

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTNERSHIPS IN URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT - *WORKING FOR WATER* TACKLES THE JUKSKEI RIVER

by Karoline Hanks, *Working for Water* programme

The ubiquitous township stench of burning plastic and rubbish hits us as we turn our backs on the gloss of Sandton, and enter the time warp that is Alexandra. It is an obscene contrast – one far too many Johannesburg residents choose to ignore. We are en route to the *Working for Water* project office in the centre of Alex.

It is estimated that up to 450 – 670 people live on a single hectare on this 2km<sup>2</sup> patch of land. This compares impressively with the 32/ha densities of the leafy suburbs less than a kilometre away. Corrugated iron, sheets of rhino board and scraps serve as housing for the estimated 300 000 people living in Alex. 'Houses' are crammed together, divided by a complex maze of alleyways and side streets. At every turn, there are blocked storm-water drains, gutters packed to overflowing with plastic and filth, and a startling absence of greenery. The bridge over the Jukskei River is a good vantage point. An elderly member of our team quietly reminisces about the days when she swam and played in this river and one is hit with an overwhelming sense of despair at a seemingly irreversible situation. Shacks are perched on the riverbanks, which are nothing less than large waste dumps. Goats and giant rats pick their way through the plastic, glass and human waste, and a shoeless child plays with abandon outside her house, on the edge of it all.

The *Working for Water* Jukskei project started in July 1999, first with employee training and then with clearing of poplar, syringa, black wattle and gum trees. The project initially employed 60 people on a daily-wage system. This year, the budget is R940 000 and it employs 70 people. The reasons for tackling the Jukskei are due to the fact that flood events have been exacerbated due to the presence of invasive trees upstream. With houses built precariously close to the riverbanks further downstream, the risk of losing property and life is higher.

Working in a dense urban environment presents a set of unique challenges. Specialised training has been necessitated by the fact that cars were getting damaged, the window of a house was broken, and a road had to be closed due to incorrect felling procedures. Ablution facilities are lacking, which is problematic for workers. The quality of the water in the river is such that the teams are no longer allowed to expose themselves to it when clearing. In the past, it has brought on rashes and allergies – a hazard indeed when one considers the fact that people are living alongside it and children invariably swim in it. The response in the community of Alex itself has been overwhelming. Upstream along the Jukskei, however, some higher income landowners have been less enthused about the removal of trees where they served as sound barriers (from the motorway) or for aesthetic reasons.

The teams have to build one day into each contract to clean litter from the river. This is a mammoth undertaking, and in most instances, it is impossible for the teams to make any noticeable impact. The programme's attempts to tackle such a huge environmental problem in Alexandra are fruitless without a holistic approach to management and planning. As such, the programme has forged partnerships with a number of organisations in the Alex environs. Benefits such as direct funding, the loan of the premises, or simply buy in and expertise, are obtained from key partnerships with Primedia, Alex FM, ABSA, Alex training, Ort and the East Metropolitan Council. The steering committee comprises a vast array of role-players across the spectrum of health, education, industry and business.

As a developmental programme, close partnerships such as these are imperative. They define the way in which the programme seeks to offer a broad developmental engagement with communities, around its core work of clearing invading alien plants. Not only are these partnerships of greater value to the intended beneficiaries, but the marginal costs are also lower for everyone concerned, meaning that more resources can be devoted to those in greatest need.

## The Best Management Practices for Controlling and Preventing Invading Alien Species Symposium, February 2000

Partnerships such as those in the Alex project need to extend beyond our borders. This was highlighted at a symposium on the Best Management Practices for Controlling and Preventing Invading Alien Species which was hosted by the *Working for Water* programme at the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens in Cape Town in February.

The delegates called unequivocally for us to integrate our efforts across line-functions. Without a comprehensive programme against invasive species, we shall not succeed in our war against invasive species. This has been recognised in the USA with President Clinton's Executive Order on Invasive Species, which mark the beginning of a multi-sectoral initiative to combat a full range of invasive species in the USA. The strong Australian delegation had a similar perspective. These augur well for the strengthening of partnerships and scope across line-functions in South Africa.

Collaborative approaches signal the most obvious way to prevent and manage invasive species. A particularly welcome outcome of this symposium emanated from the commitment of the representatives of the Southern African Development Countries (SADC) to meet and focus specifically on their needs concerning invasive species. It is also true of the South Africa : United States of America bi-lateral commitment. The symposium may lead to a focussed partnership between South Africa and Australia as well.

The need for international political and financial leadership in the war against invasive species emerged clearly. The Global Invasive Species Programme (GISP) plays a vital role in the establishment of such international leadership. GISP also represents broad acceptance of the need for a science-based understanding of invasive species. Nevertheless, in the war against invasive species, if there are to be effective interventions, these need to be driven at a higher political and financed level.

Delegates from SADC countries, the US, Australia, Norway, the United Kingdom, Germany and Switzerland attended presentations and workshops on best management practices for terrestrial and aquatic invasive species.

The symposium produced the "**Kirstenbosch Declaration**" - the delegates' vision for the management of invasive species, and an eloquent call to collaborative action. There was widespread praise for the relevance of the symposium, which certainly helped to advance the cause of programmes to control and prevent invasive species.