

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project aimed to advance our understanding of the relationships between freshwater conservation planning and the social, economic and political landscape within which freshwater conservation goals are being implemented. It is proposed that once this relationship is more deeply understood that freshwater conservation goals and objectives would be more robust because they will reflect wider agreement about the desired and expected delivery of human benefits from freshwater ecosystems, and hence implementation of freshwater conservation would be more effective and successful. This proposition was tested through the following project objectives:

To investigate why a new discourse, a socio-economic and political based one, is needed to enrich the current conservation planning process;

To identify those socio-economic and political issues that play an important role in the successful implementation of a freshwater conservation planning strategy;

To investigate how these socio-economic and political issues can and should be incorporated into current conservation planning processes; and

To develop a national research strategy for the improvement of conservation planning by incorporating socio-economic and political aspects.

Three of the project activities report directly on the above objectives, namely an *issues paper* which examines ways in which the systematic conservation process can be augmented by re-defining ecosystems as social-ecological systems, by promoting co-operation across overlapping mandates and an adaptive learning process, and by categorising societal groups and attitudes that can be targeted through different strategies to encourage freshwater conservation ideals and practices; *a research strategy* which contextualises future research needs in this field of research; and *a proposal* (submitted to and approved by the Water Research Commission) which continues research in this field based on the work undertaken in this project by focusing on how the conservation process is influenced by different categories of actor clusters that do not know, care and/or act when it comes to freshwater conservation.

A further requirement of the project was capacity building - this was achieved in two ways:

The development of an active network of scientists to build a platform for potential future collaboration on multidisciplinary freshwater conservation research. A small group of 12 scientists from different disciplines but with a common interest in freshwater conservation initiated discussions on the possible barriers to the implementation of freshwater conservation as being a result of a lack of transdisciplinary work in this field.

The development of a concept note for a future PhD study that expands on the notion that the answer to some of the problems within the field of freshwater conservation lie outside the traditional disciplines of the natural sciences; it examines the idea of river ethnography as a tool to uncover the narrative of a river in order to understand the complex relationships between people and rivers. It focuses on but is not limited to issues of water use and management, power relationships, spirituality and religion, coping with poverty, gender hierarchy, economic activity, patriarchy and indigenous knowledge systems.

This report captures the knowledge gained through each of the above activities and is divided into three sections, namely a summary of the issues and challenges that face freshwater conservationists today, a research agenda that describes research questions that need to be addressed in the future in the multidisciplinary field of water management, and a research proposal that will continue the research in this field of study. Two appendices provide information on the Background Information Document that was circulated to the focus groups for discussion and a list of the participants in the focus groups.