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Author: Brian Sokutu

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INTRUSIVE: MATATIELE LOSES ABOUT 2M LITRES PER HECTARE PER YEAR DUE TO WATTLE TREES

⇒ Among others, the trees are cut down by locals to produced charcoal.

Brian Sokutu

Villages in the Matatiele region of the Eastern Cape are benefitting from 43 protected springs, with 40 000 residents getting reliable water at R190 per person for life – thanks to the intervention of the WWF Nedbank Green Trust.

So huge has the impact of the intervention been – covering 49 200 hectares of the proposed protected area under six traditional authorities of Mzongwana, Makhoba, Sibi, Nkosana, Moshoeshoe and Bakwena – that locals have pinned their hopes on the support received from environmental organisations.

The villagers – settled close to a tributary of the uMzimvubu River, one of South Africa's strategic water sources – have been battling to get rid of the fast-growing invasive alien wattle, which has been consuming water and rendering the area dry.

On hold, due to lack of funds, is the charcoal-producing project requiring the chopping, sawing and baking of the wattle – an initiative which has a potential to lift the local economy through local sales and exports.

Charcoal entrepreneurs have been helping to restore grazing areas by removing the wattle.

The removal of the wattle returns the grass species to its indigenous state – increasing the land available for grazing and restoring ecosystem function.

One of the largest rivers in southern Africa, the uMzimvubu



INVASIVE. The clearing of wattle trees would restore trillions of litres of water. Picture: Supplied

drains over two million hectares – supplying water over hundreds of kilometres in various regions, including Port St Johns.

Matatiele is one of the regions where the WWF Nedbank Green Trust have been supporting catchment areas and natural resource conservation through projects like charcoal-from-wattle and grazing management.

According to environmental scientist Nicky McLeod of non-profit social enterprise Environmental and Rural Solutions (ERS), the most cost-efficient, sustainable way to conserve and free up fresh water “is by looking after the natural landscapes, starting high up in the mountains in the catchment area and then down from here all the way to the river mouth”.

ERS and water restoration projects – in partnership with Lima

Rural Development Foundation – operate under the banner of a local multistakeholder partnership, the uMzimvubu Catchment Partnership (UCP).

It feeds into national initiatives, such as the Green Business Value Chain, driven by the department of forestry, fisheries and the environment.

To tackle the wattle infestation in the region's river courses, in 2019 ERS trained local youth to establish and run forest stewardship council-accredited ecofriendly charcoal production micro enterprises along the tributaries of the uMzimvubu River.

Matatiele loses about two million litres of water per hectare

per year due to the uncontrolled and rapid growth of black and silver wattle.

“We would restore trillions of litres of water and the rivers would flow as they should, if we could clear even one quarter of the 30 000 hectares of wattle in the upper uMzimvubu catchment area,” said ERS soil scientist Sissie Matela.

She maintained that people employed through Working for Water and other extended public works programmes “are paid to clear invasive alien plants, so why not extend this to communities and organisations doing the same in our villages? In areas cleared by

the charcoal entrepreneurs, the wattle is not reinvading.

“They have learnt how to remove it permanently and areas where they work are showing tremendous recovery.”

South Africa needs to actively address payment for ecosystem services, such as the freeing up of water. “Our district municipality spends millions on contractors to put in huge piped water schemes that regularly break down as they are high-tech and rely on diesel and maintenance. It's not practical,” explained McLeod.

“Protecting the springs with simple, locally designed and built spring capture systems offers people a safe, reliable, basic water supply in our area at very little cost,” she added.

To help address this, a WWF Nedbank Green Trust project has partnered with Lima on the construction of 18 spring capture systems. This, to offer quality drinking water to 600 homesteads in 12 villages, where more than 4 000 people live. “Keeping the springs flowing and healthy relies on the rehabilitation and maintenance of healthy grasslands, wetlands and soil,” said Matela.

The ERS team works in partnership with communal farmers in six Matatiele chieftainships spanning 55 rural villages to reintroduce some of the traditional methods of rotational grazing and rest – in combination with high-density, fast-rotation grazing to improve and restore the health of the landscape.

The wattle charcoal production involves the cutting of the alien trees into kiln-size logs and baked in three kilns at 600°C, with each kiln using one ton of logs to produce between 120 to 150 kilograms of charcoal. It is then sold locally for R32 per 5kg and to a business in Pietermaritzburg and Lesotho for R2 128 per ton. – brians@citizen.co.za

Most sustainable way to conserve fresh water is by looking after landscapes