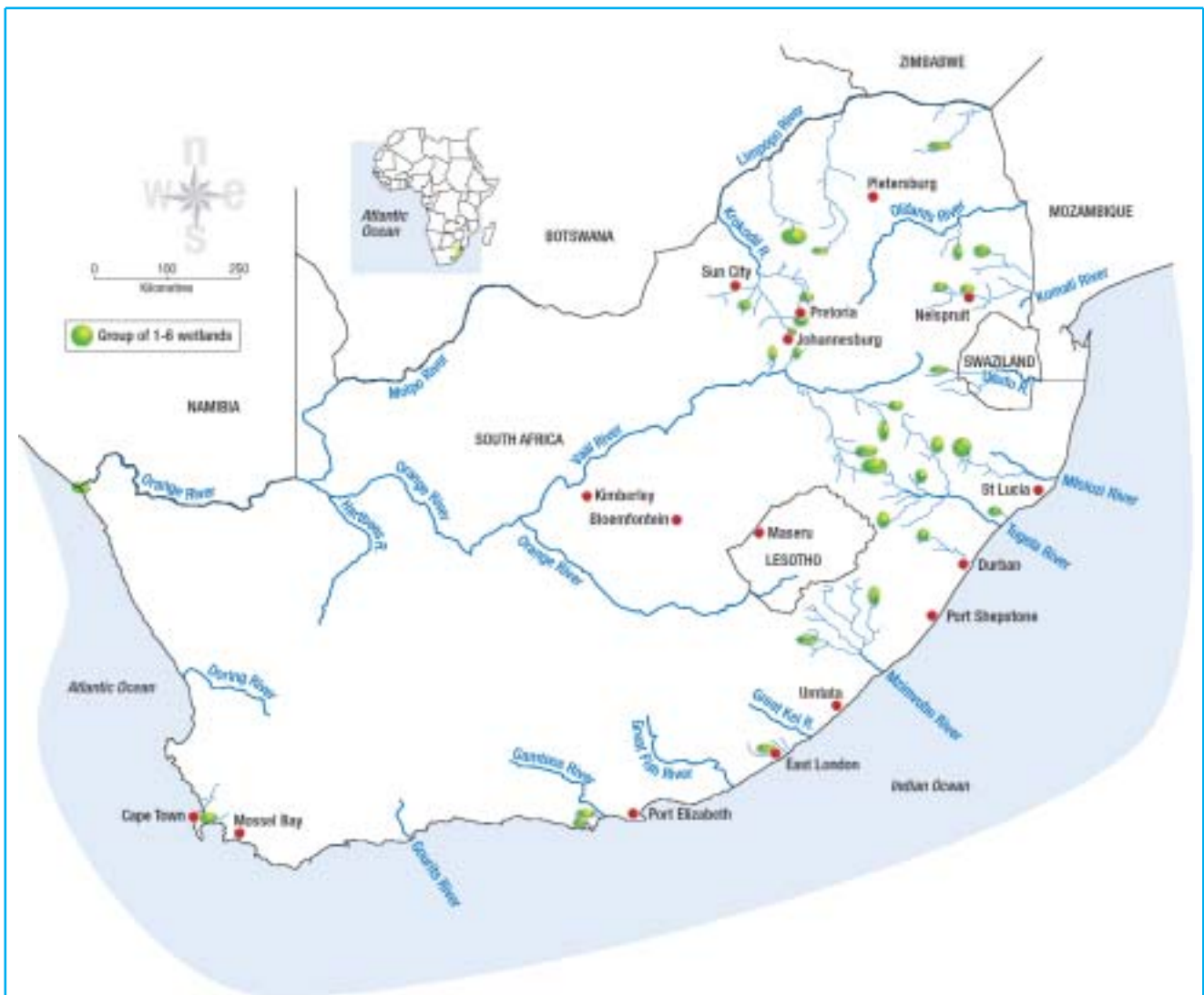


# Working for Wetlands, South Africa



## Basin countries

### South Africa

The two programmes described cover many South African river basins. 'Working for Water' operates in all major catchments, which are too numerous to list. 'Working for Wetlands' has so far been active in about 15 river basins, including the upper reaches of tributaries of the Limpopo, Tugela, Vaal, Nkomati, Oliphants, and Usutu Rivers, as well as the following smaller systems: Berg, Umzimvubu, Black Umfolozi, Krom, Kouga, Blood, Breede, and Sand Rivers

### Priority issues for river basin management

Sixty-five per cent of South Africa receives less than 500mm average annual rainfall, meaning that drought is an ever-present risk. Future projections indicate that by 2025 the country's water requirements will outstrip supply unless urgent steps are taken to manage the resource more sustainably. There are already major problems of supply and quality, with an estimated 8 million South Africans currently having no access to potable water. The growing water crisis is exacerbated by the fact that about half of South Africa's wetlands have been lost. Poverty levels are also extremely high.

It is against this background that the South African government, working in partnership with WWF and others, has initiated catchment management programmes, including the control of water-thirsty alien plant infestations and wetland restoration, across the country, under the banners 'Working for Water' and 'Working for Wetlands'.

### Role of WWF and its partners

WWF has played a catalytic role in both Working for Water and, by working through the 'Mondi Wetlands Project' established in 1991, Working for Wetlands. WWF has also provided assistance with managing and implementing the two programmes, which have seized opportunities arising from South Africa's 1998 National Water Act. This forward-looking legislation is based on the principle of managing water resources for environmentally sustainable social and economic benefit. The Act also recognizes that water reserves are required for both basic human needs and protection of aquatic ecosystems. Key WWF activities have been:

- lobbying key decision-makers in government and business
- raising awareness among government decision-makers and field workers
- developing capacity – through training activities – for rehabilitating wetlands and using them wisely



- forming partnerships to manage wetlands wisely, and then enthusing, guiding, advising and encouraging the relevant authorities and organizations within these partnerships.

## **Working for Water**

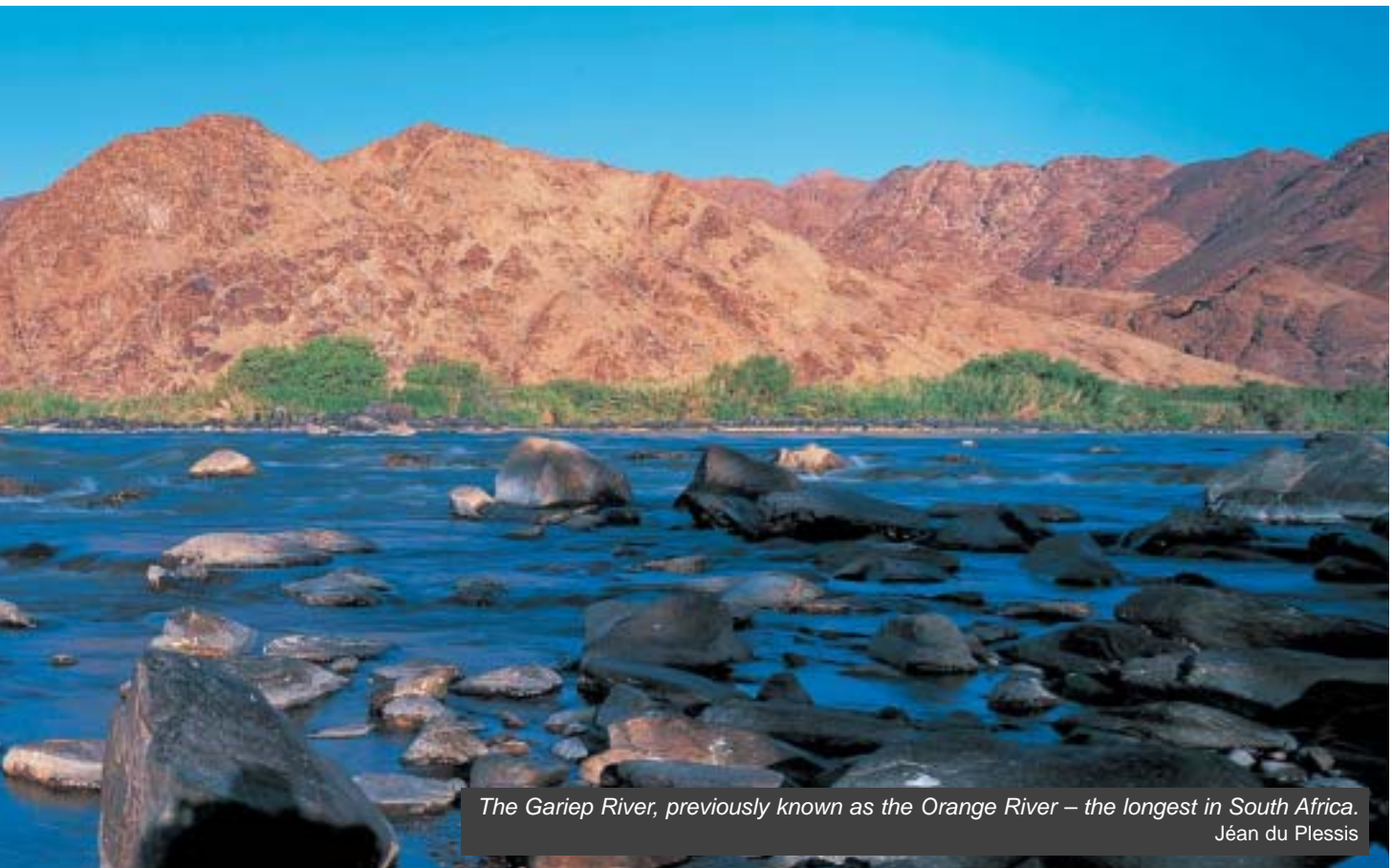
Working for Water, initiated in 1996 and led by the Department of Water Affairs, aims at boosting water supply by clearing river basins of exotic tree species (mainly originating from Australia and South America), many of which consume water at a much higher rate than native vegetation. For example, a large gum *Eucalyptus* tree can consume up to 400 litres of water per day. Clearance of exotic tree cover makes an instant difference to the quantity of water entering watercourses and recharging water tables. Since many of the areas concerned were originally grassland, trees are not replanted. Elsewhere, native tree species or shrubs are planted, as appropriate.

The cutting of exotic trees, control of secondary growth, and rehabilitation of cleared areas are extremely labour intensive. Working for Water

ensures a ‘win-win’ scenario by engaging unemployed people – in particular, women and young and disabled people. The annual budget is now half a billion Rand (more than US\$65.8 million), of which 60 per cent goes in salaries, 10 per cent in management fees and 30 per cent in materials and transport. The programme has given preference to using new and emerging contractors in rural areas and is planned to continue for at least another 15 years. Some of the timber from larger trees is exported to Japan for the pulp industry, with the remainder used locally for cottage industries, such as the making of charcoal and furniture, practised by poor rural communities.

## **Working for Wetlands**

Operating within the overall framework of Working for Water, Working for Wetlands is a public-private partnership. It has an annual budget of 30 million Rand (approximately US\$3.9 million) and involves government departments, private contractors, corporate partners and WWF. Like its parent programme, Working for Wetlands has a number of mutually reinforcing objectives:



*The Gariep River, previously known as the Orange River – the longest in South Africa.*  
Jéan du Plessis

- Water resource protection
- Poverty reduction and capacity building
- Conservation of biodiversity.

There are currently 50 wetland rehabilitation projects under way, employing 2,230 previously disadvantaged people. For example, at Rietvlei, a freshwater wetland close to Pretoria, 55 people are employed in rehabilitating a degraded peatland that was drained in the 1960s for peat mining, dryland cropping and irrigation purposes. In addition, poorly timed annual burning of reeds led to peat fires, while upstream urban townships and industrial areas caused serious pollution. Rietvlei supplies nearly 20 per cent of Pretoria's water and is owned by the municipality. Since the remaining 80 per cent of water has to be bought in, there is a strong economic imperative to manage water wisely and to restore the former diffuse flow of water through the wetland that previously provided natural water purification services free of charge.

Working for Wetlands has enabled the diversion of water from the central drainage canal out to the edges of the peatland, reflooding previously dried-out areas. Small gabions (rock-filled wire baskets) placed at 30m intervals allow the water to back up and then overflow into the desiccated wetland.

Workers are recruited from the nearby township communities for periods of up to two years. Drawing on the government's Poverty Relief Fund, the programme targets the 'poorest of the poor', including single-parent families and those living with HIV/AIDS. Training provides professional and life skills in the form of primary healthcare, basic adult education, gender equality, family planning, HIV/AIDS, first aid, safety, swimming, fire fighting, and financial management. The combination of temporary employment, income generation, acquisition of new skills, and the raising of personal self-belief and self-esteem gives workers an opportunity to escape the vicious circle of poverty.

The Working for Wetlands partners are:

- South African government Departments of Water Affairs and Forestry, Environment Affairs, and Agriculture
- Contractors and workers
- WWF/Wildlife and Environment Society of

South Africa (WESSA) Mondi Wetlands Project, various corporate entities, and water utilities such as Rand Water.

### Conservation method demonstrated

Working for Water and Working for Wetlands exemplify the importance of catchment and wetland rehabilitation within a river basin context. Both projects demonstrate the key catalytic and advisory role that an organization like WWF can play in influencing those with the resources to make a real difference on the ground. Wetlands are promoted by WWF-South Africa as 'water managers', rather than as centres of biodiversity, and wetland rehabilitation is seen as a tool or catalyst for achieving the wider goals of water resource management, poverty reduction and wetland conservation.

### Resources devoted

US\$3.9 million per year from government to fund wetland rehabilitation projects, plus US\$170,000 per year from WWF-South Africa to fund the operation of the Mondi Wetlands Project (which has five staff). (The purchasing power of US\$4 million in South Africa is equivalent to roughly ten times that amount in Europe or North America.)

### Chronology

#### 1991

- Mondi Wetlands Project established by Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa and WWF.

#### 1996

- 'Working for Water' initiated.

#### 1998

- National Water Act (Act No.36 of 1998) introduced.

#### 2000

- July: 'Working for Wetlands' initiated. It takes a further two years of work by all partners to steer the programme to the point where it is operating relatively smoothly.

#### Ongoing

- The South African government has committed funding until 2007. It is highly likely that this will be extended, as Working for Wetlands is helping the government to fulfil its water security, poverty reduction and biodiversity conservation obligations.

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## Lessons learnt

**1. In a water-stressed developing country such as South Africa, water resource *management*, not biodiversity, should be the key issue used to persuade stakeholders of the importance of wetlands**

**2. Integrate wetland rehabilitation with poverty reduction and water resource management**

This ensures the necessary political buy-in from government, the forestry industry, agriculture, and rural tribal communities.

**3. Public-private partnerships can be highly successful**

Governments need help from non-governmental organizations and vice versa. The government can be a powerful partner that can work for conservation and multiply the results of NGO work many times over. At the beginning this may seem impossible, but if wetland issues are presented in the right way, they can become central to government development plans.

**4. It is vital to have a catalyst working at a national level doing the basic fundamentals required to initiate wetland conservation**

The catalyst needs to be an NGO in order to provide the freedom of movement and the freedom of speech to act as an 'honest broker' that governments and business do not have. The fundamentals include raising awareness among government field workers and key decision-makers, landowners and the wider public; developing capacity for rehabilitating and using wetlands wisely; lobbying key stakeholders in government and business; and enthusing, initiating, guiding, encouraging, and advising key target audiences.

**5. A small number of people with relatively few resources can make a big difference – providing the organization embraces a catalytic role**

By adopting a catalytic role, an organization can mobilize a huge workforce and get others in government and business to 'do all the work'.