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UMZIMVUBU CATCHMENT PARTNERSHIP

# WORKING TOGETHER FOR WATER AND PEOPLE IN THE EASTERN CAPE DRAKENSBERG

The Umzimvubu Catchment is under significant pressure from multiple sources including climate change, invasive plant species, poor land management practices and unplanned developments in marginal areas. These pressures contribute to widespread soil erosion and declining water quality, affecting both local ecosystems and communities.

## THE UMZIMVUBU CATCHMENT PARTNERSHIP (UCP)

Established in 2013 by two local NGOs (Environmental and Rural Solutions, and Conservation South Africa), the Umzimvubu Catchment Partnership's ultimate goal is a healthy resilient ecosystem which benefits local and downstream residents. The partnership brings together organisations that foster co-learning and collaboration. Since its inception, the UCP has relied on the steadfast support of donors and strategic allies and its work has also been strengthened by the invaluable voluntary contributions from local NGOs and individuals. The UCP has become a leading example of collaborative catchment management, bringing together a range of organisations and community stakeholders, and promoting shared learning and ecosystem-based solutions. The partnership also values indigenous knowledge by actively involving traditional leaders and local communities. Over time, it has grown its membership and helped secure varied funding to support sustainable land use and community wellbeing.

A core team of organisations including WWF South Africa, Lima Rural Development Agency, the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), Conservation Exposure Education & Training (CEET) and others support the UCP's shared water security and landscape restoration goals. For more information about the UCP, visit [www.umzimvubu.org](http://www.umzimvubu.org)

**ONLY AROUND 1%**  
of the Eastern Cape Drakensberg Strategic Water Source Area is protected

## WATER SECURITY

South Africa has 22 strategic water source areas (SWSAs) which cover 8% of our country. These critical water-rich catchments provide 50% of the water in our rivers and dams and are the main surface strategic water source areas that capture the water that drives our economy, provides for people and sustains nature.

The Umzimvubu catchment is one of South Africa's more important and ecologically diverse river systems, providing essential water resources and ecosystem services to the Eastern Cape. Rich in biodiversity and natural beauty, the catchment supports countless species of plants and animals, making it essential for both the environment and local livelihoods.

The river system lies along the north-eastern boundary of the Eastern Cape province, extending for more than 400 km from its source in the Maloti-Drakensberg watershed on the Lesotho escarpment to the coastal mangroves of Port St Johns, where it joins the Indian Ocean.

The catchment is located within the Eastern Cape Drakensberg Strategic Water Source Area, highlighting its importance in supplying disproportionately high volumes of water for both local communities within the landscape and downstream users.

## THE VISION

Protecting and carefully managing the Umzimvubu catchment means protecting the communities and ecosystems that depend on it. This requires a holistic approach integrating technological advances, policy reforms, community participation and international cooperation to tackle the multifaceted challenges of water resource management.



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## WHO WE ARE

The UCP is a community of practitioners, community leaders and researchers that empowers partners to achieve:

- **Resilient landscapes:** Stakeholders are supported to foster a more functional and biodiverse landscape, capable of providing essential ecosystem services to both people and animals in the face of a changing climate.
- **Sustainable livelihoods:** Communities are empowered to achieve improved food and water security, adapt to a changing climate, unlock new sources of income and become stewards of their natural resources.
- **Thriving partnership:** Learning, governance and collaboration are enhanced, leading to the discovery of new and sustainable innovations and funding opportunities.

### Purpose

UCP exists to be a co-created platform for proactive networking, sharing, learning and mobilising resources and knowledge through collaboration.

### Goal

The UCP goal is for healthy resilient ecosystem function in the Umzimvubu Catchment providing services and benefiting local and downstream people.

### Where

The land area (belonging to and used by people) from which rainfall drains into the Umzimvubu River, from source to sea, along its undammed length.

## WHY THE CATCHMENT IS SO IMPORTANT



### ECOLOGICAL

- **Biodiversity:** The catchment is home to diverse ecosystems including grasslands, forests, thicket and wetlands. These support a wide range of plant and animal species and are crucial for regulating floods, preventing soil erosion and naturally purifying water.
- **Water source:** The Umzimvubu River system is one of South Africa's few remaining near-natural rivers and is classified as vulnerable due to rapid degradation. It provides essential water resources to over two million people every day for drinking, agriculture, livestock farming and maintaining local livelihoods.



### SOCIO-ECONOMIC

- **Livelihoods and well-being:** The upper catchment area, where the UCP mainly operates, spans approximately 20 000 km<sup>2</sup>, mainly comprising communal land under traditional governance systems. It supports local livelihoods and socially, it is central to local heritage, cultural identity and community practices, reinforcing a strong sense of place and belonging.
- **Job creation:** The livestock-based economy contributes around R15 million per year to local households and generates at-home employment for over 3 000 farmers. Conservation and rehabilitation projects within the catchment have created over 5 000 jobs, and there is much potential for increased job creation.

## WHY THIS? WHY NOW?



Just less than  
**2 million km<sup>2</sup>**  
catchment area



**2 million** people



**70%** rural



**400 km** river length  
from source near  
Mataatile on Lesotho  
watershed to Indian  
Ocean at Port St Johns

**68%**

unemployment

**<5%**

access to tertiary  
education

**48%**

is under 18  
years of age

**53%**

women-headed  
households



**30%**

of residents have **no access to electricity**



**26%**

**have piped water** supply in their community (although these often fail). Water collection takes 45 minutes per day



**80%**

of people **rely on woody biomass** for energy, collection takes 2 hours per day



**R14 600/year R3 100/month**

Average household income

**Big developments** are planned for the lower catchment. These include a new smart city, agricultural development, dams, bridges and highways, but there are no plans for environmental sustainability. There is a need to secure the future economic development of the catchment.

**Environmental degradation** has included uncontrolled fires, eroded grasslands, overgrazing, rapid growth of water-thirsty invasive tree species, and rivers and springs running dry.

## MAIN UCP LEARNINGS SINCE INCEPTION

- As the partnership has matured, it has welcomed new members and catalysed access to different funding sources for its members.
- It has also recognised the need for better data collection. Sustainable management of water resources requires a deep understanding of local conditions, hydrology, climate patterns and socio-economic factors. Comprehensive data enables decision-makers and experts to develop effective policies and strategies in a region with water scarcity and quality issues.
- The collaboration with research groups has contributed greatly, and to this end, the UCP has an active knowledge hub and research task team which is one of six focus groups made of partners in the partnership.

**"We used to collect about 10 buckets a day as the spring was very slow. Now we get over 60 buckets and no one has to wait in queues as the tank stores enough water overnight from the gentle flow. The wattle trees used a lot of water: now that they are cleared, the spring flows so much more strongly that we have enough water for raising pigs in a small project."**

- Black Diamond village resident

## THE NEXT GENERATION

Today, the focus is on cultivating a new generation of local young leaders from the landscape who will steer the partnership into the future with a continued focus on resilient landscapes and livelihoods.

The UCP values the enthusiasm and fresh perspectives of these young individuals who have the opportunity to gain invaluable real-world experience. These emerging champions, mentored by experienced partners, will guide the partnership toward broader horizons and innovative nature-based solutions.

The strategy defined up to 2028 includes resourcing the partnership, growing collaboration and building the knowledge hub.

**"When ERS approached us with an offer to help clear wattle, it rekindled our unity to work as a community to manage our landscape. We had lost our collective approach to clearing weeds, helping plant fields and doing weeding, but this practice has been revived again. All we needed was a reminder and encouragement that the old systems are in fact good systems."**

– Ntate Thabiso Mohato, village leader and farmer from the Black Diamond community, expressed this sentiment.

# A DECADE OF UCP WINS



## Goal A: Effective management, rehabilitation and maintenance of ecological infrastructure

**49 200 ha**

Designated for UCP Stewardship

**17 597 ha**

Under improved rangeland management

**250**

Meetings with members of Rangeland association

**93** Total Conservation Agreements signed

**43** Natural springs have been protected for human consumption

**18** Collaborative implementation projects undertaken

**73** Learning exchanges and meetings held

**4** Maintenance agreements signed



## Goal B: Improved freshwater quality and quantity for ecological systems and downstream communities

**28%**

Increase in water fit for human consumption

**300**

Springs identified through hydrocensus

**140.9%**

Increase in flow rate of protected springs

**38 445**

People with year-round access to reliable water < 1 km of their home

**118**

People employed for spring construction

**5 641**

Households benefited

**16** Water monitors trained for spring protection

**4** New springs that have surfaced post removal of invasive plants

**43** Springs protection constructed



## Goal C: Improved livelihoods from employment, small businesses and increased value chains

**R44.7 m**

From livestock sales via 'Meat Naturally'

**166**

Permanent jobs equivalent income from auctions

**896**

Farmers benefited with 58 livestock auctions

**R800 k**

In turnover by 3 youth-led charcoal-producing SMMEs

**95** Youths trained on marketable skills

**3** Small charcoal businesses ready for investments

**39** Rangeland associations formed by EcoChamps

**18** Eco Champs working in sustainable livelihoods



## Goal D: Improved rangeland condition and biodiversity

**18 000**

Person days invested in clearing wattle

**R180 k**

From harvesting wattle and selling charcoal

**367 ha**

Cleared of alien trees and 135 hectares have received aftercare

**1 033 282 kL**

Water was gained through runoff due to invasive plant clearance



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