

Restore our wetlands to honour Madiba

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JULY marks Nelson Mandela's birth and presents an opportunity to free him from the prison of being cast as nothing more than a political actor concerned only with bringing about a democratic society.

Portraying him in this way separates him from other important aspects of our lives, which he strove to ensure were part of a society based on human values of dignity, equality and freedom. This is particularly so with regard to the values enshrined in the Bill of Rights, such as the creation of an environment that is not harmful to the health and well-being of the people, and enjoins the government to make sustainable development its priority.

Mandela was aware of the need to

make environmental justice an integral part of the Struggle for freedom.

The National Water Act of 1998 is one of the pieces of legislation enacted to ensure we move away from the belief that water resources are protected and distributed equally. They are not infinite and cannot be used without regard to the fact that we are among the driest countries in the world. The legislation is alive to the right to access clean water and is a tool to alleviate the disparities between the haves and have-nots.

The Department of Water and Sanitation is rallying around such legislation to give effect to a politically just society and a society that protects environmental rights of communities.

Its annual Clear River Campaign uses Mandela's birth month to raise

awareness about human activities that cause pollution, and which are responsible for the poor health of rivers, wetlands and catchments. The department is uniting communities, businesses and civil society organisations to participate in the cleaning of rivers and wetlands through the campaign. The project aims to engage communities and promote awareness and education.

Thus, Mandela would have encouraged everyone to play their part to ensure that the right of access to clean water was a lived reality. He would have agitated that the right included an obligation on each of us to act responsibly by protecting our freshwater resources.

Therefore, active and responsible citizenry is encouraged. Community members must take care of their rivers

to ensure that they are not polluted. We must become active agents.

Thus, the need for water security, particularly in the face of global climate change and anthropogenic impacts affecting our rivers, calls for a unified approach to protect our rivers, wetlands and broader catchments.

To celebrate the birthday of a man of Mandela's stature, we are called upon to do whatever we can to restore the life of our streams, wetlands, dams, canals and any freshwater source. Environmental justice remains part of the Struggle for which Mandela and his ilk fought so gallantly. It is a legacy they wanted every South African to enjoy.

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