



ARE WE DOING ENOUGH TO PROTECT OUR WATER SOURCES?

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Start

South Africa is currently facing a serious drought and the threat of water shortages in major centres. Although this is a scary notion for city dwellers who are currently dealing with water restrictions, largely as a result of failing infrastructure, we should give some thought to the farmers and communities in far flung rural areas whose very livelihoods are at immediate risk. In the city, we are so far removed from the source of our water that it is inconceivable to turn on your tap and have nothing come out. But for people who rely on water directly out of a river, they understand the true value of the precious water source areas that feed our rivers.

So where do our freshwater resources come from? Certainly not from a tap! In South Africa we have a number of key 'water factories' that feed the rivers that supply the dams that fill the reservoirs that pump water to your tap. These water source areas can be mountain catchment areas, such as the Drakensberg; grassland 'sponges' like the Steenkampsberg; and dolomitic aquifers like the Marico Eye. These water factories contribute significantly to the overall water supply of the country (as well as beyond our borders) and they support economic development right from their origin to where their rivers meet the ocean.

But many of these water factories are under threat. Some have already been severely degraded – such as the headwaters of the Olifants River (Emalahleni, Ogies) which features a hub of opencast coal mining activity. Polluted water from this area flows through the communal areas of Bushbuckridge and eventually into the Kruger National Park. The source of the Orange-Senqu River is the Lesotho highlands and much of this water is being dammed and transferred into other rivers, often at the expense of local communities' access to water. The Waterberg complex – another high water yield area – has been earmarked as the next Industrial Development Node and water is being traded off for coal energy. In the Karoo – a highly water scarce ecosystem - fracking may pose a serious risk by contaminating vast groundwater aquifers. In addition, the headwaters of the Mzimvubu River is now facing the threat of fracking by a foreign consortium that is putting both the water source and rural livelihoods that depend on it at risk.

The question that we should be asking is: how important is freshwater, really? Do we need to sacrifice our key water factories in the name of unsustainable short-term economic development? The Endangered Wildlife Trust believes that there are smart solutions to both the water and development challenges that we, as citizens of this country, face and it is imperative to address these challenges in a far more strategic and sustainable way. Collective action and strong partnerships are key to effecting real change and we have seen the impact this has had on issues such as university fees and e-Tolls. We would like to see civil society working together with government and industry more frequently and effectively to plan sustainable economic activities; ensure equitable access to water; and implement water-smart solutions at the catchment level. Furthermore, a loud and unified voice, speaking out against the destruction of water source areas is the basis of ensuring a supply of clean water for every South African.

South Africa has developed the National Water Resource Strategy 2 (NWRS 2) and we have identified our National Freshwater Ecosystem Priority Areas (NFEPAs). We know what needs to be done. The NWRS 2 sets out key strategic actions under Water Resource Protection, with the following objectives:

- Manage for sustainability by using Resource Directed Measures (RDM) to set and approve a management class, and associated reserve and resource quality objectives, for every significant water resource in the country.
- Invest in strategic water resource areas by increasing their protection status.
- Maintain National Freshwater Ecosystem Priority Areas (NFEPAs) in good condition and include them in protected area network expansion plans, where appropriate.

- Protect riparian and wetland buffer zones and critical groundwater recharge areas.
- Invest in the strategic rehabilitation of key catchments to improve water quality and water quantity through Natural Resource Management Programmes (NRM).
- Minimise pollution from wastewater treatment works into surface and groundwater resources.

But knowing and doing are not the same thing. If we are serious about protecting our precious water resources, we cannot allow unsustainable and destructive activities to proceed in key water source areas and we need to plan economic development at the catchment level, with a clear strategy for maximizing benefit-sharing to all who share the catchment.

The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) works in partnership with the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA) and Conservation South Africa (CSA) through the Healthy Catchment Alliance (HCA). This Alliance provides a platform to share experiences, provide a diverse set of skills and expertise to a range of projects, and to create a loud and unified voice when it comes to protecting our water resources. The work we do includes; securing water source areas under Biodiversity Stewardship, rehabilitating mountain and grassland catchment areas, diversifying and greening local economies and empowering communities to monitor, value and protect their rivers. We are currently working with local partners, such as Environmental and Rural Solutions (ERS) and the South African Institute of Aquatic Biodiversity (SAIAB) in uMzimvubu, uMzimkhulu and Amathole catchments in the Eastern Cape and southern KwaZulu-Natal, with plans to expand into other priority catchments over the next few years. The Healthy Catchment Alliance was selected as a [finalist](#) in the Biodiversity category of the EcoLogic Awards for our collaborative approach to solving environmental challenges in the region.

It is critical that we protect our water source areas and maintain their natural functionality if we are to ease the effects of water scarcity. Climate change predictions do not bode well for water availability and we need to disrupt the current status quo of water management if we are to build climate resilient communities that value water above all else.

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Bridget Corrigan is the Endangered Wildlife Trust's (EWT) Source to Sea Programme Manager. She guides the EWT strategy for marine and river catchment conservation, based on sound science and global priorities. When she's not developing projects, managing budgets, attending workshops or occasionally getting her feet wet in a river, you can find her hiking in one of the many remote and beautiful places we are lucky to have in southern Africa.

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