

Enviro champs and eco rangers doing their bit for World Water Day

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When the community members of Nzinga requested assistance with the clearing of alien vegetation to improve access for their livestock for grazing purposes, the Sappi-WWF partnership saw this as a great fit for the work being done in the uMkhomazi catchment to improve water security in the area. As a result, a team of 10 individuals has been identified, appointed, and trained to do invasive alien clearing at Nzinga, in the area just upstream from Impendle, close to Bulwer in KwaZulu-Natal.

This project is particularly relevant as we celebrate **World Water Day** (22 March) and **National Water Week in South Africa** (20 – 26 March 2022), and we reflect on the progress that has been made on the Sappi and WWF-SA's (World Wide Fund for Nature South Africa) Water Stewardship agreement, which was concluded in July 2021. Aimed at improving the water security in the uMkhomazi catchment area, which forms part of the Southern Drakensberg Strategic Water Source Area in KwaZulu-Natal, the catchment serves commercial farmers, subsistence farmers and domestic users, in addition to Sappi, which has a large footprint in the area thanks to the location of its Saiccor mill and 42,000 ha of forestry land.

“Importantly, this initiative is also beginning to build relationships and trust with the communities in the catchment area in helping to understand the need to become active partners in preserving crucial water resources, providing ‘Water for All, Forever’,” says David Lindley of WWF-SA, who manages the partnership together with Sappi. “We are encouraged by the progress being made in this water stewardship programme, where the foundations required for social change processes to successfully improve governance and management of our water resources at a landscape and catchment level are being developed. The speed of social change will only progress at the pace of developing trust and firm relationships between all partners and stakeholders on the ground, which takes time. There are no short cuts, and we need to do it right.”

The training that is being provided by the Institute for Natural Resources (INR) is also equipping the participants with skills to secure green livelihoods in future. In addition to the Sappi-WWF funding, their training is co-funded through the Presidential Economic Stimulus and the Department of Science & Innovation through the Amanzi Ethu Nobuntu programme, which focuses on empowering local citizens to be champions of the environment (Enviro Champs) in their local

community, where people living adjacent to rivers are given the responsibility to adopt-a-stretch of river - cleaning, maintaining, greening, restoring, and undertaking citizen science monitoring on that section of the river.



This project in the uMkhomazi is also aligned with the uMhlathuze Water Stewardship Partnership (uWASP), where Sappi plays an active role in supporting improved rangeland health and community cattle management in the uMhlathuze catchment in northern KwaZulu-Natal near eSigcalabeni. Sappi and WWF have proactively worked with community members to form the eSigcalabeni Grazing Association in October 2021, in partnership with Meat Naturally. Meat Naturally is an organisation which partners with NGOs and land users to offer community-based cattle owners formal training on regenerative grazing techniques, rangeland restoration practices, cattle management, stock theft patrol, predator control, and importantly marketing their cattle through mobile cattle auctions.

In both the uMkhomazi and uMhlathuze catchments, these programmes follow the Herding for Health (H4H) Rangeland Management model, which supports livestock-owning rural communities to manage their rangelands, water sources and livestock in ways that could reduce the risks that climate change pose. Climate change impacts on rural communities in southern Africa threaten the livelihoods of the most vulnerable, who rely on natural resources for their existence and wellbeing and are not equipped to deal with these effects on their resources. This is done by empowering communities through professionalising herding and training up herders to become Eco Rangers, by equipping them with the skills to manage their rangelands for greater socio-economic and environmental benefits. Eight Eco Rangers have been identified in the eSigcalabeni area and will shortly start with their training.

These projects are examples of the progress being made, where Sappi and WWF are beginning to work together with many other partners to achieve the objectives of the stewardship programme. This Programme has four main focus areas to improve water security in the uMkhomazi catchment; 1) to improve water governance through multi-stakeholder engagement; 2) to promote efficient water-use; 3) to remove alien invasive plants and rehabilitate wetlands and riparian areas and 4) to strengthen the capacity of local communities in natural resource management.





The reconnaissance of planned and existing projects in the Greater uMkhomazi catchment area, with the establishment of a comprehensive database of partner projects, logging their status and prioritising them on a needs assessment basis, is the next step. A contractor has been appointed to undertake the catchment mapping and to prioritise the critical areas for water security, where long-term projects for the improvement of water quality and quantity can be implemented. The mapping process will be completed by the end of March, and will be followed by a costing exercise, whereafter relevant service providers will be appointed for project implementation.

“The progress made in the stewardship programme with WWF-SA to date has been positive, and we are pleased that we are making good on the promise to work towards prioritising Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 – the right to clean water and sanitation—as part of our business strategy”. So says Hlengiwe Ndlovu, Divisional Environmental Manager for Sappi Forests who adds that the work being done in conjunction with WWF-SA and partners like Meat Naturally and the INR is better equipping our communities to cope with long-term issues that speak to the need to provide water for all, but also with the effects of climate change. “The training of these Enviro Champs and Eco Rangers means that we are helping our neighbours to also take Climate Action in support of SDG13 – but importantly, it also makes them more self-sustainable as they’ll pass on this knowledge for generations to come.”

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