



iSimangaliso
Wetland Park



Communiqué

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Lake St Lucia's lifeline cut off

The fresh water currently flowing into iSimangaliso's Lake St Lucia Estuary from the uMfolozi River as a result of recent rain is a godsend. With 90% of Lake St Lucia's surface water dried up, 315km² of the 350km² Lake's bed lies exposed and barren, ravaged by the drought. What little water is left is 5 times saltier than the sea in places. The highest tolerance level for estuarine species is between 2 and 3 times saltier than the sea.



Comparative satellite images of Lake St Lucia taken in September 2014 (left) and February 2016 (right)

Between 12 and 14 March 2016, some 6.2 billion litres of fresh water entered the Lake St Lucia system, following rains both in the catchment and locally. This amounts to an average of 2.5 billion litres per day and provides an important buffer against the possibility of continued low rainfall over the next six months. Sixty percent of Lake St Lucia's fresh water comes from the uMfolozi. These are the first significant flows of water into the system since December 2015 and it is hoped that some of the negative impacts of the drought will be reduced.

Yesterday morning, fresh water forcefully pushed its way into the 20km long Narrows, and the 50km long main body of iSimangaliso's Lake St Lucia received its first influx of fresh water from the uMfolozi River in six months. If water continues to flow into the Estuary for another two days, water could reach Catalina Bay and possibly even go further north to become aquatic habitat once again.



Fresh water in the main lake will have a tangible positive impact for the 15 000 rural households whose livelihoods rely significantly on Lake St Lucia and the sustainability of the Tugela Banks prawn fishery, not to mention the 800 hippo and 1 200 large Nile crocodile. Both of these are listed on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and iSimangaliso has the largest populations of hippo and crocodile in South Africa.

Unfortunately, the up side in this case also comes with a down side.

On 12 March 2016, iSimangaliso received notification from UCOSP that water levels had reached 1.2msl at the Cotcane measuring gauge and should begin the process of establishing a breach of the uMfolozi River out to sea. This notification follows from an interim settlement agreement that was made an order of court in October 2015, and which is valid until May 2016. Excavators have been deployed to the beach and the breach was completed yesterday. What this means is that the fresh water entering the St Lucia Estuary will now flow out to sea – thousands of litres of fresh water will be lost to the Lake St Lucia system.



Umfolozi Sugar Cooperative (UCOSP) and two farmers launched an application in the High Court in August 2015 to compel iSimangaliso to breach the uMfolozi river mouth to the sea. The application was launched on an urgent basis to enable the draining of floodwaters from less than 94ha or 1% of the 9427ha of land under sugarcane on the uMfolozi floodplain. This matter has been set down for May 2016. An interim court settlement, which remains in place until May 2016 when the matter will be heard, requires iSimangaliso to breach the mouth at a point of its choosing when the Msunduze water levels reach 1.2gmsl at Cotcane.

A second urgent application was launched by UCOSP and the two farmers in December 2015 to compel iSimangaliso to breach. iSimangaliso stayed the breach. This was the last time water flowed from the uMfolozi River into Lake St Lucia. The application was postponed sine die. A date has not been given for this hearing.

In the spirit of collaboration, iSimangaliso has been in discussion with UCOSP since 2008, when iSimangaliso began the review of the management strategy for the Estuary. Commitments to improve their flood protection by UCOSP have yet to be fulfilled.

We are extremely concerned about the possible adverse ecological impacts to Lake St Lucia from the breaching of the uMfolozi River to the sea, as well as the possible knock-on effects on the livelihoods of many people, particularly in light of the poor winter rain that has been forecast. 2015 was recorded as the lowest rainfall year since 1920.

iSimangaliso's Lake St Lucia Estuary is one-of-a-kind. It is the world's oldest protected estuary and Africa's largest estuarine system, as well as the focal point of the UNESCO World Heritage Listing. It has been a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance since 1986 – not only of global ecological significance, but also of regional and local economic importance.

More than 50% of all water birds in KwaZulu-Natal feed, roost and nest in this estuary. Of the 155 fish species that have been recorded in the Lake St Lucia estuarine system, 71 species use St Lucia as a nursery area and at least 24 of these are important in marine line fisheries.

Harvests of raw materials, particularly estuarine sedges, is estimated to be worth around R7,5 million a year. The contribution of the estuarine floodplain areas to livestock grazing is estimated at R3,6 million per year.

Tourism related to the St Lucia estuary area employs an estimated 1291 direct full-time equivalent jobs and 6924 indirect jobs. There are about 510 000 visitors to the study area per annum, of whom 42% are foreign visitors, that spend R46 million on an estimated 157 000 tourism activities from local operators.

iSimangaliso has not been idle in working towards the hydrological restoration of Africa's greatest wetland. Cyclone Engineering, the company awarded a R10 million contract to remove 100 000m³ of dredge spoil (sand, silt and vegetation) that was placed in the natural course of the uMfolozi River impeding its flow into Lake St Lucia, is establishing site. This is the biggest wetland rehabilitation in South Africa, and a milestone in the healing of the Lake St Lucia Estuary. With the support of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) and World Bank, a further R20 million has been allocated to iSimangaliso to continue the work of restoring Africa's largest estuarine system.

If you would like further information, the following link offers additional insight:
<http://isimangaliso.com/newsflash/isimangaliso-signs-historic-contract-to-restore-lake-st-lucia/>

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