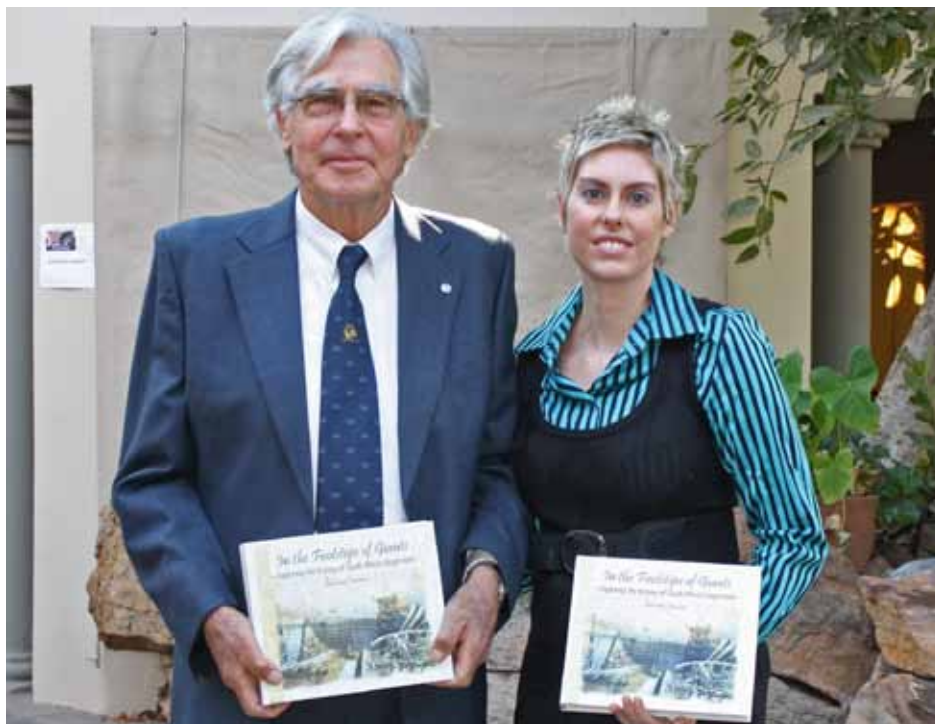


SA's engineering giants help launch WRC's book on history of large dams

Four years after Water Wheel Editor, Lani van Vuuren's journey started into the history of South Africa's large dams, her book has finally been published by the Water Research Commission (WRC).



Inga Jacobs

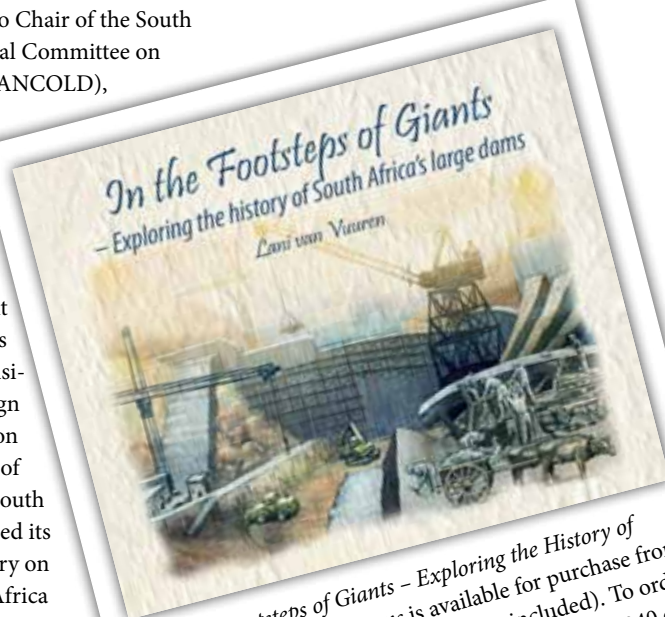
The glossy, 340-page publication, *In the Footsteps of Giants – Exploring the History of South Africa's Large Dams*, was launched in Pretoria earlier this year. Developed around the water history articles that have featured in this magazine since 2008, the book takes the reader on a journey through the history of South Africa's largest dams, starting with the traditional attitudes and indigenous knowledge around water resources prior to European settlement and ending with a glimpse into the future of dam building in the country.

"The South African water story is one that is yet to be completed and the book is an important contributor towards fulfilling that story," says WRC CEO, Dhesigen Naidoo. "It examines the beginnings of water history in this country and provides a useful platform to examine some of the drivers of development of

South Africa's water infrastructure, which has been celebrated around the world."

According to Chair of the South African National Committee on Large Dams (SANCOLD), Danie Badenhorst, the launch of the book comes at an opportunity time, as the Department of Water Affairs (DWA), responsible for the design and construction of around 80% of large dams in South Africa, celebrated its 100th anniversary on 1 July. "South Africa has developed a large percentage of its water resources and there will

Keynote speaker at the launch, Honorary President of ICOLD, Dr Theo van Robbroeck, with Footsteps author, Lani van Vuuren.



* *In the Footsteps of Giants – Exploring the History of South Africa's Large Dams* is available for purchase from the WRC at a price of R150 (postage included). To order the book contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340 or Email: orders@wrc.org.za.



Left: *Footsteps* author, Lani van Vuuren, WRC Director: Water-Centred Knowledge; Dr Heidi Snyman, and WRC Multimedia Publisher, Drinie van Rensburg, who designed the book.

Right: WRC CEO, Dhesigen Naidoo at the launch of the book.



Inga Jacobs

be limited dam developments in the future. We need to look after our multibillion Rand dam assets by way of maintenance and rehabilitation.”

Footsteps explores the reasoning behind the construction of the country’s massive water storage structures, the laws that guided their development, and the people and institutions that made them possible. Woven in between are the tales behind some of the country’s most iconic dams and dam engineers. This is the first time that such a publication has been on offer for a wider audience in South Africa.

“Far from being mere earth and concrete structures, our dams serve as monuments of our past and beacons on our path to socio-economic prosperity. Behind each dam lies a tale of imaginative thinking, daring spirit and resolve to make South Africa a better place to live in,” writes Van Vuuren. “South Africa’s dams history goes back at least five centuries. Many of our strategically most important dams were built with nothing more than bare hands and sheer determination. This book is not only dedicated to the pioneering engineers who dared to dream big, but also to the thousands of labourers who toiled in sun and dust to turn dreams into reality as well as the families who supported them.”

Keynote speaker at the launch, Honorary President of the International Commission on Large Dams

(ICOLD), Dr Theo van Robbroeck, captivated the audience with his recount of experiences as an engineer with the DWA and the mentors that shaped his career. He started working for the department as a young recruit in 1957. What made his address even more enthralling was the fact that many of his former colleagues – the very engineers that designed and built the country’s foremost dams, pumped storage scheme and inter-basin transfers – were present in the room.

“The older I get the more I come to realise how lucky civil engineers were to have lived and worked at a time when exciting huge projects were undertaken: think of two brand new harbours – Richards Bay and Saldanha with the accompanying railways for mineral exports; major road works such as the Ben Schoeman and the Cape Town and Johannesburg freeways; giant coal-fired power stations and last but not least, mammoth water projects,” said Dr Van Robbroeck. “Apart from the Orange River Project, there were the Tugela-Vaal/Drakensberg, the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP), the Riviersonderend-Berg River project, the Palmiet and Steenbras pumped storage schemes, etc. As we in South Africa know so well, there would not be a modern economy without our dams.”

As South Africa gears up to tackle

more impressive water infrastructure projects, such as Phase II of the LHWP, it is hoped that the lessons captured in this book will go a long way to ensure the sustainable development and management of the country’s large dams going forward. “Until we can find a reliable alternative to dams as a way to store water in South Africa it is up to the new generation of dam builders to devise and implement schemes to sustainably manage our water resources, which must be matched by a commitment to retain or conserve as far as possible the fragile ecosystems on which they are constructed,” says Van Vuuren.

Naidoo adds: “The book tells us that we should not rely on one solution. While we have this wonderful legacy of building large-scale infrastructure, our future lies in using that same ingenuity and innovation that helped us be a dam-building giant in the world to apply similar kinds of paradigms and know-how in the areas of water conservation and water demand management. *Footsteps* organises to pitch a series of questions about our water past, our water present and our water future that we would like researchers to examine further. The water story in South Africa continues to be an interesting one, and one more milestone has been reached with this wonderful book.” □