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UMHLATHUZE WATER STEWARDSHIP PARTNERSHIP

COLLABORATION FOR WATER SECURITY IN THE UMHLATHUZE

The uMhlathuze catchment is located on the northeast coast of KwaZulu-Natal. Land use in the upper parts of the catchment consists of rural communities and forestry, with the middle parts dominated by large irrigated agriculture and lower parts hosting a concentration of industries and business in the urban centres of Empangeni and Richards Bay. With its headwaters in the Babanango hills, the uMhlathuze River is the main river system. The river flows over 100 km eastward to the coast, forming an estuary before joining the sea at Richards Bay, which is classified as one of the country's important industrial development zones.

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

The uMhlathuze is a high-risk catchment in terms of water-related issues. Water scarcity is one of the top risks. In 2016, the area was hit by a severe drought which caused widespread devastation.

Within the 4 209 km² catchment area, agriculture – a high water-using sector – plays a significant role in providing livelihoods for poorer communities. Loss of financial viability due to water issues could result in significant job losses in this sector alone.

In Richards Bay, industry underpins the local economy and requires a very high assurance of water supply. Water quality is also a concern in the lower catchment, especially within the boundaries of the City of uMhlathuze. This requires better regulation and monitoring of water use. Protection, restoration and maintenance of both ecological and grey infrastructure are critical to improve water security in the uMhlathuze catchment.

HOW IS WATER USED ?

Based on the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) 2017 breakdown of the total allocation to Mhlathuze Water (using contracted volumes), water use by sector shows the four major users as agriculture (34%), urban (26%), industrial (25%) and forestry (15%).

WHAT IS THE DEMAND?

The water reconciliation strategy for Richards Bay and surrounding towns (DWS, 2021) suggests water demand is expected to rise with a projected population increase in the uMhlathuze catchment as towns expand and more rural villages have equitable access to water. At high-level predictions, Richards Bay alone is expected to require 20 million m³ per annum by 2025 – this is already above the licensed water requirement (DWS, 2021). Water demand for industrial development and agriculture is also projected to increase and will be exacerbated by climate change.

SOUTH AFRICA'S STRATEGIC WATER SOURCE AREAS

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

In 2016, the Goedertrouw Dam was at 18%. Located on the uMhlathuze River, this dam is the main contributor of water supply in the uMhlathuze catchment, providing 52% of water to Richards Bay. The City of Richards Bay is a key economic hub for KwaZulu-Natal and it depends on multiple SWSAs, including 15,4% from freshwater lakes (Nsezi, Mzingazi, Chubu and Nhlabane) which form part of the Zululands coastal aquifer groundwater SWSA. The Northern Drakensberg SWSA provides 20,7%, via the Thukela water transfer and an additional 11% comes from the Mfolozi Headwaters SWSA via Lake Nhlabane.

As climate risks escalate, we need long-term planning and sustainable management of our water sources. Water stewardship is a long-term journey to improve water use, reduce water impacts and act with others on the big water issues.



FOSTERING PARTNERSHIPS TO PROTECT THE UMHLATHUZE CATCHMENT

Stemming from the impacts of the 2016 drought, the dire situation catalysed stakeholders to become involved in partnerships for water stewardship and sustainable management of ecological infrastructure in the catchment. This highlighted the need to tackle water security as a shared risk through collaborative action. To act on water security issues in the catchment, such as the 2016 drought, businesses, civil society and the local municipality came together to establish the uMhlathuze Water Stewardship Partnership – commonly known as UWASP (www.uwasp.org.za).

WHO CAN JOIN UWASP?

As a multistakeholder platform, membership of UWASP is open for all stakeholders with a presence and interest in the uMhlathuze catchment.

UWASP membership includes signing a letter of intent which helps to guide partners on how they can be involved in supporting implementation and resourcing of various water stewardship initiatives.

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WHAT IS THE VISION OF UWASP?

The vision for UWASP is an effectively managed uMhlathuze catchment that supports water security for all.

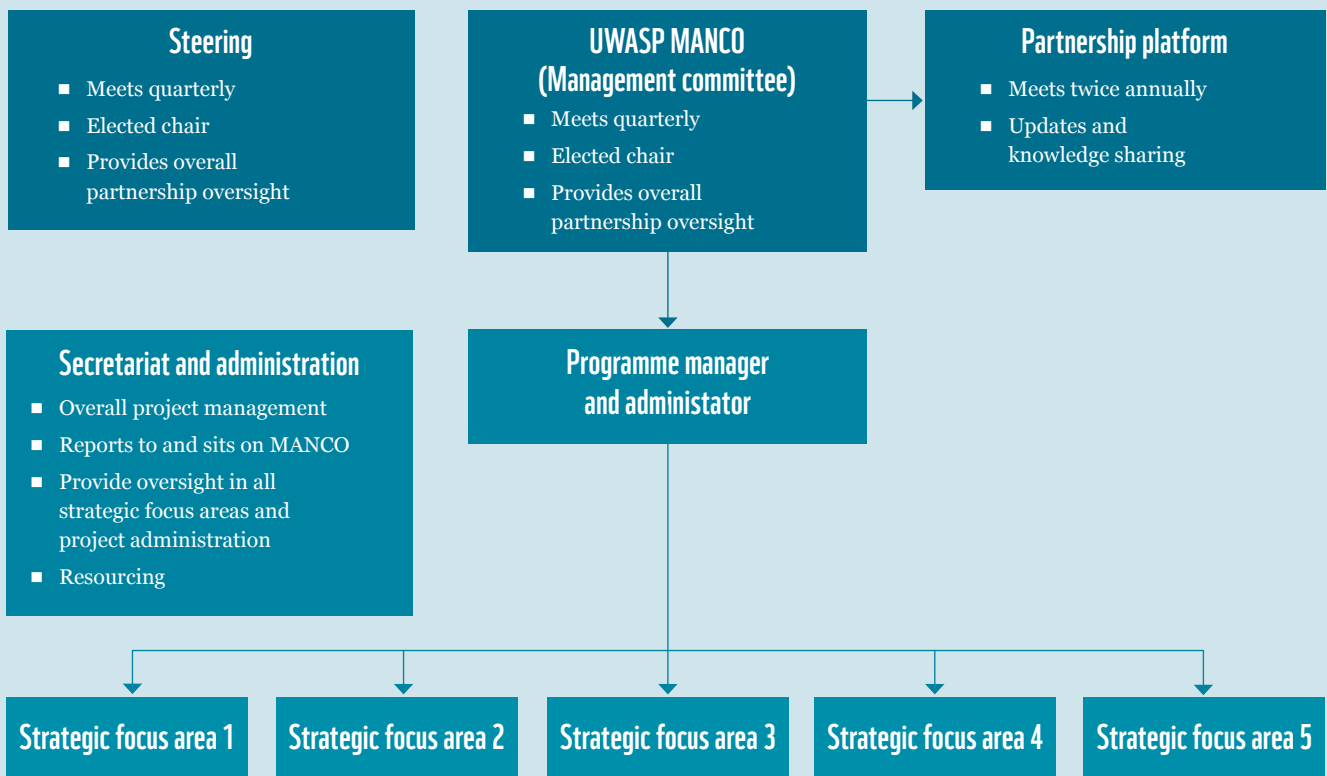
“This means engaging in climate change risk management of water resource impacts in the uMhlathuze catchment through facilitating an inclusive stakeholder partnership approach that enables good water stewardship and water security for all.”

WHO IS THE UWASP STEERING COMMITTEE?

During the early years of establishing and strengthening UWASP from 2016-2019, there was a steering committee which coordinated and convened the partnership. The steering committee included members from the National Business Initiative (NBI), WWF, German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) NatuReS programme, Mondi, Siyazisiza Community Trust and City of uMhlathuze.

ESTABLISHING A NEW STEERING COMMITTEE

Post the Covid-19 pandemic, the partnership lost capacity and many projects were halted by the pandemic. This resulted in a loss of momentum. Currently, UWASP does not have a fully functioning secretariat and it relies on coordination support from members of WWF, NBI and GIZ NatuReS. As part of re-launching UWASP, the partnership is looking for new stakeholders to serve in the future steering committee as shown below:





WHAT ARE UWASP’S STRATEGIC FOCUS AREAS?

Starting in 2022, the UWASP coordination team started a lengthy stakeholder engagement process for re-launching the partnership. This included individual meetings with UWASP members and new stakeholders. The relaunch process was concluded in 2023 by a stakeholder workshop to develop a new strategy. A consultant was appointed to lead the workshop and further refine the new 5-year vision strategy for UWASP (see below). The strategy draws on UWASP work from 2016 and integrates new thinking for addressing future water security challenges in the context of a changing climate, increasing water demand, and deteriorating grey and ecological infrastructure.

Strategic focus areas (SFA) necessary to achieve the vision					
	SFA 1	SFA 2	SFA 3	SFA 4	SFA 5
Outcomes	An integrated knowledge management system is in place to carry out key research, monitor, collect, manage and disseminate data	Stakeholders in the whole catchment and from all sectors are effectively mobilised and represented in the catchment management platforms	Technical and institutional capacities for planning and implementation are enhanced for and by various stakeholders	Support is provided and resourced to strengthen water governance and management processes	Relevant projects are identified, resourced and implemented to support climate-aware water stewardship in the catchment
Examples of project activities necessary to achieve the outcomes					
Intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish an integrated information system Mobilise information sharing and learning by key stakeholders Integrate modeling in catchment management Develop and strengthen real-time water flow monitoring (e.g. Inwards and FlowTracker) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Broaden participation in UWASP Mobilise and engage stakeholders from all sectors and from all parts of the catchment (upper, middle, lower) Improve communication and provide regular information to and with stakeholders (e.g. regular newsletters via UWASP management committee) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technical skills development for water services authorities and municipalities Support development of water resource planning tools, strategies and plans Support capacity development initiatives for farmers and communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support Catchment Management Forum secretariat Support resourcing of administration of projects and office spaces if required Support Water User Association nascent processes and alignment with UWASP Support Catchment Management Agency and Catchment Management Strategies and alignment with UWASP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Water use monitoring and efficiency in farmers, industries Invasive alien plant control Wetland restoration and coastal lakes monitoring Implement citizen science river-health monitoring Non-revenue water monitoring in municipalities



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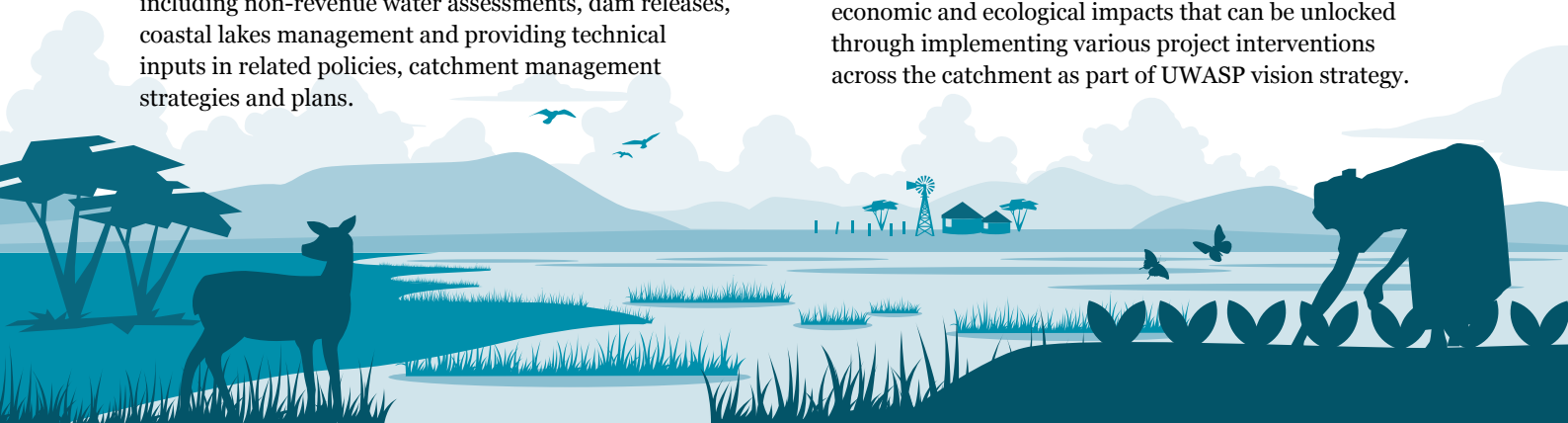


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SHARED UWASP SUCCESSSES IN THE UMHLATHUZE CATCHMENT

The partnership has contributed to many successful initiatives and projects funded by different UWASP partners including WWF, NBI, GIZ NatuRes, Mondi, Tongaat Hulett and South32 Hillside.

- **Innovative digital tools for real-time water monitoring:** Developing FlowTracker and Inwards Lite, real-time water use monitoring use tools to assist stakeholders and authorities in making informed strategic decisions on water management.
- **Convening the local catchment management forum:** Organising and coordinating stakeholders to participate and engage in the uMhlathuze Catchment Management Forum as a platform for collective action in catchment management issues including droughts, floods and everyday water management.
- **Development of invasive alien plant strategy:** Coordinating engagement with stakeholders on the development and implementation strategy to address challenges on invasive alien plant control and rehabilitation of ecological infrastructure at a catchment scale.
- **Strengthening water governance:** Working with mandated water institutions including Department of Water and Sanitation, as well as the local municipality, to support water resource management and governance, including non-revenue water assessments, dam releases, coastal lakes management and providing technical inputs in related policies, catchment management strategies and plans.
- **Supporting water stewardship practices:** Working with farmers, irrigation boards and water user associations to improve water management, reducing the need to irrigate, working with sugarcane farmers on wetland rehabilitation, and hosting irrigation management workshops with farmers.
- **Improving local livelihoods:** For smallholder farmers in the catchment, UWASP identified an opportunity to provide practical training sessions in Good Agricultural Practices (localG.A.P). In partnership with Siyazisiza Community Trust, a local champion in the catchment, UWASP supported over 50 smallholder farmers to improve their skills and subsequently benefit from increased access to value chains, which resulted in the opportunity for an additional income stream.
- **Feasibility assessment:** In 2024, UWASP conducted a comprehensive assessment that identified the feasibility of ecological and built infrastructure interventions in the uMhlathuze catchment. The assessment is titled *Scoping study to assess the feasibility of grey-green infrastructure project interventions in the uMhlathuze catchment*. The study outlines the potential social, economic and ecological impacts that can be unlocked through implementing various project interventions across the catchment as part of UWASP vision strategy.



Lasting positive outcomes for people and nature in the places where we work and from priority environmental challenges we focus on.

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