



**water affairs**

Department:  
Water Affairs  
**REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

**SPEECH BY THE DEPUTY MINISTER OF WATER AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS, MS REJOICE MABUDAFHASI AT THE LAUNCH OF ATLAS OF FRESHWATER ECOSYSTEM PRIORITY AREAS IN SOUTH AFRICA AT THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL BIODIVERSITY INSTITUTE, NATIONAL BOTANICAL GARDENS, PRETORIA**

Ladies and Gentleman

Water is fundamental to the economic growth and development of this country and to the well-being of all our citizens. There is no doubt that this scarce resource in South Africa should be well managed, protected, used, conserved and developed in a sustainable manner. This is the responsibility of the Ministry of Water and Environmental Affairs, and it gives me great pleasure to launch South Africa's first Atlas of Freshwater Ecosystem Priority Areas that supports these goals.

As South Africans, we are very familiar with the challenges of water service delivery. What we are sometimes less familiar with is the idea that it is not only municipalities that provide these services, but also our ecosystems. While we know that our municipal infrastructure – like taps and dams – brings clean water to our homes, we are often not even aware that this precious water resource is shaped and controlled by the health of the ecosystems through which it has passed.

Ecosystem services therefore, like municipal services, play an essential role in supporting social development and economic prosperity. This ecological infrastructure, together with artificial infrastructure, generates jobs and eradicates poverty.

Deterioration in the health of ecosystems negatively impacts on their ability to continue providing these beneficial ecosystem services. There is no doubt that South Africa's freshwater ecosystems are under increasing pressure. Over half of our river and wetland ecosystem types are already threatened. However, we still have examples of healthy ecosystems.

For example, healthy flows of water from smaller tributaries help to dilute poor quality water in heavily-used downstream rivers. They also restore the natural flow of water that is essential for sustaining important ecosystem services. Keeping some rivers and wetlands healthy serves a dual purpose of promoting the sustainable use of water resources in the catchment and conserving South Africa's freshwater biodiversity.

An important question for us to answer is: how many and which rivers and wetlands do we have to maintain in a healthy condition to sustain economic and social development and conserve our freshwater biodiversity? The maps in this Atlas address this question.

This Atlas provides the first comprehensive assessment of our Freshwater Ecosystem Priority Areas, or in short, those areas of the country that are most important for sustaining the health and continued functioning of our freshwater ecosystems.

Maps have been developed for each of the 19 Water Management Areas in South Africa. The maps facilitate informed choices and trade-offs that can now be made

based on a clear understanding of where our valuable freshwater ecosystems are located. They provide a single, nationally consistent information source for incorporating freshwater ecosystem goals into integrated planning and decision-making processes. As such, they serve as a common reference point for our political leaders and decision-makers to work together to develop and implement policies and plans that will protect South Africa's water resources.

The maps showcased in this Atlas are not only a consolidation of the best available science but also an exceptional example of collaboration between scientists, managers and other practitioners. In going forward, our focus should now be to continue this collaboration and become a world-class example in integrated water resources management and the environment. I am fortunate that my portfolio includes both the departments responsible for water and environment, which will facilitate the use of this information at all levels of government in strategic planning and decision-making.

At a Water Management Area scale, these maps empower communities with knowledge to strategically manage water resources in their own catchments. Securing Freshwater Ecosystem Priority Areas requires management such as clearing of invasive alien plants, rehabilitating wetlands and river banks, and controlling the spread of invasive alien fish. These activities lend themselves to unlocking job creation through the Department's Natural Resource Management programmes, which are already contributing substantially to the intertwined objectives of securing water resources, creating green jobs and conserving biodiversity.

Several recommendations have been made around securing these Freshwater Ecosystem Priority Areas, which the Departments will be giving urgent consideration to:

Firstly, we need to step up our efforts to empower communities and the private sector to be engaged in water problems. As an initial step in this direction, we should seek to **capacitate and employ aquatic ecologists in provinces, Catchment Management Agencies and municipalities** to promote sustainable water development decisions and improve on-the-ground regulatory and extension work with communities and water users. One such example is the **River Health Programme**, which monitors the health of our rivers. Using the renewed strategic focus provided by these maps, we need to strengthen this programme dramatically, and expand its scope to include wetlands.

These efforts should include the **revitalization of the Adopt-a-River initiative**, which works hand-in-hand with the River Health Programme and is aimed at creating awareness among South Africans of the need to care for our scarce water resources..

Secondly, we need to explore new ways of **maintaining the health of Freshwater Ecosystem Priority Areas through public-private collaborations**. There are a number of biodiversity stewardship and catchment stewardship initiatives gaining momentum that mobilise the resources of private and communal landowners in managing the health of their land and water resources, through contractual agreements. Such stewardship arrangements provide tax rebates to landowners and also enable the establishment of contracts between private land owners and the Department's Natural Resource Management programme to unlock labour for assistance with priority activities, such as invasive alien plant control. This helps to create and sustain jobs and empower the Green Economy. Biodiversity stewardship could be particularly useful in helping to **secure our high water supply areas** identified in the Atlas.

Finally, there should be ongoing **strengthening of collaboration between Water Affairs and Environmental Affairs** around managing and conserving freshwater ecosystems. The single Ministry for the two departments provides an ideal opportunity for formalising cooperation around freshwater ecosystem management, and the map products in this Atlas provide areas on which to focus such combined efforts. The recently established **Inter-Departmental Liaison Committee for Freshwater Ecosystems**, under the leadership of Water Affairs, provides an opportunity for the various key role-players in freshwater ecosystem management and conservation to establish shared objectives and to collaborate actively, and to tease out their respective roles and responsibilities in more detail.

The maps in this Atlas are made available to planners and decision-makers through training and web-based tools on SANBI's Biodiversity GIS website. In fact, training and capacity development will begin this week in Cape Town, followed by Pretoria and KwaZulu-Natal. There is also a training course planned for next year in the Eastern Cape. Over 250 water and environmental practitioners will be participating in this training, building a solid foundation and capacity for using these maps meaningfully in day-to-day planning and policy decisions around water resources.

In closing, Programme Director, allow me to express my sincere gratitude to all the participants from so many government departments and institutions that participated in developing these maps. Let us continue building on the momentum of this excellent collaboration all around the country, working together across agencies and sectors to secure these strategic areas that enhance our ability to grow and develop as a nation.

"Saving tomorrow, today

Thank you!