

# Call for government to save Durban's contaminated rivers

By [Lucas Nowicki](#)

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"Toxic" levels of E. coli will require national government intervention, say water activists.



Image: South Beach in Durban earlier this February after heavy rains. Much of it comes from rivers that empty into the sea. Photos: Lucas Nowicki | GroundUp

- Two organisations monitoring E. coli levels in Durban's rivers have raised the alarm and are calling for a national intervention to fix eThekweni's sewage infrastructure crisis.
- Water activists say the polluted rivers and beaches pose a serious risk to businesses and to communities who rely on them.
- The municipality said that repairs to damaged sewage infrastructure are ongoing, but that it will likely cost over R500m.

Two organisations in KZN have called on the Department of Water and Sanitation to urgently take action over high levels of E. coli and other pollutants in Durban's rivers which are also affecting the coastline.

Earlier this year, local Adopt-a-River and WaterCAN, an initiative from the Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse (OUTA), joined forces to monitor the water quality of the Umgeni and Umbilo rivers.

Wastewater treatment works and sewer infrastructure, which were already failing, were further damaged by the April 2022 floods, exacerbating pollution levels in the rivers and sending sewage into the sea.

Many Durban beaches had to be closed during the holiday season because of unsafe E. coli levels. The rivers also pose a health threat to communities that rely on them as water sources.

Jonathan Erasmus, from WaterCAN, has been conducting E. coli water tests on the Umbilo River, which flows from Kloof, a town about 26km from Durban, through various communities and into the Durban harbour.

“The socio-economic impact of these rivers not being cared for is massive. There have been a host of bed and breakfasts and tourist activities on the rivers that just can’t get business because of the smell and pollution,” says Erasmus.

E. coli water quality is “ideal” if the count is 0 to 130 per 100ml; “acceptable” if 130 to 200; “poor” if 200 to 400; and “critical” if 400 or above, according to Talbot Laboratories.

Erasmus regularly takes samples at different sections of the river. Samples taken on 15 February had E. coli counts of 696,700 and 30,760 per 100ml in tests run at Talbot Laboratories.

Janet Simpkins, director of Adopt a River, has been testing and monitoring the Umgeni River which flows from the KZN Midlands area to the ocean at Durban North. Before the floods in 2022, it had started turning “a murky black colour”.

Simpkins said according to their tests “the levels of E. coli have been toxic”, which is “a good indicator other pathogens may be present”.

Tests taken at different sites along the Umgeni on 16 February found E. coli counts of 282,000 per 100ml and one as high as 8.7-million.

Location and date	12/1/23	19/01/23	26/1/23	02/02/23	09/02/23	16/02/23
Northern Works	97,000	115,300	1,860,000	744,000	1,483,000	282,000
Kingfisher Canoe Club	6,130	10,800	41,400	4,884	15,531	4,620
Riverside	1,178,000	228,200	9,804,000	10,810,000	7,270,000	8,664,000

Umgeni River: Talbot Laboratory E. coli water tests 2023 (E. coli count per 100ml)

Water Quality Interpretation (E.coli count / 100ml)		
IDEAL	E.coli range	0 -130
ACCEPTABLE	E.coli range	130 -200
POOR	E.coli range	200 -400
CRITICAL	E.coli range	> 400

Simpkins says there are continuous problems with the pump stations at the Northern wastewater treatment works dumping untreated waste in the Umgeni river.

Due to the local currents, water from the Umgeni mouth is often taken north towards Umhlanga. Beaches on the North Coast had to be closed for longer than others due to E. coli counts even higher than beaches around Durban.

Poor water quality in the eThekweni metro predates the April 2022 floods, according to Erasmus and Simpkins. The floods only exacerbated the problem.

“The years of neglect of pump stations and the wastewater plants, all while adding built infrastructure and not upgrading and maintaining pipes is just as bad as the damage floods caused,” says Simpkins.

Simpkins believes the eThekweni municipality cannot fix the problem. It does not have the necessary funds. It will be up to the national government “to step in and fulfil its mandate as custodian of water”.

The owners of Queensburgh Caravan Park, which sits right next to the Umbilo River, told *GroundUp* that the polluted river has affected business and daily life at the caravan park for over a year. The smell of sewage coming from the river is permanent, while the water is often a brown yellowish colour, they said. Guests are warned not to swim in the river.

Earlier this month, the famous Dusi Canoe Marathon opening day had to be moved at the last minute due to issues with water quality in the Msunduzi River (which flows into the Umgeni) near Pietermaritzburg. Paddlers feared getting the infamous “Dusi guts” that plagued participants in 2019.

ActionSA and the Abantu Batho Congress have taken the eThekweni Municipality to court demanding that the City fix all its pump stations and damaged wastewater treatment works. The case is set down for Monday.

## City response

Lindiwe Khuzwayo, Ethekeweni’s Head of Communications, told *GroundUp* that the issue of polluted rivers had “been a problem for a while” and that it is caused by sewer washways, sewage line blockages, and overflowing pump stations.

She said that the City has been “allocated about R228m from the R1.5bn [for 2022 flood relief] to deal with water and sanitation infrastructure rehabilitation,” in addition to another R114m provided by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs in September 2022.

Khuzwayo said that the City is currently running mechanical and electrical contracts for repairing the damaged wastewater treatment works. She said that a cost assessment done in 2022 estimated “the City would require more than R500m to rehabilitate the wastewater treatment works affected by the floods”.

She said some of the maintenance work had been completed but “there are still areas where the remedial work has not yet been completed”.





Image: Jonathan Erasmus from WaterCAN walking alongside the Umbilo River at the Queensburgh Caravan Park | GroundUp

*This article was [originally published](#) on [GroundUp](#).*

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