

Unveiling of the Taung Dam Memorial Stone
Speech by Mrs LB Hendricks, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry
Manthe Village, Taung, North West
8 September 2007

Premier Molewa
Premier Peters
MECs
Executive Mayor of the Bophirima District Municipality
Mayor of Greater Taung Local Municipality
Members of Parliament
Members of the Provincial Government
Councillors
Traditional Leaders
Programme Director
Ladies and Gentlemen.

1. Introduction

I am honoured to be here to unveil the Taung Dam Memorial Stone. Today we paying tribute and commemorating our ancestors whose graves are buried under the waters of the Taung Dam. So that we acknowledge and remember them, the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry has constructed this memorial stone.

Part of the unfortunate history of our country is that when dams were built during Apartheid the rights of communities and their culture were often ignored, as a result we saw dams like the Taung Dam being built over grave sites without the graves being removed. Furthermore, during the construction of these large dams inadequate attention was paid to the impact on people's lives.

We also saw that they built these dams during that period it was often for only a single purpose – sometimes just for agriculture, or just for industry, or only for water for domestic uses. As a result we see that huge dams were built - yet the people living near the dam were not given access to clean water.

Since 1994 we have changed our approach so that such large projects are in line with our constitution and with our democratic principles. As a result of these changes, today we are seen by the rest of the world as leaders in how to involve communities and protect the environment when we construct new dams.

In 1998 the former Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, the honourable Professor Kader Asmal led the World Commission on Dams which looked at the best way to build new dams, taking into account: Equity, Efficiency, Participatory Decision Making; Sustainability; and Accountability.

By using the guidelines of the World Commission on Dam, when we now build new dams, such as the new dam currently being built in Sekhukune in Limpopo, we work very closely with the community. This approach ensures that not only are the community extensively consulted on the new dam, and their ancestral burial sights taken care off, but also that the community are able to access some of the work and business opportunities that arise from such projects. We have also ensured that in building these new dams the water can be used for multiple purposes, and the local community will benefit by receiving clean water – steps that will ensure for this new dam in Sekhukune that hundreds of thousands of people will benefit.

The approach we now take is very different from what was done when the Taung Dam was built by the former Bophuthatswana administration.

From the World Commission on Dams report we set up a multi stakeholder forum that recommended we look at addressing unresolved social concerns from existing dams and we explore and implement ways for local communities to share in the benefits of dams. My department supported these two proposals and is part of the reason we are here today.

2. A tree of remembrance

Programme Director, in addition to the memorial stone that we are unveiling today we will also be planting a tree in memory of our ancestors.

Each year we celebrate Arbour Week during the first week of September and for the past week we have held events across the country to create awareness amongst our people of the many benefits that trees can bring to their lives. We celebrated trees with our President and the community of Ga-Rankuwa last week Saturday; and the President at that event spoke from the heart about the need to plant more trees across the country and he launched our campaign to plant at least a million trees a year, the majority of them fruit trees.

Ladies and Gentlemen, aside from the many economic and environmental benefits of trees, trees are important for social reasons - and across different religions and cultures they have a special significance. In some countries people plant trees when children were born or they plant them as a celebration of a great event in their lives. People also plant trees in order to remember someone who had died, as a symbol to make sure the memories of that person live on. I hope that in planting this tree today we are sending a powerful message to our ancestors that we have not forgotten them. Through the trees that we are planting in their memory we will also be contributing to building a better life for this community.

Trees can also bring people together and they can be a symbol of reconciliation in communities. Let us look at this tree and the others that will be planted in this community as a way of bringing people together in a spirit of renewal, of growth, in a spirit of commemoration and reconciliation.

3. Heritage Month

Ladies and Gentlemen, the month of September is a very important month in our calendar, because it gives us an opportunity to celebrate the rich heritage we share as South Africans. It is a time for reflection, a time for celebration and a time to recommit ourselves to continue valuing and protecting our diverse heritage. Our former President, Mr Nelson Mandela, in his 1996 Heritage Day speech stated: "When our first democratically-elected Government decided to make Heritage Day one of our national days, we did so because we knew that our rich and varied cultural heritage has a profound power to help build and unite our new nation."

May the Taung Dam Memorial Stone, which will be unveiled here today, become part of our heritage and may it serve to unite the people of Taung and the Kolong/Dikgageng people in particular.

4. Taung Dam

This Memorial Stone is also a symbol of the injustices and insensitivity of many of the developments of the past, and a reminder to us that we should not allow these things in the future.

At the time that the Taung Dam was built studies showed that the Dam could provide significant benefits for food production and food security, however, the Dam's potential could never be fully utilized as no infrastructure was provided to convey water from the Taung Dam to the areas with irrigation potential. We need to ensure that this Dam is utilized for socio-economic projects to the benefit of the communities around Taung, and my Department is currently looking how this can take place. As the Dam also offers tourism and recreational opportunities, the North West Parks and Tourism Board is in the process of establishing a Protected Environment around the Taung Dam. This will mean job opportunities for local people in the Tourism Sector.

Our Government is committed to creating a better life for our people and to the provision of basic services. For water and sanitation, my specific area of work, we are committed to providing access to clean water and access to basic sanitation for all of our people. Lack of access to water and basic sanitation brings the risk of ill-health or even death and undermines people's dignity. We are still facing a backlog in water supply and sanitation in the Greater Taung Local Municipality and I want to assure you that my Department in collaboration with our water sector partners are working to address these backlogs, and within the timeframes set by Government. Surely, the water available from the Taung Dam can be used to support our basic water supply and sanitation programmes.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion I want to say that the Government cares about its people, and my Department will work hard so that there is water available to support basic water supply, support agriculture, feed our people and create jobs.

We feel strong that in building new dams the people who are directly affected by the development of the Dam should benefit from the process. In doing this we carefully plan and manage processes to achieve and reconcile many different objectives.

I would like us to now spend a moment of silence in memory of our ancestors.

I thank you.