



# Water The Tie That Binds Eastern Cape Community

*In a rural corner in the Eastern Cape, amidst mountains and sprawling citrus farms, one community is proving that water can be the tie that binds.*

*Lani Holtzhausen reports.*

**A**t first glance the Kat River Valley might seem just another sleepy farming community. Situated northeast of Grahamstown in the old Ciskei in the foothills of the Winterberg and the Amatole Mountains, the Kat River Catchment is about 80 km in length, and covers an area of about 1 715 km<sup>2</sup>.

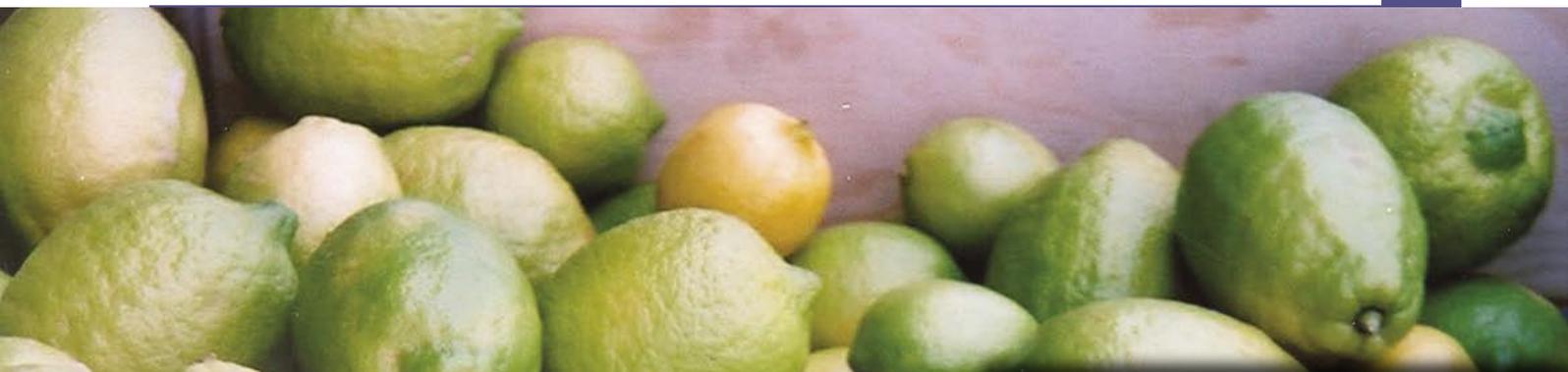
Agriculture is the main activity here. The majority of commercially irrigated farmland is used for citrus production for export, which occurs on the flat river terraces throughout the catchment. Also practiced are

stock and game farming in the lower reaches to the upper reaches, and small-scale community farming. There are several small towns in the catchment, the largest being Fort Beaufort.

The Kat Dam is the main primary bulk water infrastructure, and is situated in the north of the catchment at the town of Seymour. Outside of the towns, few of the villages have access to potable water and where communal or yard taps have been provided water supply is erratic at best.

## COMPLEX HISTORY

The area has had a complex history from the start. Since the days of early settlement the land of the Kat River Valley has been severely contested, first between the Khoi-Khoi and the Xhosa, and later between the Xhosa and the white settlers. Throughout the decades, the valley has seen farmers and families of all race and creed come into the area full of hope and hard working dreams only to have politics and government changes destroy them.



*Citrus remains the biggest export of the Kat River Valley*

The creation of the homelands during the apartheid era resulted in the inclusion of large portions of the Kat River area into the Ciskei. Although earmarked for agricultural purposes, much of the land was never allocated, and the rest was claimed by government officials.

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Those who were selected to take over land were rarely given title deeds, and very little support was provided. Land tenure is still an issue today,

and it is reported that many of these farms have been abandoned.

### **FINDING COMMON GROUND**

Today, the people of the Kat River Valley are rewriting history, working together around that on which all their lives depend – the Kat River. This process was started almost ten years ago when the Department of Geography at the University of Rhodes aimed to raise environmental awareness and build capacity among the community to manage the water resource at the local scale of two villages, Fairbairn and Hertzog.

By the end of 1998, events had progressed to the point where the desire had been expressed by the villagers to become part of the broader water management structure of the whole catchment. The ensuing project, funded by the Water Research Commission (WRC), focused on facilitating the effective participation of these and other

village communities in the Kat River in both the transformation of the Kat River Irrigation Board into the Kat River Water User Association (WUA) and the development of a catchment forum in which broader issues relating to catchment management could be tackled in a more formal structure.

According to Prof Kate Rowntree of the Rhodes Department of Geography, the Kat River WUA was one of the first to be established in the country, and aims to make government, agricultural business, small town and local rural community stakeholders jointly responsible for the availability and quality of the water of the Kat River, and the environmental health of the catchment area. It has also provided a framework for the establishment of future WUAs in the country.

Communities are also acquiring a large volume of knowledge concerning water law and policy. “People here have an understanding of government’s policy of

decentralisation. They grasp that they must be responsible for the management of their own water resource, and they realise how important it is to have a say in what is being done with their water," Rowntree tells *the Water Wheel*.

Water quality is of special concern to the commercial citrus farmers who need to adhere to strict international standards in order to export their products, as well as to the communities who remain dependent on the river for daily use. In the past there have been incidents of pollution related to the sewage overflows from the town wastewater treatment plants in the area.

Another issue is that of water allocation. With groundwater being unreliable and mostly unusable due to high levels of salinity, all along the

catchment use the water from the river, and measures have to be put in place to ensure enough water for those downstream.

The Catchment Management Forum is made up of representatives of 20 villages in the catchment. Rowntree reports that although not mandated by the Department of Water Affairs & Forestry, the village-inspired catchment forum has provided an invaluable platform for empowering participating communities to a point where they are able to take the lead in improving their environment. "The Kat River Catchment Forum has been in place for five years, during which time the members have endeavoured to actively identify needs in their catchment and implement integrated water resource management principles and practices to bring about change."

For the researchers at Rhodes University who continue to provide scientific and technical support there have also been some valuable lessons. This includes the importance of professionalism when dealing with community participation issues. In this regard, professionalism refers to standards and personal commitment of facilitators involved in stakeholder participation projects.

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## REWRITING HISTORY

One of the needs identified in the Kat River Valley was to rehabilitate severely degraded land in the area, causing soil erosion and silting up of the river. Heavy overgrazing by sheep and cattle have thinned large areas of the valley bushveld in the southern section of the catchment, and selected regions of the foothills of the Katberg and Elandsberg mountains in the north. Almost all of the grasslands in the catchment are degraded, and some regions are completely bare of vegetation.

Between 2002 to 2004 some 19 villages took part in land rehabilitation projects in the catchment with resources from the Land Care Programme. Apart from safeguarding the river and large tracts of land, the project provided much needed employment.



*About 200 people are employed at the Riverside citrus packing shed outside Fort Beaufort.*





*Minister Buyelwa Sonjica (centre) recently met with representatives of the Kat River Catchment Management Forum and the Water User Association.*

The latest initiative, a partnership between the Kat River WUA and Rhodes, is aimed at developing a catchment management plan for the Kat River Valley. The WRC is providing funding for the project. It is envisaged that the project will require major community input, and will hopefully result in enormous benefits for the people in the area.

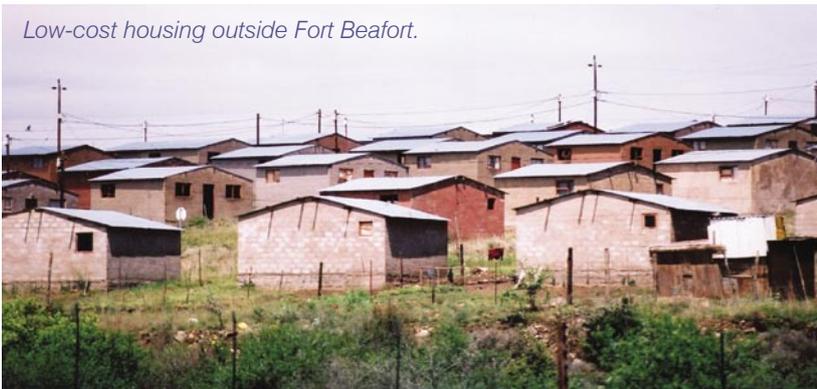
## CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Perhaps the biggest breakthrough of the Catchment Management Forum was overcoming centuries of mistrust and misunderstanding and getting the range of social and economic groups around one table to discuss the management guidelines for the Kat River Catchment.

“The Kat River Catchment has people who want to make a difference to the environment in which they live; people that are hungry for the opportunity and training that would enable them to make their dreams and hopes go that much further,” says student Sharon Birkholz of Rhodes University. “The most amazing thing about this process is seeing a commercial farmer, a subsistence farmer and a rural villager sitting together finding common ground in how to best manage their water resources.”

On a recent visit to the Kat River Valley, Minister for Water Affairs & Forestry Buyelwa Sonjica met with representatives of the WUA and the forum. She praised the process, calling it an example of integrated water management in the country. “The Kat River Valley again proves that water need not be a catalyst for conflict, that it can be a catalyst for peace and co-operation. We need to celebrate our differences and together come up with solutions that will bring development and prosperity for all through the one thing that binds us – water.” 

*Low-cost housing outside Fort Beaufort.*



*Fort Beaufort is the main economic centre of the Kat River Valley.*

