

Water Week

Why should water conservation be a priority for everyone? With many water shortages, it's time to pay attention.

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National Water Week: Know what you protect

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Founder of Explore4Knowledge, John Lucas, teaching learners about the importance of our freshwater sources. Images and video courtesy of Explore4Knowledge

22 March 2016 marks **World Water Day** and in South Africa we will celebrate **National Water Week** from 16 to 22 March. With South Africa's crippling water crisis, protecting and saving our precious water is everyone's business. Listen up, and do your bit. By Arnold Ras

If a tap was connected to your bank account, and it was constantly dripping, would you really turn a blind eye? This startling but realistic question is posed by John Lucas, founder of the non-profit [Explore4Knowledge](#). This organisation, which uses adventure to teach SA's young and old about the environment, received a SANParks Kudu Award in 2014 for their work.

Wild caught up with this passionate scientist and water conservationist to talk water, and learn why this year's National Water Week should be on our radar.

"Every day should be World Water Day. In South Africa we are facing a water crisis, whether we want to admit it or not. What to do on that day? Go visit a local nature reserve or wetland to see what a river looks like. A lot of people have no idea. They don't know it's a body of water and don't quite understand what it does and how it functions. They lack the bigger picture," John explains.

"Water is the golden thread that holds a society together, and yet it's the thread that we cut to pieces the entire time. Yes, it's great to conserve water, yes, it's great to re-use your water for your garden, but this means absolutely nothing if you do not know what you are protecting."



Keen on conducting a habitat assessment of a river?

For example, few people realise that the mountains in some of our favourite nature reserves are responsible for providing them with clean drinking water. In fact, 90% of the water catchment areas in the Western Cape are managed by CapeNature, and 57% of the country's strategic water resources reside in the province. And it is thanks to the pristine fynbos that the mountains can yield so much water. Research has found that infestation by invasive trees can reduce stream flow by 55%. [Learn more about the ["water factories" of the Western Cape.](#)]

Water warriors
With Explore4Knowledge (E4K), John wanted to address the detachment between the efforts of scientists and what the public knows about water conservation. His solution? Showing people exactly what the work entails. "Why care about a river? If we can immerse you in a river and have you understand what it is from the source to the sea... This way we can change opinions. We are taking you to the problem, showing you first-hand what's going on and what you can do."



To know what we are protecting, we have to know where our water is coming from.

Last year's E4K Water Warrior Project took learners and students to explore the Olifants River Catchment, a substantial section of which runs through the Cederberg Wilderness Area. "The Olifants is considered by some as SA's last frontier for water conservation. The system is also small enough to make a positive impact. The area is very close to our hearts."

During the Water Warrior Project, students explored different locations, sampled for insect and fish species, and carried out a habitat assessment of the river. John says the experience changed students' attitude towards water almost instantaneously. "They now realise water is a privilege."



Want to get a glimpse into the world of water conservation this Water Week? Embrace citizen science, says John. "It's exceptionally important and empowers individuals. Today anyone can quickly and easily monitor the health of a river through the [miniSASS tool](#) and upload their findings to a national database. All of a sudden normal people are adding to water conservation science."



Learners monitoring the health of a river.



Time for some fun on the Olifants River.



Catching, assessing and releasing fish forms part of E4K's holistic approach to educate others about water.

Protecting water for all
"As a country we will have to figure out how we all fit into the picture. Are we going to save a bit here, spend a little less there and be more aware of pollution until we have enough water to move forward? Our water crisis is not a case of pointing fingers, it's a case of us having to stand together as a nation and say: Water is our resource, it belongs to us. But water conservation is not a right, it's a privilege."

E4K: A way to teach water conservation
Since E4K's launch three years ago, John and his team have educated more than 15,000 young people about the importance of SA's freshwater sources. "It's one thing to sit in a lecture room, but it's something completely different to physically lay nets in a river, catch fish and feel them [before safely releasing them again]. To take what you have learnt, appreciate it and take it home... That's the point!"

Interested in an E4K learning experience? [Visit their website](#) or send them [an email](#) for more information about their educational camps and various projects.



Having water is not a right, it's a privilege says John Lucas, founder of E4K.