

Water history

Conserving SA's rich water heritage

A completed Water Research Commission (WRC) study provides a progress update on the South African water history archival repository (SAWHAR) project at North-West University's Vaal campus.

The need to preserve SA's water heritage

Deliberations on the viability of a potential water history archive started in mid-2012 when a number of stakeholders in the water sector met with officials of the WRC in connection with research-related matters. At the time there was a need articulated for the conservation of South Africa's water heritage.

Consequently, a number of stakeholders were identified. These included officials in the Department of Water Affairs (now called the Department of Water and Sanitation or DWS), retired engineers who were former officials of the department, officials of the National Archives Repository (NAR) in Pretoria, representatives of an engineering consultancy that has done considerable research for the DWS, as well as some members of the management at the WRC.

In February 2013 a Water Dialogue sponsored by the WRC and focusing on the SAWHAR project brought the initiative to the attention of stakeholders in the water sector and academia. There was considerable interest in proposals mooted for the establishment of an archive that made provision for the digitisation of material.

Moreover, the idea was mooted that the SAWHAR initiative should become part of InterPARES, an international consortium of archival specialists with their headquarters at the University of British Columbia, in Canada.

Inclusion of Waterlit

Part of the SAWHAR project included a donation from the WRC of the Waterlit Collection that had been developed at

the CSIR between 1974 and the early 1990s. The collection was transferred from Pretoria to the library of NWU (Vaal) and ordered in a proper sequence as the first collection of SAWHAR in the first half of 2013.

Waterlit is home to more than 300 000 items related to water. In the 1990s the collection's catalogue was considered to be the largest of its kind in the world before its incorporation into an ever larger international water database.

Several archival collections have been donated to SAWHAR since 2012. These include a collection of documents that were substantial enough for the creation of an archive of the Standing Committee on Water and Sanitation.

Other archives that started taking shape included an archive of SAWHAR itself; as well as the personal collections of material by former DWS officials and water sector researchers. An electronic collection of materials collected in South Africa by a Finnish scholar, on the country's water history, was also taken up as the first digital collection of SAWHAR.

A request by the WRC for their documents to become part of the SAWHAR digital archive, has had a most favourable response from NWU (Vaal) and the recommendation is that attention be given to the development of a strategy to accommodate the WRC archive in the new knowledge and research commons on the campus.

Opportunities and concerns

The final report flowing out of the study provides an overview of the progress made towards the establishment of the SAWHAR. Details are provided of the organisational

structure and lines of communication established with key stakeholders.

The report also discusses the need for a heuristic project aimed at collecting archival information that represents contemporary historical perspectives on water in South Africa. These sources need not necessarily be institutional in nature, but should be explorative and representative, specially of community perspectives on the water history of everyday life in South Africa.

Much of the information will form part of indigenous and social knowledge emanating from personal historical memories and oral traditions.

At the outset of the SAWHAR project a number of concerns were articulated by senior representatives of South Africa's water sector, that much of the information on the DWS, at its Pretoria offices as well as the many regional offices of the department across South Africa, were in danger of getting lost.

Members of the SAWHAR team held talks with senior officials of the NAR in connection with the storage of the government department's documents. It was evident that not all relevant materials from the department's head office had been transferred to the NAR in the twentieth century.

With the exception of a few small archives, hardly any material on the department was housed at the NAR in Pretoria. The talks also pointed to the problem that the NAR did not necessarily have sufficient space to accommodate all the department's materials.

Based on deliberations with current and former officials on the DWS there is reason to believe that attention needs to be given to measures aimed at preserving a part of South Africa's water heritage as reflected in the DWS's documentation.

Recommendations

It is recommended in the report in the report that a research and reconnaissance team consisting of an experienced archivist, as well as an official of the department, in collaboration with a qualified historian, visit a number of regional

offices of the DWS to make an assessment of the department's local documentary material and how it is preserved.

It is further recommended that report be compiled on:

- The condition of the documents in storage at the regional offices of the department
- The relative importance of the available documentation
- The need for archiving the material.

Thirdly, relations should be established with regional offices of the National Archives Service to negotiate for the accommodation of archival material of the regional offices of the DWS.

In a second phase a number of social science graduates should be appointed as officials in DWS with the aim of ordering the department's historical records. The material can then be transferred to the nearest regional branches of the national archives repository.

While ordering the hard copy archives, attention should simultaneously be given to the digitisation of the archives. It is advisable that the DWS take this responsibility.

For material after 1980 there should be a significant corpus of digital documentary information available. That information should be consolidated with the assistance of officials in the respective information technology divisions.

In view of the fact that the objective is to develop SAWHAR as a digital archival repository, the research report also deals with matters of copyright and digital documentation. While it is accepted that as an archival repository SAWHAR will focus primarily on the storage of primary documentary material for preservation and digitisation, there could be some legal implications if previously published material is copied and placed electronically at the disposal of researchers who are making use of the SAWHAR facilities.

Further reading:

To order the reports, *The South African Water History Archival Repository (SAWHAR) project at North-West University (Vaal) and a historical overview of the Waterlit collection (Report No. KV 326/14)* contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340, Email: orders@wrc.org.za or Visit: www.wrc.org.za to download a free copy.