



Wise Wayz Water Care Project: Community Water Stewardship



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South Africa is at the tail end of what is considered one of the worst droughts to hit the country. Against this devastating backdrop emerged a group of 130 inspirational volunteers, ranging from youth to gogos and mkhulus, who have committed themselves to effectively managing the water resources and ecological infrastructure of their catchment. Through funding from the AECI Community Education and Development Trust, the Wise Wayz Water Care (WWWC) Project was formed to support the volunteers with skills development and career path opportunities in water resource management, enabling them to do their voluntary work effectively and, most importantly, to support their livelihoods.

The Wise Wayz Water Care Project was formed in February 2016, and is based on the lower Mbokodweni Catchment with two communities participating, Folweni and Ezimbokodweni, working alongside each other with one mission – to create a clean and healthy environment – “One river, one team, one mission”. The WWWC volunteers have adopted a 30 km stretch of river in the lower Mbokodweni catchment. The catchment and its communities are faced with challenges ranging from illegal solid waste dumping and disposal, alien plant infestations, poor aquatic health, effluent discharging directly into the river systems, freshwater leaks and illegal sand mining.

“The project has taken a novel, holistic approach to deal with these issues, emulating a bottom-up approach, where community members take ownership of restoring ecosystem health, while at the same time improving their livelihoods,” comments Ntswaki Dithale, the Project Manager at i4Water.

“This is necessary to address socio-economic, community and environmental issues, as a project cannot hope to alleviate challenges in one of these aspects of concern without addressing the others,” says Ntswaki.

To achieve this, the volunteers have identified 6 interventions where they have received training and mentorship support to develop capacity. These are:

- Invasive alien plant removal and control
 - Community engagement on issues of solid waste, water leaks, infrastructure monitoring and education
 - Recycling and the development of buy-back centres
 - Community vegetable gardens with the potential to upscale to commercial agriculture
 - Solid waste removal from water courses
 - Safety Health & Environment (SHE) also forms an integral part of training and awareness
- Water quality monitoring by volunteers using citizen science tools developed by WRC project K5/2350

The two-pronged approach of this type of programme sees the teams improving water quality and quantity by removing solid waste and invasive alien plants, and at the same time developing capacity within the broader community to understand the impacts of their actions on the environment. The development of capacity will facilitate better decision making in dealing with key environmental issues.



Teams engaging with their fellow community members in a knowledge sharing and receiving dialogue to build the understanding of socio-ecological challenges and come up with collective solutions.



Far left: Teams removing solid waste from a stream Middle: Volunteers who are part of the monitoring team testing the quality and health of the river using citizen science tools such as the E. coli swab to measure the amount of E. coli colonies present in the water, and (far right) using a clarity tube to measure the clarity of the water

The added component of environmental monitoring ensures that the teams are able to track the impact that their efforts are making on the quality of the water entering the Mbokodweni River.

Ntswaki further stressed that another unique component of the project is the partnership between business, community and local municipality. Through funding from the CEDT the volunteers have been able to focus their work and take it to a new level where their efforts are measured and they are acknowledged for the contribution that they are making to improve river health.

Kirsten Mahood, who co-manages the project with Ntswaki, says, "The role of local municipality cannot be overlooked, and they have played a critical role in supportive training and engagement, to promote a sense of self-worth within the teams, knowing that the work they are doing is recognised by the municipality for the value it is adding to the City."

Kirsten further adds, "An example of this is that teams identified a municipal water pipe that had been leaking for over 3 years (8 million litres of potable water lost in that time!)". Through understanding the reporting structures within eThekweni Municipality, the team reported the leak and it was resolved within a week of reporting."

According to Ntswaki, to achieve these outputs much emphasis has been placed on intensive training and skills development, which has included SHE, water safety, environmental monitoring, and the development of a research programme to create useful data to share with the key role players, such as AECl, local government and the community.



Top: WWWC volunteers recycling solid waste removed from streams and rivers. Bottom: Volunteers removing alien invasive plants in one of the streams

The volunteers of Wise Wayz Water Care have seen the bigger picture of the impact that they are having, not only on the environment, but also their own livelihoods, and that of the community at large. They are grabbing opportunities with the intent to grow their initiatives. In a country where volunteerism on a large scale is almost unheard of, these teams are bucking the trend and charting a course to a better South Africa for all.