

SCIENCE 

# Restored river is a watershed for conservation in SA

Baviaan's River in Hout Bay shows how partnerships can rescue a dying river

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The Baviaan's River in Hout Bay has been rehabilitated by the community, city and many partners.

**Image:** Claire Keeton

How do you boost freshwater in a country running out of water? A bubbling river above Hout Bay in Cape Town, flowing freely from source to sea, shows how this is possible.

The Baviaan's River used to be eroded, throttled and murky in parts, but it has been rescued by the removal of hundreds of invasive alien trees that were sucking it dry. Now it flows stronger for longer in the year, the water quality has improved and its steep banks are covered with indigenous plants.

[The Baviaan's River demonstrates how rivers can bounce back](#) through actions such as clearing pines and gumtrees from catchments and restoring indigenous vegetation. Frogs and butterflies are proliferating.

South Africans rely on 22 freshwater catchments for their water and protecting these water sources is key to avoid “water shedding” in future.



Before its rehabilitation, the Baviaan's River was degraded and the water flow was choked by invasive alien tree.

*Image: Supplied*

Jemimah Birch, from the Scott Estate and Baviaanskloof Community Improvement District, says of their project to save a river from catchment to coast: “We started by getting some of the biggest trees out because they use a lot of water and you cannot rehabilitate vegetation underneath them. They were also a fire risk and [dangerous if] they fell over or shed branches.

“We had input on flood management, especially after KwaZulu-Natal, and identified areas along the river we could open up for wetlands.”

[Friends of the Rivers of Hout Bay](#) secretary Birch has put in tons of work on the polluted Disa River and has always wanted to clean up the Baviaan's River, along which she lives and near to the school where she taught.

The Baviaan's River runs from the mountain slopes, under SANParks stewardship, down through residential areas and city parks and lands, where built, hardened surfaces affect its flow. The river ends in the Hout Bay estuary, where it helps to dilute the hazardous E. coli pollution.

CID chairperson Helen Snell says their district, backed by the City of Cape Town, funded two jobs for clearing and planting in the catchment and worked in partnership with SANParks, clearing massive pines and a dense stand of invasive hakea in the catchment and high up on Constantiaberg.

“When we saw the volume of invasives, we brought in an additional two people to scour the massive catchment, removing any invasive seedlings they come across. They have cut and hand-pulled thousands of invasives across the Baviaanskloof catchment,” says Snell.



The planting of indigenous shrubs and clearing of aliens has improved the quality of the river water and the frogs are multiplying

**Image:** Claire Keeton

Two additional people are employed who have planted indigenous trees and shrubs as replacements in the riparian and other areas. White pear, wild olive, wild peach, Cape saffron, rooiels, wild almond are on the planting list.

“In the beginning it was so dirty here and now it looks beautiful,” says Stefanus Sakaria. Carrying a young plant down the bank his colleague, Henry Mukone, says the river looks “very different” from when they started.

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He discovered a new beehive in a tree on Wednesday. Up in some trees are owl boxes to attract the nocturnal raptors to their area.

The project took off in November 2020 and picked up intensity, with more than 350 massive pines felled so far. The stumps of felled trees mark where the aliens were and trimmed stumps have been used to create a path alongside the river, while other offcuts were used to stabilise the banks.

Snell says: “The river space itself is vastly improved and we extended our scope further, into the catchment area. This has grown beyond what we thought we could achieve.”

The national departments of environment, forestry and fisheries and of water and sanitation, and NGOs like the Sugarbird Trust, are supporters of their efforts.

For this project expert treefeller Vernon Mitchell, from Hangberg above Hout Bay harbour, used teams of up to 12 for cutting down the huge trees and clearing debris off the ground.



Hundreds of invasive alien trees have been cleared in the river restoration project, driven by Helen Snell from the community improvement district.

**Image:** Claire Keeton

“It has been a long journey, but now most residents are in favour [of the river’s rehabilitation]. The river is getting its biodiversity back, and it is more friendly for foot traffic,” says Birch. “The Baviaan’s River is really the only freshwater in Hout Bay.”

Unless we protect our water sources and reduce our water consumption, South Africa could run out of water by 2030, warn scientists.

The Baviaan’s River is a symbol of hope — a riverine role model of what can be done to conserve water and biodiversity, and protect against wildfires, when people work together and give nature a chance.



Henry Mukone (pictured at the river’s edge), with his colleague Stefanus Sakaria, says the river is transformed from when they started planting.

**Image:** Claire Keeton

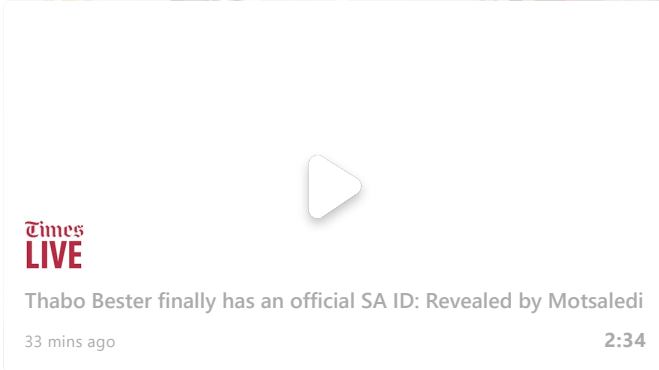
“I don’t let the guys climb up and just drop big branches down. That could destroy indigenous plants, and my job is to protect them,” says Mitchell, who started a landscaping company called Indigicare. He started his career and developed skills through government-sponsored programmes, such as Working for Water.

The felling of trees was contentious with landowners along the Baviaan’s River at first, says Birch. There was an outcry from some that it was invading their privacy, and others were sentimental about losing the large trees with which they have lived for decades.

Residents with cleared lands have been offered replacement indigenous trees to provide shade and beauty, and they have responded positively to a “planting list” of indigenous options, says Birch.

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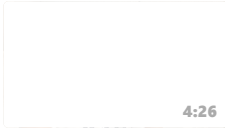
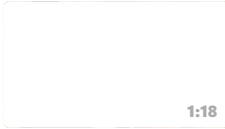
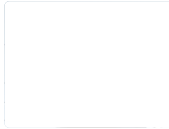


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