

Launch of the State-of-Rivers Report for the Buffalo River System
Address by Ms BP Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Maden Dam, Eastern Cape
23 November 2004

Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen.

It gives me great pleasure to be here today in the company of this group of pioneers. The River Health Programme (RHP) has completed 10 years since its pioneering initiative in 1994. It therefore coincides with our ten years of democracy in South Africa.

The programme has broken new ground in many different ways. And as we all know, pioneering work is always difficult – and requires vision and commitment beyond the ordinary.

There are some individuals present amongst us who have demonstrated this commitment often in the face of adversity and resistance. It is therefore a tribute to them that we have come this far and indeed are seeing a growing momentum and support for the River Health Programme.

The Eastern Cape has a special place in the history of the River Health Programme. Some of the initial ground breaking research was done in the Eastern Cape Universities. The academics had courage to embark on an un-chartered path and this was to the benefit of the whole country - today we have internationally acknowledged tools and methods for measuring the River Health Status. We say thank you to these patriots for a bold initiative towards transformation of the academia.

Maybe at this point we need to respond to the question - why Dwaf, under the leadership of former Minister Kader Asmal, decided to start this programme?

Ladies and gentlemen, as we were opening up to deliver services to the previously marginalized, we needed to ensure that our water resources will sustain us. This meant that we needed to find ways of managing our water resources to deliver to all South Africans. This programme therefore preceded and informed our policy formulation processes.

Hence the National Water Act asserted Dwaf as the custodian of the water resources - proposing programmes, strategies and systems that can be pursued and implemented to realise Dwaf's mandate as espoused in the Act.

The River Health Programme must be understood within the context of integrated water resource management, which is about management of water resources and rivers are some of such water resources.

The River Health Programme helps to pay specific focus on the state of our rivers – to monitor them, assessing their biological and habitat integrity. It enables us to have the knowledge of the ecological state of the river in an objective and scientifically sound manner.

The information obtained through research supports sustainable utilisation and control of the deterioration of the aquatic resources.

However, this project cannot be left to be an academic exercise only. We all have an important challenge to demystify the river health programme and ensure its relevance to those factors, which constitute the vision and the agenda of our democratic government. The programme must be interpreted and understood within a particular context that is characterised by the following factors –

- Sustainable development
- Poverty alleviation, and
- Transformation.

The programme can be traced back to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992 where the Agenda 21 resolution, a blue print for sustainable development, was adopted. In its context, Agenda 21 incorporates economic, social and environmental issues pertaining to water resource management and development, a position that was further endorsed by the Johannesburg 2002 WSSD.

The River Health Programme is an example of a programme that measures sustainability of aquatic ecosystems through a comprehensive set of methods and techniques, ranging from measuring the range and biodiversity of aquatic organisms as well as in-stream habitat, river bed and bank status as a substrate for supporting ecosystem dynamics, riparian vegetation, morphological characteristics, etc.

The information contained in this report is vital for local government as well as the province as you embark on social and economic development activities. The information would also ensure that the aquatic resources are utilised sustainably for sustainable development.

A key objective of the River Health Programme is to “package” and disseminate information on river health in such a way as to serve ecologically sound management of rivers in South Africa. The programme also aims to inform and educate the people of South Africa regarding the health of our rivers.

This is significant, as the people have become central to the development programme of our new government. It is important to note that informing, educating and involving people meaningfully are a defining feature of sustainable development.

However, according to yesterday's Daily Dispatch, involving people in river health programme still faces the following challenges and I quote –

- “persuading community to buy into the River Health Programme in the light of more pressing concerns such as the recent cholera outbreak in the Eastern Cape,
- the backlog in service delivery and the fact that the health river programme cannot be interpreted in terms of human health,
- making research outcomes accessible to the public, and
- Involving both men and women in water resource management to ensure effective development, utilisation and management of water resources”.

Therefore we need to ensure that there is a direct link between the River Health Programme and poverty alleviation that would ensure meaningful participation of our people. The Working for Water programme and such other projects can be embarked upon so that the RHP has a practical meaning to all the people, especially the most vulnerable. Conserving our indigenous and medicinal plants is another viable project that could also be embarked upon.

Sustainable river systems should and must benefit the most vulnerable of our communities who are on the frontline of exposure to the pollution - and the first to feel the effects of deterioration in water quality status of water resources.

The National Water Act and the National Water Resources Strategy both recognise that the best way to achieve this is to manage the aquatic schemes at the catchment scale through joint participation by all interested parties. The River Health Programme supports this management process by providing management

information needed by water resource managers and other stakeholders involved in water resources management.

In South Africa the catchment management areas are but one measure to effect transformation in the water sector and are characterised by allowing people to manage a catchment area for the benefit of all those who reside in the locality of a particular catchment.

Today I am proud to present to you the first State-of-Rivers Report for the Eastern Cape: The Buffalo River (Qonce). This is a result of the converging hearts and minds of our aquatic scientists, policy makers, water resource managers and different tiers of government with one common objective – of sustainable development and integrated management of water resources.

The River Health Programme can be seen as one of the success stories. This is the 8th report in South Africa and it demonstrates the success of the whole programme. However, I would like to appeal that these reports should be written in a user-friendly language in order to encourage a wide ranging readership that also targets the poor and the vulnerable. These reports should aim at demystifying the River Health Programme and the entire technical language within the water sector and most importantly they should aim to raise people's interests and curiosity towards the water sector.

Some of the benefits of the programme are the emergence of training courses at universities and technikons, as the academic world responds to the need for trained specialists in freshwater ecology. I cannot over-emphasise the need of involving women and school children in such programmes as these two groups are the most important and effective in terms of educating the nation. We need to note that such programmes should assist us to change the attitude of society towards polluting and destroying our ecosystem.

We are seeing increased amounts of research funding diverted into this important area. Business, institutions, Parks Boards, other Government departments, such as the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, the Water Research Commission, individuals, and many more stakeholders have shown increasing interest in aquatic ecology and the River Health Programme and are the key to its success.

The Buffalo River System's State-of-River Report that we have before us today is based on the findings of river surveys that were conducted as part of the implementation of the River Health Programme in the Buffalo River Catchment, where we are today.

True to the style of most River Health Programme activities, the compilation of this report was a collaborative effort with the main participants being my Department, the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, the Water Research Commission, the Norwegian Agency for Development Co-operation; CSIR Environmentek, Coastal Environmental Services; Rhodes University; Border Technikon; Amatola Water board; Buffalo City Municipality; the Provincial Department of Health in the Eastern Cape and the University of the Transkei.

It is also true, government cannot do it alone. We will continue to appeal to the private sector to also lend a hand and contribute to the programmes that are aimed at improving the lives of the majority for the better – improving the health of the people, the health of our communities and our nation.

I thank you.