the flowers for stuffing pillows, the leaves for weaving baskets and mats, and the rhizomes, which contain as much protein as rice and more carbohydrate than potato, can also be ground into flour, and eaten whole, raw, boiled or roasted.

The South African equivalent "bulrush" (*Typha capensis*) is also benefi-

cial in that it prevents soil erosion, acts as a filter system or breaks the force of water, especially during floods.

"No doubt the most important property of *Typha capensis* is that it is a food source and/or shelter for several wetland animals thereby enhancing the biodiversity of any wetland," says Glen.

"Sadly, these positive 'Dr Jekyll' characteristics are overshadowed by the negative 'Mr Hyde' characteristics, such as vigorous growth, that block waterways."

Nevertheless Glen proposes: "Should we not be concentrating on how to use this potential food source to alleviate some of the starvation in this country instead of trying to find ways of eradicating this plant from wetlands?"

WATERBLOMMETJIE

Take the "waterblommetjie" (many South Africans may be familiar with this plant, scientifically known as *Aponogeton distachyos*). It is often cooked in a "bredie" or stew. This plant is valuable as a food source, it keeps water clean, it is home to (and protects) various creatures, and it can be grown commercially. Unfortunately, in Australia, waterblommetjies have been introduced as an attractive pond plant – where it has lost all its "Dr Jekyll" attributes and changed into "Mr Hyde", Glen points out.

"All these wetland plants only become a problem when they grow in polluted water or are introduced into foreign habitats," she says.

"In the novel *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, during the day Dr Jekyll was an extremely helpful and kind medical practitioner but at night he drank 'potions' that changed him into a barbaric, unkind person," Glen explains.

"Likewise, wetland plants react to the 'potions' people put into the wetlands and then become uncontrollable, as did Mr Hyde."

Glen wonders: "Is it not time we stopped blaming the plants and enforced better management programmes instead?"

Waterblommetjies are often cooked in a "bredie" or stew.

Examples of aquatic weeds

Potamogeton pectinatus

Potamogeton schweinfurthii

Potamogeton crispus

Potamogeton schweinfurthii