

Being a River – where citizen science flows with creative arts

Inspired by Diamonds on the Soles of our Feet (DSF), Being a River seeks to strengthen connection with nature through learning with the heart.

Responding to DSF’s global call for community actions for water between Water Day and Earth Day (22 March 2025 – 22 April 2025), Being a River held its inaugural session on 13 April 2025, at 5th Avenue Park, Parkhurst, Johannesburg. It was integrated with a clean-up day organised by the local residents and business owners association ([PRABOA](#)).



Bubele Africa team members free the Braamfontein Spruit from the plastic and other rubbish draped over it by the city’s stormwaters

Rubbish removal immediately improves a place, yet the action taken by volunteers and members of the Bubele Africa team that morning went beyond a litter clean up. It included finding out how to encourage indigenous plants to grow on the stream banks to reduce soil erosion, testing the water to check levels of pollution, and simply enjoying being by the river and reflecting on our shared space.

Caring for water by caring for plants

Plants prevent soil erosion because their roots hold the soil in place and slow down the flow of stormwater. Some plants also help to clean water by removing pollutants. Some types of plants that grow by the stream are 'invasive' which means they spread quickly and crowd-out indigenous plants, and may take up a lot of water.

Sam Brown, the Liaison Officer from [Jozi Trails](#), showed us how to reduce the spread of bugweed and black jack, both invasive plants. "Cut the flowers and seeds off and put them in a plastic bag for a few weeks until they die, before composting them", she said. "Let grass and other plants grow to cover areas of bare soil, and gradually introduce indigenous varieties that are suited to this highveld wetland area."

When it comes to trees in the park, Sam cautioned "Before removing an invasive tree, plant an indigenous tree nearby, only remove the invasive tree after the indigenous tree is growing well."



A tributary stream of the Braamfontein Spruit flowing through the park, free from plastic and a bugweed that had rooted between the rocks in the stream

Our water, our health

Johannesburg's system of sewers and waste water pipes needs repair and maintenance. Streams get polluted from broken sewage pipes, and rubbish and chemicals washing into them through stormwater drains.

When working along Johannesburg's waterways, the Bubele Africa team wear waterproof boots and gloves as safety precautions. However, how safe is the water in our streams for drinking and washing? To help us answer this question we needed to test the water quality.

Under the guidance of Dr Teresa Dirsuweit, from the Geography Department of UNISA, members of the Bubele Africa team identified two water testing sites in the park, and tested water for chemicals and coliform bacteria. The results showed that the water was not safe for drinking or washing.

Gabriel Molepo, Bubele Team leader, says "Regular water testing helps us to monitor the health of our streams. If we know the water is polluted, we can take precautions to protect our health."

Over the next few months, Being a River will do regular water testing in the Braamfontein Spruit, as part of [WaterCAN's](#) Jozi RiverWatch. In that way, we can alert the city council to incidents of pollution, and advocate for more investment in water infrastructure.



Teresa explains the water testing process

Creative conversations

After the water testing, participants flowed into Being a River's creative conversation process. It included tuning in to the natural sights, sounds and smells of the park and sharing reflections of the experience.

"It opens your mind ..."

"It takes your thoughts away from your phone ..."

"It was good to sit and talk to members of the team informally about how these open spaces are important for all our wellbeing."



Afterwards, we made little booklets to remind us of our creative expressions and water testing process, featuring artwork by Pauline Borton, Director of [Creative by Nature](#), which she created during the conversations on the day.

"Seeds fly by in the wind ... everything's connected"

Another creative conversation focused on artwork by Sally Whines, that showed how a network of streams connects Johannesburg to two oceans – the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean.

We wondered, what would we rather say about our city, Johannesburg – a city polluting two oceans? Or a city with a network of people caring for a small part of their local stream and so *enhancing the health* of two oceans?

Together with other community groups and organisations, Being a River works towards a healthy Braamfontein Spruit that people enjoy and treat with care. It is an emerging initiative developed by Rachel Adatia, Sally Clark and Sally Whines.

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Being a river
Reimagining the blue lines