



Press Release

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Parks and protected areas alone fail to stop freshwater decline, says new expert group

In a statement published today, the Skukuza Freshwater Group, made up of experts from leading conservation organisations, advocated urgent action and approaches to water management in order to meet the needs of the world's poorest people, combat the alarming decline of freshwater species, and correct mistakes of the past.

The Skukuza Statement: Keeping Our Rivers, Lakes and Freshwater Wetlands alive – a Call for Action, states that the diversity of freshwater species is declining more rapidly than those in terrestrial or marine environments. The group stated that many freshwater ecosystems have been “substantially failed” by the weaknesses in design and management of many networks of parks and protected areas because they are focused primarily on terrestrial conservation and ignore the parts of freshwater systems that lie outside park borders. Furthermore, the interconnectivity of rivers means that negative changes in one part of the catchment can influence the rest of the system and the people depending on them.

“Healthy freshwater species and the water needs of people are inextricably linked and the future of both is at stake. More than 3 billion people collectively lack adequate drinking water or sanitation services and freshwater life has declined 50 percent since the 1970’s,” said Carmen Revenga, Senior Freshwater Scientist at The Nature Conservancy. “It is imperative that we find ways globally to manage water for people and nature and address threats to ensure that these valuable resources are protected now and for future generations.”

In order to restore freshwater ecosystems for people and for nature, the Skukuza Group recommends:

- New guidance to help protected area managers better target freshwater areas in parks and protected areas as well as participate in management decisions of rivers outside park borders;

- An integrated approach to manage water that balances protection of key species and habitats, with conservation of ecosystem functions that deliver services to people, particularly the poor whose livelihoods depend upon freshwater ecosystems;
- Developing criteria to help governments protect the world's declining number of free-flowing rivers, i.e. those free from dams and significant levels of water extraction, as important assets in the protection of global biodiversity.

“Ecological processes have very tangible impacts that can make or break a river system. Stemming freshwater decline entails managing demand and water allocation for uses from agriculture to industrial and urban use, protecting rivers and wetlands that support aquatic species, and reducing land-based pressures such as pollution and deforestation,” said Harry Biggs, of SANParks Programme for Adaptive Biodiversity Outcomes.

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Editors' Notes:

The Skukuza Group studied a number of examples including Kruger National Park, South Africa which lies in the middle of five major river systems flowing from heavily populated areas upstream across the international border with Mozambique to the east. Faced with deteriorating quality and quantity of water flows, the park has recently attempted to improve freshwater biodiversity protection by engaging in discussions about water resource use in the upstream catchments, and applying new management processes within the park to identify and act upon signs of trouble for Kruger's river life.

The Skukuza Freshwater Group is made up of freshwater biologists and other experts from South African National Parks (SANParks), the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) and various independent academics from Australia, the United States and South Africa. It is named after a symposium held in October 2006 in Skukuza, Kruger National Park, South Africa, to discuss the potential for improved protection of freshwater ecosystems.