Wetlands’ impact on mental well-being – a case study from Uganda

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Introduction
Wetlands, like swamps, shore zones etc. provide livelihood for subsistence farmers in East Africa. Due to a high population growth and rapid development of these regions, these ecosystems are degrading. Wetlands need to be protected and their tangible and intangible values determined. This study aims to gain evidence on the healing character of an inland wetland for locals in Uganda.

Methods – Triangulation
Three sub-studies have been conducted. 290 persons took part. Results from the survey and group interviews provided information for the semi-structured interviews.

Research area
Uganda, Wakiso District, Inland wetland basin 5 villages and towns

Results

Activity space
The wetland provides materials and resources, which are necessary for the locals’ livelihood. Furthermore, the wetland provides financial well-being. People spend their day-to-day lives in the permanently and seasonally flooded areas. The wetland represents an essential part of their lives.

Experienced space
The wetland provokes feelings and emotions. The wetland’s specific biodiversity and its provisioning functions of income and livelihood result in a deep identification with and emotional bonding to the wetland. Food and water security satisfies locals. The social hierarchy onsite, however, hampers these feelings as well as causes distress for local subsistence farmers.

Symbolic space
The wetland has a sense of place, which represents historical, social, political as well as demographical changes of the country. During the Ugandan wars in the 1980s guerrilla forces took the wetland as concealment. After 1995 political stability and population growth fostered cultivation in the swamps. Today the year-round availability of water attracts outsiders, which results in a rapid degradation of the wetland.

Conclusion
Wetlands in East Africa impact mental well-being of their residents. The provide livelihood and income. Based on the ecosystem services, farmers have the opportunity to develop and act freely.

Climate change and the wetlands rapid degradation leads to the loss of health-promoting functions. Unequal distribution of resources forces conflicts and adversely impacts mental well-being.

References
• Völker, S. & Kistemann, T. (2015), Developing the urban blue: Comparative health responses to blue and green urban open spaces in Germany, Health & Place 35, 196-205

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