

Invasive alien could stop future Dusi Marathons

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THE recent discovery of an invasive alien weed in the Msunduzi River may result in a major environmental disaster within the next three months if it is not tackled speedily.

So says Dusi Umgeni Conservation Trust (DUCT) chairman Dave Still, who goes on to say that the outbreak of *Pistia*, which is commonly referred to as water lettuce, is of serious concern as the weed will blanket the entire river's surface before the end of summer unless drastic measures are used to combat it.

Through e-mail correspondence with DUCT and Msunduzi Municipality officials, water quality specialist at Umgeni Water Steve Terry says: "I wish we'd known earlier. This is potentially a disaster for the [Msunduzi River]. I would put it on par with a major sewer line disaster, one that never, ever gets fixed."

Terry goes on to say that biocontrol is not recommended for initial infestation because making use of that method alone will ensure some level of infection afterwards.

"It takes way too long to establish the biocontrol — the plants will continue growing. Thereafter, you get an alternating "boom and bust" cycle ... it likely will be enough to stop the [Hansa Poweraid Dusi Canoe Marathon] race in future ..."

Terry says the best method is manual removal coupled with herbicide spraying.

Msunduzi's conservation and environmental manager Rod Bartholomew says they were alerted through e-mail correspondence between Umgeni Water and DUCT.

They investigated and confirmed a *Pistia* outbreak in the Camps Drift canal.

He says he sourced a herbicide, which was delivered yesterday, and DUCT manager Andrew Booth arranged for teams in boats to conduct manual removal.



PHOTO: IAN CARBUTI

DUCT employees Japhta Elephant (left) and Sphamandla Memela clear *Pistia* (water lettuce) from Camps Drift yesterday.

WHY PISTIA IS SO DANGEROUS

THESE plants are some of the fastest growing in the world.

The warmth and nutrients in the Msunduzi River provide ideal growing conditions for *Pistia* and nothing in the river will really eat them. The plants can double their size in as little as two weeks or less.

What is in Camps Drift right

now (perhaps a few hundred square metres) could, by the end of summer, be enough to cover the entire canal and the Msunduzi River right down to below Darvill.

That would be about the time that any biocontrol, introduced now, might be starting to be noticed.

WHAT IS BEING DONE TO CLEAN UP THE RIVER?

DUCT are using additional staff and working intensively to clean up the Msunduzi River in the build-up to the Hansa Poweraid Dusi Canoe Marathon.

Some of their activities include:

- Fixing and reinstalling the trash boom above Campsdrift (it was broken in a big storm in mid December)
- Brushcutting river banks at certain priority areas

Although the partnership between DUCT, Umgeni Water and the municipality is currently seeing to the eradication of the plants, seedlings are already developing, which indicates that the infestation has been lurking beneath the edge vegetation for at least the past several months. Terry said

many of the larger plants have flowered, meaning this will now become a long-term problem.

- Cleaning trash from the river banks using boats, from the top of Campsdrift all the way to Woodhouse Road
- Taking samples of river water quality for analysis at Umgeni Water
- Patrolling bulk sewer lines to provide early warning of sewer blockages
- Removing water lettuce (*Pistia*) from the river.

He says ongoing maintenance and vigilance will be required to achieve complete eradication.

Attempts to get in touch with Umgeni Water spokesman Shami Harichunder were unsuccessful.

