

CONCEPT PAPER ON HOW TO PROMOTE COLLABORATION BETWEEN SOUTH AFRICA AND NAMIBIA IN MANAGING THE ORANGE- SENQU RIVER MOUTH

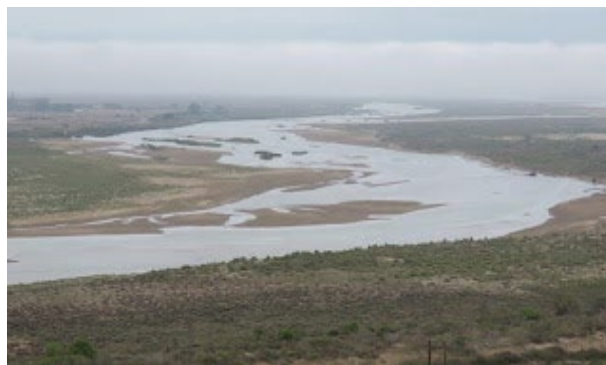
1. Introduction

The Orange-Senqu River has a total length of 2,200km and is the longest river in South Africa. It originates as the Senqu River in the Drakensberg mountains of Lesotho at an altitude of 3350m, flowing westwards through South Africa and ends at Alexander Bay in the Atlantic Ocean, more or less half-way between Cape Town and Walvis Bay. The main tributary along the way is the Vaal River. A smaller tributary, the Fish River in Namibia, joins the Orange River in the lower catchment.

The river flows into the Gariiep Dam, largest dam in South Africa, and then into the Vanderkloof Dam. Along its way, it forms borders between South Africa and Lesotho, and between the Free State, Eastern Cape and Northern Cape. Further downstream, just west of Upington, it crashes down the 60m high Augrabies Falls, before acting as the border between South Africa and Namibia for the last 400km to its mouth.

The river, one of few perennial rivers in southern Africa, is the source for extensive irrigation activities, especially in the flatter areas on the western side. There are no crocodiles or hippos in the Orange River which makes it a sought-after river for recreation and adrenalin action sports.

The wetland



Pic 1 showing The Orange River Mouth as seen from the Namibian side.

The Orange -Senqu River Mouth as seen from the Namibian side. The Orange-Senqu River Mouth is a Ramsar wetland and a typical wetland. There is very little evidence of a river in flood, as the water was slowed down into multiple channels, making it difficult to see or pinpoint the actual mouth.

The importance of the site becomes even more apparent when one considers the fact that the next nearest coastal wetland is the Olifants River mouth, some 400km to the south in South Africa, and Sandwich Harbour, 500km to the north in Namibia.

The area designated as a Ramsar site comprises the estuary of the Orange River before it reaches the Atlantic Ocean, between the river mouth and the Ernest Oppenheimer Bridge that links the border towns of Oranjemund in Namibia and Alexander Bay in South Africa. While the exact boundaries of the Ramsar site are somewhat unclear, the South African section of the wetland covers approximately 2000 hectares while the remaining 500ha falls within Namibia.

The Orange - Senqu River Mouth can be described as a delta type river mouth which comprises a distributor channel system between sand banks covered with pioneer vegetation, a tidal basin, the river mouth and the saltmarsh on the south bank of the river mouth. At times the Orange River flows directly into the Atlantic Ocean, but sometimes its access to the sea is blocked by sandbars.

The Orange-Senqu River Mouth falls within the winter rainfall area of southern Africa, receiving between 11 and 88mm of rain per annum.

The two Ramsar wetlands on both sides of the Orange River virtually overlap and share many common traits and challenges

2. Current land uses and Institutional arrangements

Currently, the responsible government institution on the South African side is Department of Environmental Affairs in relation to implementation of the ORM Estuary Management Plan whereas in Namibia it is the Department of Water Affairs where the Director is the Leader of Namibia Delegation to ORASECOM. In South Africa, The Department of Environmental Affairs works closely with the Department of Water Affairs where the Chief Director who is the Leader of South Africa Delegation to ORASECOM is located as well as the Department of Tourism because of tourism development interests. In Namibia the Department of Water Affairs works closely with the Department of Environmental Affairs and Forestry. In both countries, there is need to bring on board the Departments of Agriculture because of the many farming interests as well as the Irrigation authorities.

3. Threats

The major threat to this wetland is the loss of inflow of water and sediment through human manipulation of water in the Orange River catchment. This is not to imply that developments such as dams must be stopped but rather, the need to look at the situation closely and suggest adaptation measures to promote the concept of wise use or sustainable use of the Orange River resources. The two major extant dams (Gariiep and Vanderkloof) on the middle reaches of the Orange River, already limit floods in the lower Orange River. Development of further dams and diversion of flow in the headwaters as part of the Lesotho Highlands Scheme are likely to further reduce water availability in the Orange River Mouth. Namibia has constructed the Neckartal dam in the lower Fish River which will further compound this situation because the Fish River is currently the main source of floods at the Orange River Mouth.

With more than 20 major dams and numerous weirs within its catchment, river inflows to the Orange River Estuary have been markedly reduced with only an estimated 44% or less of natural flows still reaching the system.

There are other minor threats such as the diamond mining activities, access roads to the beach and access control to the Ramsar wetlands. Most of these should be resolved with proper management.

Many plans

The River mouth is associated with attempts at many plans for different purposes. According to various management plans for both sides of the Ramsar wetland, future developments will focus a lot on tourism. Although only plans on paper at this stage, it includes the following:

- i. The region has the potential to offer a unique product, in terms of pristine diversity and unspoilt arid environment. Further potential has been identified based on the desert, mountain and ocean scenery, as well as the bird life hosted in the estuary.

- ii. Marketing and developing the area as a regional destination that offers visitors a variety of nature and culture-based attractions as well as accessible cross-border linkages and tour routes.
- iii. Oranjemund and Alexander Bay have been identified as development nodes to support the unlocking of the tourism potential in the area. Both towns will also be logical access points into the Sperrgebiet National Park when this is opened for tourism activities.
- iv. The Ramsar wetland at the Orange River Mouth has high tourism value for specialist bird watching tourists. Bird hides and other bird watching facilities at appropriate places in the Ramsar site need to be established.
- v. Golfing & other sports facilities.
- vi. Fishing, both freshwater and marine species e.g. smallmouth and largemouth yellow fish, white steenbras, mullet etc.
- vii. Diamond mining tours.
- viii. Existing airstrips are to be found at Upington, Springbok, Alexander Bay and Oranjemund. These airstrips provide the infrastructure to deal with potential higher demand.
- ix. Applying for Alexander Bay Airport to regain national status.
- x. Upgrading the regional road network.
- xi. Improving the connectivity with the Richtersveld National Park.
- xii. Linking Oranjemund and Lüderitz in Namibia.
- xiii. Refurbish existing infrastructure and/or develop new accommodation options.
- xiv. The establishment of a campground on the Orange River that provides an overnight stop for self-drive tourists at a location close to Oranjemund.

4. Need for Joint Management

The two countries recognised the need to work together long time ago, with clear steps in 1995 that led to formation of the Interim Management Committee that is elaborated further below. This was mainly because most of the issues affecting the river mouth are transboundary in nature.

5. History of Cooperation this far

HISTORY

The two countries recognized the need to work together to manage the Orange -Senqu River mouth long time ago:

- The Orange River Interim Management Committee was formed in 1995
- It was an informal get-together of Conservation staff from Namibia and South Africa (Northern Cape)
- The team soon realized that the issues affecting the ORM were much bigger than they could handle and hence strived to enlarge the committee and make it formal structure.
- From the Namibian side the representatives were from Ministry of Environment and Tourism, Department of Water Affairs and NAMDEB whereas on the South Africa side it was representatives from Department of Environmental Affairs and Northern Cape Nature Conservation.
- The meetings coincided with Wetland bird counts held twice a year and alternated between Alexander Bay and Oranjemund.

The work of the Interim Committee:

- One of the first things that happened was to try and identify the problems/issues at the ORM as well as propose suitable solutions
- Most of the problems at that time were found to be on the South African side e.g The Large Berm that was constructed after the 1988 flood to protect the town of Alexander Bay from flooding was found to be preventing water from flowing freely into the large salt marsh with the result that the marsh dried up, depriving the waders of a suitable habitat and causing dust problem in Alexander Bay
- The proclamation of the ORM as a protected area (it was already a Ramsar site on both sides) was also high on the agenda. This the gazetting of the Tsau-khaeb National Park in 2008 in Namibia was because of this work.

Key achievements of the Interim Committee:

- At one point the ORMIMC managed to get the South African CSIR to conduct a major study on the ORM, concentrating especially on the fish and hydrology.
- Eventually it became quite clear that many of the issues needed to be addressed at national level and more representatives from South African departments (e.g. DEA and MCM) were asked to join the committee.
- A consultant was hired to produce a management plan for the ORM.

Shortcomings of the Interim Committee:

- The Management plan that was developed was not accepted as there was a feeling that it did not address the issues of both countries fairly.
- One of the major shortcomings of the ORMIMC was that it was never an officially recognised committee i.e. it was always just an "interim" committee, pending the establishment of an ORM management committee sanctioned by both governments
- There was also uncertainty on the South African side as to who should take charge of the ORMIMC - national or provincial government

6. Recommended Way forward:

- Establishment of an ORM management committee sanctioned by both governments.
- Need to commission a consultancy to develop a transboundary Integrated Management plan that addresses the issues of both countries fairly.
- The UNDP GEF ORASECOM Project pledges to provide the initial support to help with the consultancy as well as provide resources for meetings during the life of the project.

7. Required action in South Africa and Namibia

In each country steps towards putting together a recognised joint management committee need to be worked out. Additionally, preparation of a joint workplan is another important step worth undertaking to initiate joint working and planning.