



Constructed during the 1930s, the Vaal Dam remains one of the largest dams in South Africa and the main supply of bulk water to the country's economic heartland, Gauteng.

SA's Rich Water History Unearthed

Water remains one of the most influential factors in South Africa's history it has been revealed by a recently published Water Research Commission report. The report, A Hydropolitical History of International River Basins, summarises the findings of a study of the country's four international river basins – the Orange, Limpopo, Incomati and Maputo.

This is the first time that the hydropolitical history of these major international river systems in South Africa has been captured in one coherent document. As the authors point out: "From the beginning of South Africa's history water has played an important role in the shaping of the country, not only demographically, but also politically. Water availability helped to determine where and how humans lived, and influenced the way in which they relate to each other. By analysing the history of these river basins we can contextualise the current patterns of conflict and cooperation between riparian countries."

The rivers' development has come a long way since the first humans, the San and the Khoi-Khoi, found their way to the southern tip of Africa about 2 000 years ago. Today they are interconnected through a multi-faceted system of inter-basin transfers. Not only are the four rivers linked to each other, they are also linked to other national river basins, such as the Fish and Sundays rivers in the Eastern Cape.

FINDING ECONOMIC VALUE IN WATER

While rivers such as the Orange had always been valued as a source of



Courtesy of DWAF

water and food for South Africa's indigenous people, it was the Europeans who first attached economic value to it. Being the first large river to be encountered when whites started to move into the interior of South Africa, it was also the first river to be exploited. In fact, plans to develop the Orange River have been found as far back as 1850, indicating that the Orange River Project dates back much further than the 1960s when construction started on what was then one of the biggest projects of its kind in the world.

The Gariep Dam (then known as the Hendrik Verwoerd Dam), near Colesberg, is the main storage structure within the Orange River. From here water is supplied in two directions, namely westward along the Orange River (via hydro-electric power generators) to the Vanderkloof Dam, and southward through the Orange-Fish Tunnel to the Eastern Cape.

While the development of the country's water resources was sparked by the discovery of diamonds in 1867 and gold in 1886, projects were implemented in seriousness after the great depression and drought of the early 1930s. Most of the projects were implemented during the time of the world economic boom (from about 1930 to mid-1970s), an indication that population growth and socio-economic development are some of the most important drivers behind the implementation of such projects. Apart from the Orange River Project other inter-basin transfers include the Tugela-Vaal project, the Vaal-Gamagara Scheme, and the Usutu-Vaal Scheme, among others.

Interestingly, the project team found that international cooperation dates back much further than 1926, when South Africa signed an agreement with Portugal regarding rivers of mutual interest (the Limpopo being one). In 1899, the Aliwal North Water

ALL IN A NAME

The Orange River (above) was named after the House of Orange by Colonel Robert Jacob Gordon during his expeditions to the river in 1777. Before the river had been known as the Gariep ('Great River'), by the Khoi-Khoi or Dragon River by the San.

Supply Scheme and the Odendaal Stroom Scheme were discussed between the Cape Colony and the Orange Free State (parts of the Orange River formed the border between the two). Notwithstanding a joint conference between the two governments, the outbreak of the

Anglo-Boer War later that year put a stop to the implementation of the project.

Today, a number of international agreements and treaties have been signed between South Africa and its neighbours regarding the international rivers. According to the authors, these agreements and treaties are positive aspects that bode well for future cooperation within the international river systems.

ASSISTING A MINORITY

Many of the country's water resource development projects implemented during this period, including the construction of the Hartbeespoort and Vaal dams, were done to create employment among so-called poor whites. Politics started playing an even more important role in the development of South Africa's water resources as project after project was implemented in all four river basins for the benefit of a minority white electorate, especially after 1949, when the National Party came to power.

Water also played a central role in the establishment of Bantu homelands, especially when irrigation projects were set up to supply water to these territories' agrarian economies. Thus, water was not only an economic resource, but also one with which the government could advance its ideological and political agendas.

Between the 1960s and 1980s, South Africa found itself isolated and ostracised within the world community as a direct consequence of its apartheid policy. The policy had international and national policy dimensions and reactions: the Bantustans, international mandatory and punitive sanctions, the armed struggle of the African National Congress (ANC) and other black resistance organisations, the South Africa armed forces' fight against communism in Angola, the State's search for security and



Courtesy of TCITA

The Katse Dam, part of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, arguably the country's greatest water engineering feat yet.

status, the widening disparities of the haves and have-nots (not only in terms of money but water resources as well) and the implementation of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, a massive, multi-dam scheme built to divert water from Lesotho's Maluti Mountains to South Africa's industrial heartland Gauteng.

When the political transformation in South Africa was started on 2 February 1990 by the then President FW de Klerk, the country was a divided society, both politically and economically. The disparity between rich and poor was stark: nearly 18 million people, most of them rural blacks, had no access to safe drinking water or sanitation facilities.

A NEW BEGINNING

In 1994, the ANC was elected the ruling party and Nelson Mandela became the country's first democratically elected president. Through the Reconstruction and Development Programme the government started to address the disparity between racial groups, with the urban and rural poor targeted as the main beneficiaries to receive safe water and sanitation facilities.

The start of the twenty-first century has also been heralded by another change: whereas farmers were lobbying for the implementation of irrigation projects in the arid parts of the country in the nineteenth century, schemes today are directed by environmental considerations as well as considerations for those affected by these large projects.

One of the most significant events of recent times has been the hearings for southern African Communities affected by large dams held by the World Commission on Dams in 1999 which included testimonies from Xhosa labourers displaced by the construction of Gariep Dam.

Water is not only a life-giver, but also a powerful political tool. It is the elixir of life that will sustain future South African generations.

*To order the report, Hydropolitical History of South Africa's International River Basins, **WRC Report No 1220/1/04**, contact Judas Sindana or Rina Winter at Tel: (012) 330-0340; Fax: (012) 331-2565 or E-mail: publications@wrc.org.za* 