



Courtesy of SA Tourism

Material dependency of rural communities on rivers is well documented, however, little is known about the spiritual connection people have with rivers.

While rural and peri-urban communities' traditional cultural connections to river systems might be waning under the influences of Western civilisation, new emerging connections are taking their place based on contemporary belief systems, a new report published by the Water Research Commission (WRC) points out. Building on these existing and new connections could go a long way in safeguarding the country's rivers. Lani van Vuuren reports.

The report is based on a WRC-funded project undertaken under the auspices of the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Institute of Natural Resources in Salem, a peri-urban community outside Durban. This traditional area has an estimated population of 20 000.

A survey was undertaken among

residents to determine their socio-economic and cultural dependence on the adjacent uMlazi River. According to project leader Dr Joan Jaganyi, this research initiative sought to improve understanding of the relationships between the needs of rural households, the river system and sustainable use, especially as it pertains to determination of the Reserve.

RURAL COMMUNITIES AND RIVERS

In Africa, belief systems and values play an important role in the way people (especially rural communities) respond to their environment. In the past belief systems of certain rural communities have facilitated the safeguarding of river systems.

It is reported that in southern Africa, in particular, pools, rivers and expanses of water have been regarded with a mixture of awe, fear and reverence by indigenous communities.

However, these belief systems have not escaped western influences and, as a result, some rural communities no longer appreciate some of their traditional beliefs, especially those that are far removed from realities.

Meanwhile, modern South African water law makes provision for reserving a quantity of water of appropriate quality to meet the basic needs people have for water and to sustain aquatic ecosystem functioning (the Reserve). This encourages the needs of rural people to be perceived in material terms, for example, water, fish and construction materials, yet it commonly fails to take into account remaining spiritual needs.

TRADITIONAL VS MODERN BELIEFS

The Salem survey showed that certain traditional values pertaining to rivers are indeed alive and well. While 70% of the respondents claimed to use the uMlazi River frequently for material needs, such as washing, bathing and watering livestock, more than half (47%) of the respondents said they used the river for traditional ceremonies.

This suggests that even if provision were made to accommodate other activities such as bathing, and watering livestock distant from the river, a majority of the people would still use the river. According to the research, the fact that users who go the river for traditional activities are drawn from all age classes and genders implies that traditional practices are still important, notwithstanding the changes that have been and are still being experienced by the community.

About 73% of respondents acknowledged belief systems related to rivers. They described these as the presence of water spirits that manifests as crabs, mysterious snakes at times, or creatures with half-human, half-fish physical features. A further 65% of respondents identified rituals related to the river. Of these the majority identified modern baptism rituals performed under the growing Zion Christian Church.

River resources play a central role in the spirituality of the Zionist. This is found in baptism, and adherents to the church believe that without baptism one cannot become a member of the church. Hence, in the absence of a river, and more particularly a river that exists in a condition that is acceptable, certain aspects of worship will be greatly affected.

Thus, the report argues, while there may be a declining prospect for using traditional belief systems to strengthen the commitment of civil society to river system management, there might be growing opportunities to seek connection between emerging religious belief systems and river management.

Importantly, these norms and values connecting people to their rivers underpin behaviour that can support responsible management of the use of river resources. The majority of people questioned at Salem showed concern about the condition of the uMlazi River, but they were unclear of the role they could play in protecting the river.

It is important then that these relationships with rivers should be considered in terms of the Reserve not only because such determinations may hold negative consequences for these people, but also because the opportunity exists to mobilise these constituencies in co-management of river systems.



TRADITIONAL CEREMONIES STILL CONDUCTED AT UMLAZI RIVER

- ◆ **Umemulo:** A traditional ceremony to celebrate the good behaviour of young Zulu girls who have maintained their virginity to the 'marrying age'. This involves bathing in the river and the initiates return from the river wearing reeds or traditional attire. The belief is that once a young girl has undergone this ceremony she will achieve a successful marriage.
- ◆ **Umsenga:** This is a reed dance, whereby young girls go to the river, cut reeds and take to the Inkosi's or Chief's palace as a gesture of honour and respect. These reeds would be used to thatch houses or make crafts, mats and so on after the ceremony. The Umsenga ceremony also provides an opportunity for the Chief to see the young girls in the community and to choose another wife.
- ◆ **Unomkhubulwane:** A ceremony that involves women in the community going to the river to ask the goddess of the river (Unomkhubulwane) to give a blessing for a good harvest. They do this by throwing seeds into the river.
- ◆ **Weddings:** The bride and her entourage go to the river first thing in the morning to bathe before the main ceremony. This signifies a belief that this removes evil spirits and is a blessing to the ceremony, and brings luck to the marriage.
- ◆ **Death:** Bereaved mourners (usually family members of the deceased) assemble at the river as a sign of cleansing so that another death does not happen in the family.