



KAYAKING FOR CONSERVATION

The TriWaters Tour

Text: Stuart Wainwright
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Franz Fulz

It may seem crazy to think of paddling 2,500 km from the Vaal River into the Orange River and finally to the Atlantic Ocean. But when three guys from different parts of the world decided that they needed something big if they were to raise awareness and funds for water conservation, 2,500 km of backbreaking kayaking seemed fitting.



The largest continuous water body in South Africa runs west from the source of the Vaal River until it merges with the Orange River, and eventually flows into the Atlantic Ocean, just below the Namibian border. However, despite this 2,500 km stretch of water serving as a source of life for generations, few of the communities dotted along its banks know how to care for this precious resource on which they depend.

Ok, That's Far, but Why Should We Care?

Unicef and who published a global report in 2013 that reveals that more than 768 million people do not have access to safe drinking water. The repercussions are unthinkable to those of us who open the tap without a moment's thought. Yet, if we don't learn to care for our rivers, many South Africans could join this number. According to the South African Department of Environmental Affairs, aquatic ecosystems are more endangered than any other ecosystem in our country. Only 26 % of rivers remain intact, while 54 % are critically





endangered, and more than 50 % of our wetlands have been destroyed.

Frightening statistics such as these have motivated a Canadian teacher, a South African engineer, and an Australian “happy-go-lucky bloke” to take on a mammoth adventure in a bid to put things right. From January to March 2015, the trio plan to kayak the full 2,500 km from the source of the Vaal to the Atlantic Ocean.

Along the way and as part of the TriWaters Tour, they will be giving talks at schools and riverside communities to promote water conservation and river awareness. They hope not only to raise awareness for water conservation, but also to educate and create sustainability within the communities.

So, Who Are These Three Blokes?

Expedition leader, Franz Fulz, was born and raised in Ermelo, Mpumalanga. After school, he left his hometown to pursue his studies and a career in engineering. More than a decade later, he returned to find that mining had largely replaced farming in the area. “The Mpumalanga Highveld is the headwaters for many of South Africa’s major rivers, including the Komati, Crocodile, Olifants, Usuthu, and the Vaal. These rivers are all ‘born’ almost within walking distance of Breyten, close to my hometown.

The landscape has undergone major changes, and so too the natural water systems,” explains Franz.

“Some research into the impact of mining,

agriculture, and municipal water systems shows that South Africa is heading towards a major water crisis.” It was with this realisation that Franz decided to reach out to fellow adventurers across the globe.

“I decided that although our rivers are under stress, it is not too late. There is still time to make a change for the better!” He is quick to add that the team are far from anti-mining or anti-establishment. They suggest that such commercial operations should be performed responsibly to ensure a sustainable supply of fresh water in the future, as South Africa’s water and thus food sovereignty depends on this.

He connected with the young Australian on the team, Brett Merchant, via Facebook. In 2013, Brett completed a source-to-sea expedition of Australia’s longest river, the Murray. “I’ve never been to Africa before, and completing the Murray expedition has reinforced my belief that water is such a finite and precious resource that must be conserved for the future. The agriculture and mining reliance on both the Murray and Vaal/Orange river systems is heavy and, at current rates, isn’t sustainable. Raising awareness of this is what the expedition aims to do, and I’m hoping we can make a real difference in people’s minds.”

Brett is a mining consultant and brings insight into the mining industry, one of the biggest challenges in water conservation. His passion for water conservation and a career in mining may seem at odds with each other on a trip such as this, but it might just be a vital component to finding a solution that allows for all involved to benefit from the water systems in South Africa.



Brett Merchant

Troy Glover of Wemindji, Canada, is an environmental advocate and teacher with a background in aquatic biology. Like Franz and Brett, Troy is an avid paddler and spends much of his spare time on the icy waters of James Bay, the Southernmost part of the Arctic Ocean. His background in conservation and education will ensure that their message remains in the hearts and minds of those the team encounter.

He's looking forward to the unpredictable and says: "What I love about travelling is the uncertainty of what is to come. I know I will learn a great deal from those who live beside this river every day, and I look forward to being able to share my experience with them."

What's Their Plan?

Beyond creating awareness, the TriWaters Tour also aims to raise funds for the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA). Their mission is to promote public participation in caring for the Earth and to create fair, sustainable management of resources. The team will also be teaching adults and children about the mini-SASS (Stream Assessment Scoring System), which allows communities to monitor the health of the ecosystem by simply counting insects in the water.

The team is hoping to raise in excess of R300,000, a drop in the ocean of what is really needed to solve a global concern of this kind. For more information or to get involved, head to www.triwaterstour.com or follow the adventure on their Facebook group and Twitter (@Triwaterstour). ■