



SOUTH AFRICA



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STRENGTHENING WATER GOVERNANCE AND IMPROVING WATER STEWARDSHIP PRACTICES

PROTECTING THE UMKHOMAZI CATCHMENT

As one of the largest water users in the Umkhomazi catchment, Sappi partnered with WWF South Africa in 2021, and has been working in the catchment, focussing on environmental restoration and conservation.

The project is a long-term water security partnership that is vital for the Umkhomazi catchment because it supports a catchment-wide strategy to improve water stewardship and governance, safeguarding not only one of Sappi's most significant risks to their business, but securing resources for the community at large and all water users.

The project mainly focuses on strengthening water governance and improving water stewardship practices to encourage effective water resource management in the Umkhomazi Catchment. The project also focusses on securing critical biodiversity hotspot areas to support functional ecosystem services at a landscape level approach to improve water security and exploring sustainable finance models to support water and biodiversity stewardship initiatives.



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Within the Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany biodiversity hotspot in KwaZulu-Natal, lies the Umkhomazi catchment – a vital ecological area that supports approx. 1.5 to 2 million people. The area is recognized for its high species endemism and unique ecosystems, making it a critical region for biodiversity conservation.

The Umkhomazi River, which flows from the Drakensburg Mountains to the Indian Ocean, south of Durban, is one of South Africa's last, large free-flowing rivers. The catchment is home to endangered species like the Cape parrot and critically endangered species like the blue swallow. It is also home to vital ecosystems such as wetlands, natural springs, rivers, natural forests and poorly protected grasslands. Much of the catchment falls within the Southern Drakensberg Strategic Water Source Area (SWSA), the largest in South Africa, making it critical for water provision. Only 14% of this SWSA is protected. These ecosystems provide essential services, including water quality regulation, habitat provision and flood control, all of which are key to maintaining ecological balance and resilience.

The catchment, however, faces significant threats from habitat degradation, invasive species, unregulated fires, climate change, municipal supply pressures as well as land-use pressures from forestry and agriculture. These challenges underscore the need for targeted conservation efforts to protect the region's biodiversity hotspot areas and ensure its long-term health and functional ecosystem services.



PARTNERING ON WATER
SECURITY FOR ALL

sappi

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

To date, the WWF-Sappi partnership has achieved the following:



188 ha of invasive alien vegetation (e.g. wattle) clearing to protect strategic water source areas and enhance water security.



Brushback implementation (made from wattle biomass) to promote vegetation recovery whilst minimizing soil erosion and reducing silt and sedimentation load in rivers.



Ongoing water monitoring to assess river health, water quality, and quantity through the support of four citizen scientists.



2 323 ha of sustainable rangeland management to sustain ecosystem health, improve rangelands quality & species diversity and prevent land degradation.



Environmental education and awareness campaigns to influence and increase community involvement.



83 jobs created for local community members in the catchment area.

KEY PROJECTS

WATER STEWARDSHIP & GOVERNANCE

With Sappi's forestry operations in the middle catchment, and its Saiccor Mill at the bottom of the catchment, Sappi has recognised the importance of securing this important water source in order to ensure adequate and sustainable, good quality water for all users for years to come.

The WWF-Sappi partnership was instrumental in establishing the Umkhomazi Catchment Working Group in 2021. This working group is fundamental to the effectiveness and collective governance of all stakeholders working within the Umkhomazi catchment. The work under this partnership focusses on restoring ecological infrastructure, improving water security, and

promoting sustainable land-use practices. Over the last four years, the WWF-Sappi partnership has maintained this broader catchment partnership through a coordination role.

Some of the main achievements under stewardship and governance include the development of collaborative management structures, improved stakeholder alignment, the promotion of biodiversity

stewardship opportunities, the integration of the Umkhomazi Catchment Working Group strategy to guide coordinated action, and capacity building within local communities. Sappi's role in the catchment working group is to contribute technical expertise, support landscape restoration initiatives, and champion stewardship practices that complement broader catchment management objectives.



BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

At the core of the partnership's work is the goal of securing key biodiversity areas in the Umkhomazi catchment, with a particular emphasis on protecting the Southern Drakensberg's Strategic Water Source Area. The partnership is working in collaboration with Conservation Outcomes to develop a biodiversity stewardship strategy and stewardship agreements with both commercial and communal landowners. The vision is to secure 30,000 ha of key biodiversity land across the Umkhomazi Catchment, through promoting sustainable land management practices that not only conserve biodiversity but also enhance water security, improve climate resilience and benefit communities.

INVASIVE ALIEN VEGETATION CLEARING

A vital component of the water stewardship work under the WWF Sappi partnership is the implementation of alien vegetation clearing.

This work has been implemented by Nzwakhele Environmental Services (Pty) Ltd, a subcontractor for the partnership's implementing partner, Institute of Natural Resources (INR). The primary goal of the programme is to eradicate water thirsty and woody invasive species, with a focus on wattle.

Over the years, a total of 188 ha of invasive alien plants have been cleared and maintained, resulting in 205.2 megalitres of water replenished in the landscape.



SUSTAINABLE RANGELAND MANAGEMENT

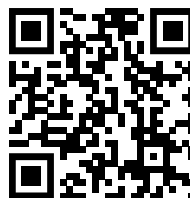
Through the partnership and using the Herding for Health (H4H) model, two Grazing Associations are supported in the Impendle community within the Umkhomazi catchment to promote regenerative grazing, improve livestock management & animal health, promote veld recovery and species diversity, control fires, strengthen predator control, and support mobile cattle auctions.

Eight local herders have also been trained as Eco Rangers, gaining professional skills in rangeland restoration and natural resource management. Key objectives include improving water governance, promoting efficient water use, removing invasive plants, rehabilitating wetlands, and strengthening community-based natural resource management.

CHANGING LIVES & LANDSCAPES

Through this partnership, WWF and Sappi's impact has had reach far beyond its 'corporate' boundaries. Community engagement has formed a large portion of the partnership's work, through upskilling community members in various areas such as alien vegetation clearing, rangeland management, fire management as well as other skills like computer literacy and environmental education and awareness. Through the implementation of a Citizen Scientist programme, young community members have been empowered with confidence, income and purpose. Not only has this programme seen young people gain practical work skills, but the impact has been far broader than this. Income received is not just income for an individual. It is food on the table for a family; it is a child able to attend school; it is a budding entrepreneur able to raise capital to start a fledgeling business – and feedback, again, into the community.

The young citizen scientists who work within the WWF-Sappi partnership have grown into role models within their communities – taking the skills they've learnt from training workshops and employment opportunities, back to their communities and influencing the adoption of better environmental practices in the landscapes – a truly winning recipe for all.



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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1st Floor, Bridge House, Boundary Terraces, Mariendahl Lane, Newlands, Cape Town.
PO Box 23273, Claremont 7735 T: +27 21 657 6600 E: info@wwf.org.za W: wwf.org.za