

'No way you can call this water'



E. Coli counts in tributaries feeding the Hennops River run into tens of millions, far above the allowed limit

Sheree Bega

Water-quality results have revealed that the amount of *E. Coli* bacteria in a tributary of the polluted Hennops River reached a staggering 52-million per 100ml between October 2020 and February this year.

E. Coli counts are used to assess faecal pollution in water sources — and counts over 400 per 100ml are considered dangerous to human and animal health.

The results show *E. Coli* counts running into the tens of millions at several sampling points of the Kaalspruit, a tributary of the Hennops, which flows into the Crocodile River before joining the Hartbeespoort Dam.

"At the Kaalspruit, the river is pitch black, and we have to go in that water to clean out all the plastic," said Willem Snyman, who runs the Pountain River Environmental Sanctuary Hennops (Fresh), a non-profit organisation working to restore the Hennops ecosystem.

"In the winter, the toxicity builds up hugely because it's not diluted, so I think you can look at those figures doubling up now in winter," he said. "These *E. Coli* figures are unheard of in the Vaal River system. It's so big, yet it's not getting any attention. It's a huge unacknowledged and untreated health threat, and there's no life left in the river."

Marlette Liefierink, the chief executive of the Federation for a Sustainable Environment (FSE), had to lodge a request under the Promotion of Access to Information Act (Paia) with the City of Ekurhuleni to obtain the water quality results.

This was after the results were presented by a City of Ekurhuleni water technician, Elsie van Staden, in a PowerPoint presentation on 30 March at the Hennops River catchment management forum. "Our request for an electronic copy was refused," said Liefierink, who added that the process has been "cumbersome and time-consuming".

In an email in April, Van Staden told Liefierink that, as an official of the city, she is bound by "a long-standing instruction that no results



'Poisoning ourselves': Plastic and other waste pollution along the Hennops River. The sewage pollution of the river affects the water quality of the Rietvlei and Hartbeespoort dams. Photo Delwyn Verasamy

may be given out upon request. Such requests may only be handled through [an] official request to the office of the city mayor.

"The only permission we as officials have, is to present our analysis data at the different river forums because of an agreement from forums to never utilise any reported data against municipalities," Van Staden informed Liefierink.

The FSE's request to the mayor's office, too, however, was unsuccessful. Liefierink escalated the matter to senior officials in the water and sanitation department and was told by one that: "Each institution has its own policy on how they deal with the information."

On 30 April, she submitted a request for information in terms of the provisions of Paia. The prescribed period of 30 days passed before the results were finally sent to Liefierink last week.

Liefierink said that copies of water-quality reports ought to be made available to the public. "Civil society is dependent on the water-quality results presented at the catchment management forums to understand the state of their drinking water and wastewater," she said, adding that the restrictions do not apply to other catchment management forums in the Vaal River system, for example.

The City of Ekurhuleni said there has not been a reluctance to issue water-quality results. "Water-quality results are presented across different forums in line with the terms of reference that govern the forums," said Nhlanhla Cebekhulu, its head of media relations. "The information is presented to the national department of water and sanitation... The request should have been directed to the department."

Cebekhulu said the part of the Kaalspruit River running through Tembisa and Ivory Park, emptying through Centurion Lake, has been an area of focus, because of its high levels of pollution. "In addition to the dense urban settlement along the river, industrial, mining and agricultural activities have had a negative effect on the catchment."

The problem won't be solved only by improving maintenance and upgrading the area's sewer line. "A comprehensive stakeholder engagement is required to address the social

contribution of the problem, such as the misuse of the sewer system by the community, leading to multiple blockages in the system."

The city, Cebekhulu said, had undertaken interventions to address

the problems and to develop a plan for the sustainable rehabilitation of the Kaalspruit catchment.

The department of water and sanitation did not respond to the *Mail & Guardian's* inquiries this week.

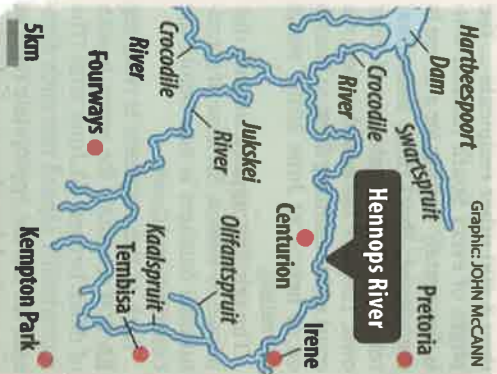
Simone Liefierink, an aquatic hydrologist and Marlette Liefierink's daughter, said the excessive *E. Coli* levels present a risk for human use. "The *E. Coli* levels are unacceptable for all water uses, such as irrigation, livestock watering and recreational use, and significantly increase the risk of waterborne diseases."

Snyman said the sewage pollution of the Hennops River affects the water quality of the Rietvlei and Hartbeespoort dams, both of which are used to provide potable water, recreational activities and — for the Hartbeespoort Dam — irrigation.

The problem, he said, arises from "token" municipal wastewater-treatment plants and poor waste services along the course of the Hennops. "The water is so toxic, and the attendant problem is cyanobacteria [blue-green algae], which is so poisonous — it's all growing on the sewage."

In 2014, work by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research found cyanobacteria are widespread in South Africa's 50 largest dams, with the Hartbeespoort Dam among the three worst affected.

Tarryn Johnston of the nonprofit organisation Hennops Revival said of the poor state of the Hennops River: "There is no way you can call this water. You can drink water, but you can't drink this — it's the Hennops sewage system."



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