

The Working for Water Programme - working for human welfare in South Africa



South Africa is waging a new sort of battle. Beginning at dawn each day, thousands of citizens wield scythes, axes and pesticides against a rapidly advancing and thirsty enemy: the alien trees, shrubs and aquatic plants that thrive in South Africa's mountains. These invasive non-native plants have infested 8% of this semi-arid country. In addition to depriving South Africans of needed water, these plants obstruct rivers, exacerbate the risk and damage of wildfires and floods, increase soil erosion and reduce biodiversity by crowding out native ecosystems.

Overview

South Africa's response to the invasion may be the largest and most expensive programme of alien plant control ever undertaken. The South African government, in full agreement with various international biodiversity conventions, is keen to protect the biodiversity of its country. Through a multi-agency effort called the Working for Water Programme (WWP), the government has hired thousands of citizens to hack away the thirsty invasive plants and to turn the by-products of their labour into saleable goods such as fuel wood, furniture and toys. Through an inter-disciplinary approach, this integrated programme addresses the crucial issue of competing needs for water (be they of people, growing urban centres, industrial activities or ecosystems). Since its inception in 1995, the Programme has offered people opportunities to acquire a living wage and new skills. In some project areas, the Programme provides childcare, community centres, national water conservation education and has also improved general health (the lack of water or use of polluted water can generate 'water-related diseases').

The WWP therefore actively addresses the impoverishment of black South Africans, which is a serious issue. 14 million South Africans currently have no or inadequate water supplies. In 1997, unemployment stood at 37%, and 50% of the population was classified as 'poor'. With 240 projects since its inception, the WWP has generated 42,000 new jobs at the same time as creating environmental awareness and systems of social welfare benefits and clearing 450,000 ha of the invasive plants. These complement the relatively recent promotion of stakeholders' participation in the implementation of sustainable resource management. The end of apartheid has also contributed to the crafting of water reforms that encourage local participation in decision-making. However, it is a slow process and, in certain places, landowners who still favour the lucrative planting of invasive species (for example, pines for timber production) benefit from preferential water charges.

The WWP has prompted the introduction of innovative water pricing and charges. There is a commitment to supplying water for all citizens, and the national water strategy has established a 'basic needs reserve' for humans — an allocation of water for drinking, food preparation and personal hygiene. The competition for various water uses is strong and, through the establishment of water charges for consumption beyond the basic needs reserve, the South African government is trying to discourage over-use and wastage, and hence save water.

New concerns and debates at international levels on the importance of water and water law have also helped formulate the South African national water strategy. Since the democratic elections of 1994, the nation has crafted a suite of water policies and laws to redress past inefficiencies, inequities and environmental degradation. For example, a 1998 law makes all water public property, repealing the previous statute that assigned water rights based on property ownership. These new policies are considered among the most progressive in the world and aim at returning a voice to all citizens.

Research on the impact of invasive species on water supply has helped generate interest in today's integrated invasive plant control effort. More economic studies that illustrate the impacts of invaders and the financial benefits of control are essential to justify the increasingly large-scale funding that the Working for Water Programme requires. By uniting social goals with ecosystem restoration, and by capitalizing on public pressure to provide water to millions of people, WWP has mustered political will, public support and funding at a time of fierce competition among the many social welfare projects visualized by South Africa's new democratic government. Although success is far from assured, the multiple dividends that WWP pays are substantial: a healthier ecosystem, more water at less cost, and employment for thousands in a country where opportunities to escape poverty are rare.

Reference

United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Environment Programme, World Bank, and World Resources Institute (2001) 'Freshwater Systems: Working for Water, Working for Human Welfare in South Africa' in: *World Resources 2000–2001: People and Ecosystems, the Fraying Web of Life*, pp. 193–205, Washington, World Resources Institute.