

SHONGWENI CLAIM CLOSE TO BEING SETTLED

Concerns over future of dam

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A LAND claim on the Shongweni Dam and surrounding game reserve is close to being settled, sparking concerns for the future of one of the last remaining "wilderness" areas in the Durban region.

Umgeni Water confirmed that negotiations were at an advanced stage and a deed of sale had been signed off to transfer the land to the new owners, descendants of the Zwelibomvu community evicted from the area in the late 1950s.

Umgeni Water spokesman Shami Harichunder said he was not able to comment on the future land use of the area, as this was the responsibility of the Land Affairs Department, but he said Umgeni might need to access water from the dam if there were shortages.

The dam served as Durban's main drinking water reservoir for decades until it became heavily silted and was decommissioned in the early 1990s.

It is understood that Umgeni will be paid about R14 million for the land and infrastructure by the department.

While there have been informal indications that the present conservation and eco-tourism land use of the area is unlikely to be changed much, a spokesman for the department has not responded to queries and Zwelibomvu community leader Bhekukwenzela Ndimande could not be reached for comment.

Animals

The 1 700ha reserve was established in 1992, largely because of the efforts of conservationist Ian Player and the Wilderness Foundation. The foundation and Umgeni Water established the Msinsi group to manage the surrounding land.

Over the past 15 years, it has been stocked with a variety of animals – including white rhino, buffalo, kudu, wildebeest, giraffe and other antelope species. It has also become a popular recreation venue.

Player said Shongweni was a priceless conservation asset and it was imperative that its future was secured.

"I took former US vice-president Al Gore to Shongweni when he visited South

Africa in 1997, and he was amazed that there was such a spectacular wildlife and recreation area so close to a great metropolitan city," said Player.

"Shongweni is a really precious asset for the province. I only hope the new owners will ensure it remains a nature reserve to provide sustainable benefits to the community."

Neighbouring land owners are also concerned about the future of the reserve, which serves to anchor similar eco-tourism land uses in the area.

"You would have to travel 200km from Durban to find another area like this, yet Shongweni is only 40km from the city," said one.

But the legal status of conservation remains in question. Although Shongweni is believed to enjoy limited protection as a natural heritage site, it is not proclaimed under provincial or national legislation.

Safety

Umgeni Water had informed the Water Affairs Department of the decision to dispose of the dam and nearby land, and had notified the land affairs department that the new owners would be responsible for ensuring the safety of the dam wall. The reservoir, known originally as the Vernon Hooper Dam, was commissioned in 1927 to provide drinking water for Durban.

During the late 1950s, mounting concern about heavy siltation from the neighbouring Umlazi and Sterkspruit river catchments led to the formation of the Shongweni Soil Conservation Area, and it was recommended that several thousand black people in the Shongweni and Geogedale areas be moved elsewhere.

A social survey in 1957 estimated that there were 7 457 people in the "African section" of the new soil conservation area, but the Secretary of the Soil Conservation Board in Pretoria acknowledged that "to depopulate the area occupied by the natives (would be) no easy matter". However, the Chief Native Commissioner recommended that people from Shongweni be moved to the Salem and Dassenhoek areas, where they could *konza* (pay tribute) to new traditional chiefs.



Young paddlers take a break during a canoeing adventure at Shongweni Dam this week. Just half an hour away from Durban, the reserve has become an important wildlife refuge and a popular recreation area.



Completed in 1927, the Shongweni Dam holds back water from three rivers and served as Durban's main water supply for several decades. It was shut down in 1992 after the water capacity was reduced by huge volumes of soil and silt during a series of floods.

PICTURES: TONY CARNIE

