



MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate release

Victory for biodiversity in uMkhomazi River Valley

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Conservation organisations, including the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) and BirdLife South Africa, welcome the rejection of the final Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the proposed construction of a raw water supply dam in the uMkhomazi catchment, KwaZulu-Natal, by the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA). With passionate support from private landowners, these organisations, amongst others, challenged the proposal due to serious environmental concerns raised, and view the rejection as a victory for biodiversity.

Although the dam has been proposed by the Department of Water and Sanitation to supply water to the area's people, its construction is deemed to be an unfavourable option by hydrologists and biodiversity experts alike, due to the pressing need for (less costly) improved catchment management in the area. Catchment management actions could include the protection of healthy grasslands and rehabilitation of overgrazed land and wetlands, which would increase natural vegetation cover and interception of rainfall, and prevent sedimentation, which, if not addressed would lead to siltation of a new dam over time. The experts also called for improved Water Conservation and Demand Management (WCDM) in this and the adjacent catchments' existing water systems.

The proposed construction is intended to take place in close proximity to several known nesting sites of the Blue Swallow (*Hirundo atrocaerulea*), which is Critically Endangered in South Africa. These beautiful birds have experienced dramatic population crashes in recent years, and there are currently fewer than 100 birds left, and fewer than 35 nests in the whole of South Africa. With the biggest population residing in KZN, it seemed unthinkable that construction, which could put these birds at risk, would go ahead in this area and that threats and alternatives were not adequately researched prior to costly EIA development.

The environmental consultants for the project organised a dedicated Biodiversity Working Group, which included the national DEA. DEA's team noted that the proposed project has the potential to inflict detrimental impacts on various species of conservation significance, notably the Blue Swallow, with the possible result being the local extinction of that species. Of additional concern is the fact that the

proposed site supports populations of Pennington's Protea Butterfly (*Capys penningtoni*) and Riverine Keeled Millipede (*Gnomeskelus fluvialis*), which are found only in the uMkhomazi River Valley region, and nowhere else in the world. As no clear mitigation measures were included in the EIR, the construction of the dam at this site may result in habitat destruction and the extinction of these species. The EIR also did not adequately address the impacts on aquatic species and wetland habitats on and around the proposed site.

The applicants will have the opportunity to address these, and other, concerns raised by DEA in their rejection of the EIR, and should the applicants resubmit their application, we would encourage NGOs and the public to comment on the new document. However, the EWT and BirdLife South Africa, as well as private landowners who have been custodians of these birds and their nests for many years, are grateful for DEA's swift response in dealing with these concerns. It is refreshing to see environmental, and specifically biodiversity issues, taken seriously when it comes to development, and we look forward to continuing work to preserve the species of this special region.

ENDS

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About BirdLife South Africa

- BirdLife South Africa is the local country partner of BirdLife International. BirdLife International is the world's largest nature conservation Partnership with more than 120 BirdLife Partners worldwide and almost 11 million supporters.
- BirdLife South Africa is the largest non-profit bird conservation organization in the country. It relies on donor funding and financial support from the public to carry out its critical conservation work.
- Vision. BirdLife South Africa wishes to see a country and region where nature and people live in greater harmony, more equitably and sustainably.

- Mission. BirdLife South Africa strives to conserve birds, their habitats and biodiversity through scientifically-based programmes, through supporting the sustainable and equitable use of natural resources and through encouraging people to enjoy and value nature.
- Birds are important environmental indicators, the proverbial “canaries in the coal mine”. By focusing on birds, and the sites and the habitats on which they depend, BirdLife South Africa’s IBA Programme aims to improve the quality of life for birds, for other wildlife, and ultimately for people.
- For more information, visit www.birdlife.org.za