

WATER HAS NO SUBSTITUTE ... citizen scientists take action at Global Water Day in Matatiele

too much, too little, too dirty: SA is one of the most water stressed countries on the planet, and climate change is threatening the way we depend on rainfall for water provision. Water is the most basic of needs: we cannot survive without it.

Matatiele Local Municipality is strategically located in the eastern upper corner of the Umzimvubu basin, providing an important catchment supplying over 1 million people with water. The Matatiele area boasts 10% of its land area as wetlands, the highest in the country: these wetlands act as a sponge absorbing and filtering rainfall, and function like an engine recharging the ground and surface water supplies for the rest of the catchment.

The Matatiele Municipality, together with the Umzimvubu Catchment Partnership Programme (UCPP), arranged and hosted a local event for Global Water Day, as part of National Water Week, on the 19th March. The UCPP team involved the Alfred Nzo District (who sponsored the lunch and tent), Department of Environmental Affairs, Endangered Wildlife Trust, Department of Water Affairs, Conservation SA, LIMA, ERS, WESSA and the Maloti Drakensberg Transfrontier Programme.

Despite several challenges, like having to relocate the venue from the Nchodu wetlands two days beforehand due to strike action on the Qacha's Nek road (which made national headlines!), the event was a major success, with lots of positive feedback from participants.

The event was attended by 9 schools from rural villages in the area: these schools are actively supported by WESSA's EcoSchools programme, and transport was arranged with funds from CEPF/ERS and WESSA to bring the students to the Khoapa wetlands to participate in the event.

Six activity learning stations were set up around the tent which was located near the huge Khoapa wetland 5km from Matatiele town. Participants divided into 6 groups, and each group spent 15 minutes at each learning station: these consisted of a display on water-related careers, a water quality testing station demonstrated by technicians from the Alfred Nzo Water Service Authority, and three hands-on stations including soil augering to delineate wetland margins, soak pits and clarity tubes, and a station for catching and identifying all the *nunus* which live in water and which indicate water health or problems, using a system called miniSASS. DWS, LIMA and ERS also sponsored some promotional gear including caps, stickers, bags, rulers and buckets which were distributed to participants.

Andrew Lucas, DWS Water Quality director from KWT, said that their Department has tried to establish many local water forums, and none have survived, while he has watched UCPP go from strength to strength. He loved the hands-on aspect and encouraged the Councillors to be proactive in addressing water conservation and quality issues in their constituency.

Programme Director Cllr Mshuqwana said she finally understands the water cycle and how we urgently need to act now to avoid 'water shedding' along with load shedding. She provided a lively session welcoming all participants, and facilitating some excellent plays provided by some of the EcoSchools, which prove that Matat has its very own little celebrities! Watch out Isidingo!

The Chief Whip and Cllr Mshuqwana suggested said we should do this sort of day for all the traditional leaders who have responsibility to allocate residential plots, to prevent further wetland margin encroachment. The Mayor, Cllr Mbedla, became an expert in the use of the soil auger to delineate wetlands. Ward Cllr Robert Mnika, who has been a driving champion for water conservation in the area, encouraged students to become involved in water conservation as ambassadors for sustainability in their communities.

The Speaker, Cllr Bosman, said she understands why we need the little *nunus* to indicate water health: she loved the miniSASS and career stations, and said this is an excellent method to encourage citizen scientists. Her vote of thanks speech came up with 'abuse it and lose it' as the parting word for the students from the nine rural schools which participated.



Cllr Bosman (speaker for MLM) and Andrew Lucas (Director of Water Quality for Dept Water Affairs Eastern Cape) catching invertebrates at the miniSASS station.



Left: Mayor Mbedla (in green helmet) and Abongile Ganya (Chief Whip's PA) learn about soil augering to delineate wetland margins with students from Mariazell and Tsikarong. Right: Yonela Sipika from EWT and Lumko Mboyi from LIMA demonstrate soak pits to show water absorption