

Online bid to keep eye on SA rivers

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It is a tough job monitoring more than 17700km of rivers running through South Africa. Now scientists have come up with a novel way to get ordinary citizens to help.



Image courtesy of Tom Curtis /
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In a world first, an environmental consulting company has implemented a system that enables ordinary folk to feed information into a national river health database.

Developed by KwaZulu-Natal-based Ground Truth, the biomonitoring platform runs on Google Earth. Citizen scientists can feed information to the system from anywhere in the world.

Aquatic biologist Dr Mark Graham said users could study bug life in the vicinity of their rivers and then complete a scorecard of what they found.

Worms, crabs, shrimps, flat worms, snails, beetles and a variety of flies are sensitive to pollution, so a survey of their numbers and an analysis of their sensitivity measured by a scorecard are indications of a river's health.

The data is then uploaded to the site using the GPS coordinates to log the location. Once the information has been loaded, the system automatically generates a coloured crab to indicate the river's state of health.

The information will help scientists to determine, among other things, the level of pollution and general health of rivers and identify priority areas. "It's impossible for the government to do this by itself. This platform will help give us an indication of what our rivers and streams look like," said Graham.

Launched late last year, the platform has already scooped an award for the most significant contribution to community empowerment at the 2013 annual Water Research Commission research conference in Pretoria.

The site can be viewed at www.minisass.org.

Source: Sunday Times

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