

Keep Sabie River pristine

SA'S PRIDE: ONE OF THE MOST BIODIVERSE SYSTEMS WITH 46 FISH SPECIES

» **Concerted effort needed to maintain river systems to ensure survival of fish.**

Amanda Watson

There's a lot more to water than a hot cup of coffee or a cool drink on a hot day, as it not only sustains life but life cycles within – and beyond – river banks.

Standing on the Sabie River bank in the Kruger National Park (KNP), Lower Sabie area, SA National Parks (SANParks) freshwater ecologist Robin Petersen called the river one of the most pristine in Africa, and an extremely important river system in South African.

According to a State of the Rivers report by the department of water affairs and forestry, Sabie River has its source at 2 130m above mean sea level in the Drakensberg Escarpment, drops into the Lowveld and joins the Sand River inside the KNP.

"It is one of the most biodiverse river systems in our country with 46 species of fish," Petersen said. "The Sabie has a high conservation status and should be protected and maintained as a pristine river."

Pristine doesn't mean one should drink the water without boiling it first but, rather, that it reflects natural hydrology, biodiversity and features before human settlement.

It's also a beacon for the South African effort towards World Fish Migration Day, taking place today.

Dr Gordon O'Brien of the University of KwaZulu-Natal said the spin-off from allowing fish to spawn in traditional, healthy, breeding grounds meant more food for natural predators and



NEEDLES. Tiger fish have sharp teeth.

Pictures: Amanda Watson

people. But because a river was exposed to human interference beyond the borders of the ecologically sensitive Kruger, it had some of the worst pollution in the world.

"The Olifants River is highly impacted, the Crocodile River is impacted and the condition of other river systems is poor, which affects the conservation potential," he said. "It affects the systems and the surrounding communities."

Petersen explained that the bridge across the river just past the Lower Sabie camp had formed a dam wall, which had prevented many species from returning to their spawning grounds. He noted the former spillway had been converted into a "rock ramp fishway", the only example of its kind in South Africa.

"All the rocks were artificially placed and cemented in place. Studies were done on what fish needed in terms of certain amounts of water. They need resting stations, and all the rocks were placed with regard to the need for certain hydraulic features, so they can navigate the rapids and go where it needs to go in order to spawn," Petersen said.



RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT. SANParks' aquatic biodiversity management manager Dr Eddie Riddell, left, and freshwater ecologist Robin Petersen on the bank of the Sabie River in the Kruger National Park this week.



GOOD CATCH. Wilko de Bruijne, an engineer from the Netherlands, holds a tiger fish caught in the Sabie River, in Lower Sabie, this week.

"Right now, SANParks is removing the Kanniedood Dam wall on the Shingwedzi River."

Explosives were used by South African Army engineers to blow up the wall, and followed on the

previous removals of Ngotso Dam, Ngotso Weir and Gudzani windmill, as part of a long-term project to restore the park to a more natural environment.

The recent 10-year drought –

from which Kruger still hasn't fully recovered – resulted in hundreds of animals dying of hunger due to no rain on the plains, even though the water in its major rivers never stopped flowing.

An abundance of artificially created water holes saw an explosion in the hippo population, which was equally decimated by the drought.

Equally in the smaller streams and rivers, which did stop flowing, fish and macro and microbiotic populations were wiped out and if there were undiscovered species – scientists are regularly finding new species in the Sabie – they were gone forever.

O'Brien said there were few South Africans who didn't know what it was like to struggle without water. "Together, we need ... to help manage these systems well." – amandaw@citizen.co.za

The Olifants River is highly impacted

FOUR ESCAPEES REARRESTED, TWO KILLED, 10 STILL AT LARGE

Correctional services crack down on unscrupulous officials

Chisom Jenniffer Okoye

The high-level investigation by the department of correctional services is paying off as three more of its officials were suspended yesterday.

This is in addition to the two who appeared in court yesterday for allegedly helping 16 fugitives escape from the Johannesburg Media A Correctional Centre.

Three of the fugitives had just been sentenced to four

life imprisonments following the murder of a family in Lawley, a township southwest of Johannesburg.

The two arrested officials were each granted R5 000 bail and are set to appear in court again on May 3. Meanwhile, the probe continues as more suspensions are expected soon.

Thakane Molatedi, the department's Gauteng regional commissioner, said developments of the internal investigation were disappointing, as the guards' alleged behaviour goes against the "ethos, and mandate" of the department.

She said: "[The department]

will fully cooperate with the investigation by the Saps to ensure that we leave no stone unturned in getting to the bottom of this escape. Those found guilty will face the full might of the law."

Molatedi added that they were taking these allegations seriously, and that the work done by the investigating teams to uncover the culprits is "commendable".

The department reported that 1 036 disciplinary cases were finalised in Gauteng from January 2017 to date, for various acts of misconduct. Forty-two officials were dismissed, some faced additional sanctions while others

were proven innocent.

"We will allow the law to take its course," said Molatedi. "As it is our responsibility to ensure that our facilities are centres of rehabilitation, we will continue to

We'll fully cooperate with the Saps' probe to ensure no stone is left unturned.

Thakane Molatedi
Gauteng regional commissioner of correctional services

root out all forms of unlawful activities in order to maintain a high standard of safety and security."

Two of the 16 escapees were killed during a shoot-out with police, while four have been rearrested. "Ten of the 16 escapees are still at large and we will not rest until all of them are arrested," she said.

Gauteng Saps spokesperson Lieutenant-Colonel Lungelo Dlamini said he could not give any information about how the guards allegedly helped the escapees, as it was the basis of evidence to be presented in court.