

# Protecting water IS A NO-BRAINER

by Robyn Powell

**The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted some of the challenges facing South Africa's strategic water source areas (SWSAs) – and landowners play a key role in protecting these vital natural resources, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) said in its webinar, "At Home with WWF", on 27 May.**

"It's not just a pandemic that can bring an economy to its knees. If you don't have water, an economy can't survive," said Samir Rander-Rees, WWF programme manager for the water source areas programme.

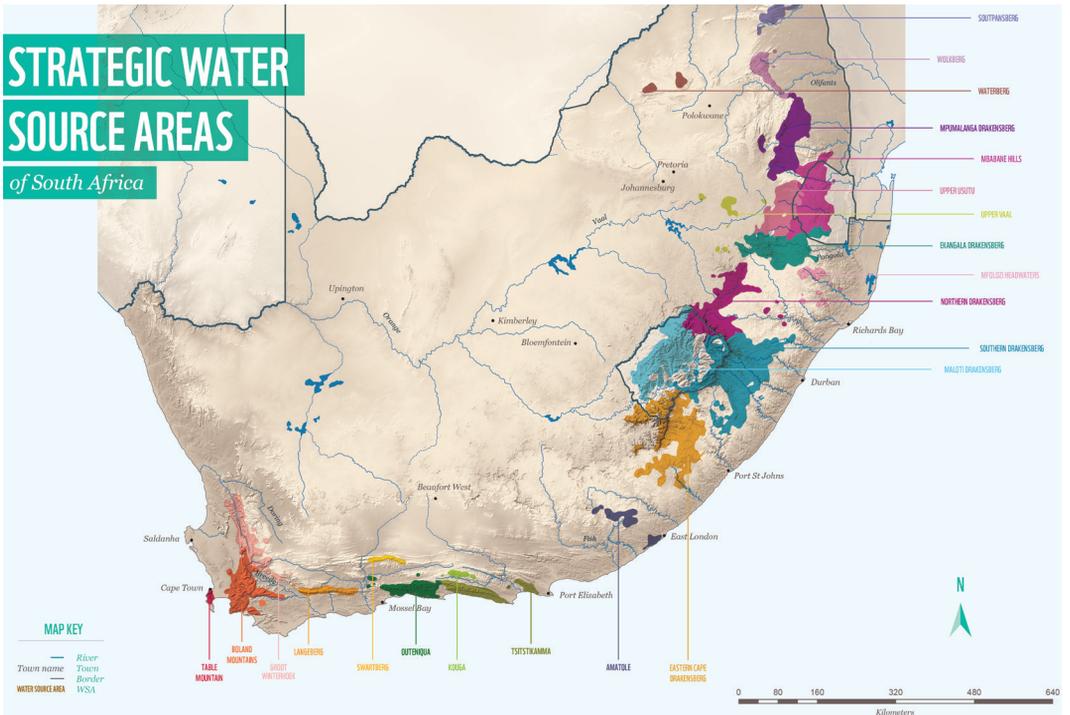
“If you are living in an important water catchment area, you have to do your own part if you want your neighbour to do his.”

that we protect these areas," Rander-Rees said. South Africa has 22 SWSAs and yet only 11% are formally protected. "These areas are starting to degrade; whether that's from mining, agriculture, alien trees, or human settlements

## **PROTECT THE NATURAL RESOURCE**

Water source areas (WSAs) produce great volumes of water in relation to their size. "Ten per cent of South Africa's land produces 50% of our surface run-off water. These areas sustain 50% of the population, 64% of the national economy, and 70% of irrigated agriculture. It should be a no-brainer

and it's starting to affect their ability to supply water to the country," he said. Turning the tide begins with governing local WSA's more effectively. To this end, the WWF is mobilising strategic water source partnerships between the public sector, business, government, local communities, and landowners in local water source areas.



WSA map graphic by WWF South Africa.

**INSPIRING PARTNERSHIPS**

These partnerships are producing inspiring results. Not only have they made an impressive contribution to water security and biodiversity improvement, but they’ve boosted employment in rural areas. The first partnership was launched conceptually in the Boland in 2019 and there are already partnerships in seven more SWSAs. A number of these are in dairy areas, including Outeniqa, Tsitsikamma, Boland, Langeberg, Swartberg, Northern Drakensberg, and Southern Drakensberg. Another is the Umzimvubu Catchment Partnership Programme, near Matatiele on the southern border of Lesotho.

**DAIRY PRODUCTION OCCURS IN SEVEN OF SOUTH AFRICA’S WATER SOURCE AREAS:**

- 1 Southern Drakensberg (Midlands, Mooi River, Underberg, Ixopo, Creighton areas)
- 2 Northern Drakensberg (Estcourt, Winterton areas)
- 3 Outeniqa
- 4 Tsitsikamma
- 5 Boland
- 6 Langeberg
- 7 Swartberg

**REVERSE AND REINVIGORATE**

In the uMzimvubu, invasive alien trees brought in for fuel and timber are spreading at an alarming rate. These trees use more water than indigenous grasslands and promote erosion. This affects water quality and grass quantity; and is threatening the traditional local economy, which depends on good condition rangelands for grazing cattle.

The WWF partners are trying to reverse this degenerative cycle, starting with clearing alien trees, reinvigorating traditional rangeland management practises, and training unemployed youth to produce and sell woodchips and charcoal from the cleared alien wattle trees. The youth are also trained to grow their own food gardens; while others are trained as para-veterinary workers and are able to generate an



Sissie Matela, director of Environmental and Rural Solutions (Photograph by Robyn Powell).

income from dehorning, vaccinating, and branding cattle.

“The programme is working extremely well. It starts to address youth unemployment and gives them skills to be self-employed and engaged in the green economy,” said WWF Living Planet award winner Sissie Matela, director of Environmental and Rural Solutions.

### ENGAGE AND COLLABORATE

Another successful partnership is in the head waters of the Breede River, in the Groot Winterhoek and Boland WSA. Here, alien plants and large-scale cultivation are key impacts on the landscape. Members of this group, the Upper Breede Collaborative Extension Group, get together at least three times a year and the platform gives



South Africa's 22 strategic water source areas punch above their weight – and produce greater volumes of water in relation to their size (Photograph by Robyn Powell).

the extension officers, permitting authorities, and owners of natural resources an opportunity to meet government and discuss their natural resource needs and authorisation requirements.

Ryno Pienaar is the WWF alien clearing co-ordinator on the ground. His post is funded by Woolworths and he leads eight alien clearing teams in the Breede River Catchment area. Pienaar has raised about R16 million for water clearing and restoration projects along the riverbeds; scaling up a system of unprecedented collaboration between non-governmental organisations, rehabilitation experts, government, and more than 116 landowners, one of whom is a mixed dairy farmer.

This partnership employs 94 people in alien clearing activities who have cleared and keep clear 500 ha of land a year. This has saved an estimated 75 million litres of water from thirsty alien trees and has led to the formation of seven small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs) in the chipping and biochar industries. “The budget for some of the big alien clearing work per farm can be as much as R100 000, of which the farmer is required to contribute a portion and the project funds the rest. As soon as the landowner is able to maintain the clearing work within his budget, then the project enters the sustainability phase,” explains Pienaar.

### REGULATIONS AND RESPONSIBILITY

It's important that farmers invest in, and take ownership of, alien clearing on their land. “There's a great deal of pressure from the state on farmers with river frontage to act responsibly. There are a lot of regulations, and farmers are on the radar where there are active Working for Water projects,” Pienaar says.

South Africa is an extremely water-scarce country and projections from the WWF show there will be a 17% shortfall between supply and demand by 2030. Added to this, the WWF's online 'Water Risk Filter' assessment tool indicates that climate change will lead to an overall increase in a moderate risk of drought countrywide in future. The western, northern, and southern areas of the Cape will potentially be hardest hit, with more areas in these regions having a high to very high risk of increased drought events; while parts of KwaZulu-

Natal show a lower risk of future droughts (*The Dairy Mail*, March 2020).

But by playing their part in clearing alien trees from their land, farmers could tap into water benefits.

“What we have learnt from participating farmers, including dairy farmers, is that when aliens are cleared, seepage from the wetland is more sustainable throughout the dry season. This water yield becomes an important resource to the farmers during low flow periods.”

Alien clearing, however, won't succeed in isolation. The success of these SWSA partnerships lies in collaboration with all the partners, including upstream and downstream properties. “If you are living in an important water catchment area, you have to do your own part if you want your neighbour to do his. A farming community can't operate in silos,” said Pienaar.[mppd](https://www.mppd.org.za)

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**ROBYN POWELL** is a freelance journalist based in Durban. Contact her at [robjoubert@vox.co.za](mailto:robjoubert@vox.co.za).