



Tenth Anniversary of River Health Programme

A report celebrating the first decade of the implementation of the eminent River Health Programme (RHP) is now available. Liesl Hill and Lani van Vuuren report.

The RHP was initiated 13 years ago as a response to the need for more detailed information on the state of South Africa's aquatic ecosystems, at a time when the Department of Water Affairs & Forestry's (DWAF) management focus was broadening from end-of-pipe monitoring to an integrated water resource management approach. The programme uses several ecologically-based approaches and methods, some uniquely South African, to determine the state of river ecosystems.

The overall purpose of the programme, supported by partners such as the Water Research Commission and CSIR, is to provide information on the ecological state of river ecosystems in South Africa to support the management of these rivers. About 13 river systems from the Crocodile River system to Cape Town's rivers have been assessed to date.

The latest report, *Achievements of the River Health Programme 1994-2004*, reflects on the first ten years of the programme's existence, from the initial planning phase to its implementation. The report provides an overview of the achievements, challenges and lessons learnt during this period. Moreover, it provides a synthesis of the ecological health and condition of many rivers in South Africa that were assessed as part of the RHP's State-of-Rivers reporting.

In view of present signs that globally, inland water resources are under immense pressure due to population growth and increased water resource demands, the value of biological monitoring, and hence the RHP in South Africa, cannot be over-emphasised. During the past ten years the RHP has brought the importance of aquatic ecosystems to the attention of stakeholders through awareness creation and capacity.

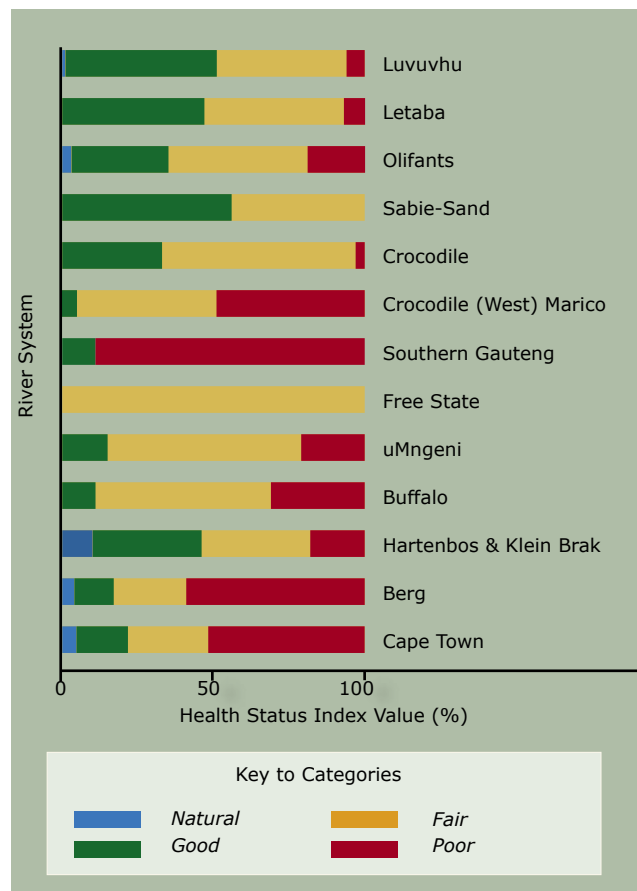
The report importantly points out that DWAF is not solely responsible

for safeguarding South Africa's rivers. Other government departments, provincial and local authorities, industries, agricultural organisations, rural communities and even individual landowners all have a share in ensuring the protection of the country's aquatic resources.

The river health assessments have shown that some of the pressures on the country's river systems are specific to a region, while others occur throughout South Africa. These pressures include urbanisation, overexploitation and modification of rivers and streams, increased demand on sewage treatment works, water supplies and solid wastes, as well as illegal dumping of solid waste, among others.

As the report concludes, aquatic ecosystems, such as rivers and wetlands, provides immeasurable benefits, either directly in the form of water or indirectly in the maintenance of vast ecosystems that underpin our survival. Despite this, we are changing these water resources so dramatically that the health of many rivers and wetlands is precarious.

- To download the report go to www.csir.co.za/rhp/state_of_rivers.html or contact Joyce Maluleka at Tel: (012) 808-9500 or e-mail: malulekaj@dwaf.gov.za



The ecological status of all river systems assessed by the River Health Programme to date.

