

The Liesbeek River Life Plan: making room for an urban river

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From the 1920s, the Cape Town municipality managed the Liesbeek catchment primarily by reducing the risk of flooding to private properties and infrastructure. At the time, alternative options were limited. Four decades later, following a series of engineering interventions, nearly 70% of the river was canalised and formally attached to a network of stormwater pipelines that discharges runoff directly into the river. These interventions also took place in the context of the city that was expanding towards the suburbs. The combination of urban creep of residential properties on the Liesbeek floodplain and the dominant engineering paradigm of the day, contributed to an ecologically degraded river system, parts of which function largely as a stormwater drain. The unintended consequences of poor urban planning and inappropriate solutions are legacies that are difficult to overcome.

The story of the Liesbeek is not unique - many other urban rivers in other parts South Africa and the world have a similar history. Is it possible to reverse the damage? There are two reasons why it is opportune to consider the question. New knowledge has already shifted the discourse on urban water management from a command and control approach, to making urban rivers an integral part of the urban water cycle. The second reason is the intensity of factors confronting the future of cities including climate change; rapid, unrelenting urbanisation; deteriorating water quality; collapse of ecosystem services; and inhospitable urban environments that may be conducive to social conflict.

Research activity and publications on urban river restoration, integrated urban water management and new theories of governance is growing. In addition, in South Africa, as in many other parts of world, there is growing interest in sustainable urban stormwater drainage (SUDS), urban ecologies, and Water Sensitive Urban Design (WSUD). It is also significant that researchers involved in these fields of knowledge are exploring how to work in a collaborative, multi-disciplinary and participatory manner by including stakeholders in building a community of practice (sometimes referred to as a learning alliance). The approach recognises that urban water issues are complex and can no longer rely on the input of single disciplines or individuals alone.

The project, nominally called the Liesbeek Life Project or Plan, is being proposed and financially supported by the Friends of the Liesbeek. The main aim is to provide a master plan for the catchment and a set of detailed designs for selected reaches along the river in places where there is potential to restore the river and its surroundings. These designs are informed by the available data. The intention is to complete this part of the project by the end of year. There is interest from UCT's Urban Water Management research unit. Invitations will be extended to civic groups, city officials and elected councillors.

The initiative presents an opportunity to contribute to re-conceptualising the design and form of the Liesbeek. While a great deal of research data already exists on the Liesbeek, the gap lies in interpreting and applying existing and further research findings in a collaborative process within a community of practice.

Selection of References

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