

WHAT WORLD HERITAGE STATUS MEANS FOR THE AREA

Save the Vaal islands too!

Conservation, tourism, co-ordination between public authorities and private interests, and wealth creation for people in the area. These benefits are likely to flow from the Declaration of the Vredefort Dome as a World Heritage Site.

The international conservation union (IUCN) however highlighted the urgent need to better protect this unique site and provide visitor facilities to help interpret the complex phenomenon.

For Otters' Haunt, our small, exclusive accommodation establishment on the Vaal, it means that conservation efforts will be intensified.

Conservation is especially necessary amid the wonderful islands of the Vaal. Some 300 lush green islands break up the river into dozens of channels from the time it enters the Dome to the time it exits - a distance of about 25km. These islands are in themselves a precious national heritage worth restoring to their natural state.



Karen Addison introduces schoolchildren to one of the magical, hidden channels of the Vaal, flowing between its many islands.

Despite their beauty and uniqueness, the islands have never really been the focus of conservation efforts. Unfortunately these islands are becoming overrun with invader species like bluegums and syringa trees. The river channels are clogged with water hyacinth. There is also little or no control over their use for fishing and camping, bringing the danger of fires and litter which could further mar their beauty.

Working for Water has concentrated on removing exotics here and in other river areas. The campaign could gain momentum if bodies like Working for Water and the dome conservancy lend their full support.

OTTERS' HAUNT CANOEING

Visitors to Otters are usually amazed at the variety of birdlife, fish and creatures such as otters and vervet monkeys in the islands.

Our special canoeing trips on the lazy meandering channels take people into a wilderness few could have imagined to exist so close to Guateng.

AN ABRANCHED RIVER

Scientifically speaking, the Vaal in this area is an "anabrached" river. This term applies to riverbeds broken up by rocks; and in this area the Vaal follows faults between the granite basement rocks of the Vredefort Dome. Erosion has removed the Karoo sediment covering, exposing the very old granite of the earth's crust. The river finds its way across the Dome by cutting its way along faultlines that radiate out from the centre of the blast. The Vaal is a very old river, superimposed on the rugged landscape of the once-deeply buried Vredefort structure.



A visitor, Ronnie, takes Shadow the Otters' Haunt unofficial guide, on an Island tour. The boat, a Fluid Synergy, is made in Parys and is safe, easy to manoeuvre, and sets up to two adults and a child. A special offer on these boats at a discount price is available to Otters' Haunt and Bush Cabin residents.

During the Boer War, the islands were used by Boer snipers hiding from the British. They would take pot-shots at military convoys crossing the river at several fords in the area.

OWNERSHIP OF THE ISLANDS

It is not entirely clear who owns the islands today. They appear to fall under different sets of land ownership rules. On the old Orange Free State side, it appears that the law gave riparian landowners ownership of the land up to the midpoint of the river (ie including the islands up to that point). On the old Transvaal side, the landowners owned only the land on the bank up to the water's edge. The fact that "Die Eiland" is in private hands (for a golf estate) and that that Parys's main island, Golf Island, has a golf club, indicates that this land ownership pattern still holds.

It may be that recent legislation has changed the ownership rights, though this is unlikely to affect those who are already in possession of the islands.

COMMON INTERESTS

Whatever the case, it is in the common interest of all landowners to agree to conservation standards and to work with local authorities in conservation and tourism to achieve set goals. What needs to happen is:

- the Vaal islands should be earmarked as a special conservation project by both the Free State and North West tourism authorities
- landowners on both banks should be called upon to help prevent the spread of exotics and not put up unsightly constructions
- a strategic environmental and tourism plan needs to be devised to guide action and gain the consensus of all concerned
- educational programmes, from schools and through media, should be developed to scientific knowledge and hence support for Vaal river and island conservation.

Of course, this is what has happened, more or less, in the case of the Dome itself. With backing from landowners, business and other interests, both central and local government threw their weight into the campaign to have the area declare first, a National Heritage, and now a World Heritage site. The Vaal Islands should now become a special project within the Dome area.

GRAEME ADDISON

Author and landowner