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'End of an era' as old KNP river research accommodation demolished



Andrew Deacon

The River Park Homes in 1990. The homes have recently been demolished after outliving their usefulness.

The water sector has bid farewell to an era following the demolition of the so-called 'River Park Homes' at Skukuza, temporary accommodation which served for more than a decade as headquarters for aquatic scientists undertaking river research in the Kruger National Park. Article by Lani van Vuuren.

During the last decade of the 1990s, the River Park Homes accommodated a constant flow of aquatic and other scientists studying the rivers of one of Africa's most iconic national parks. The structures were originally donated by the Department of Water Affairs (DWA) and built at the start of the Kruger National Park Rivers Research Programme (KNPRRP). This programme, which ran between 1990 and 2000, was a highly successful, multi-disciplinary, multi-organisational programme aimed at addressing major concerns about water quantity and quality of the perennial rivers flowing through the Kruger National Park.

It was largely as a result of the effort of former South African National Parks (SANParks) programme manager, Dr Andrew Deacon, that the homes were erected. "At the time I was the logistical coordinator of the KNPRRP, and accommodation was becoming a logistical nightmare since river researchers started to pour

into the park to participate in the project," he tells *the Water Wheel*. "On my request the park homes were obtained from DWA by the KNPRRP Management Committee, led by Dr Peter Reid of the Water Research Commission. In my opinion the homes contributed greatly to the success of the programme."

The construction of the homes were supervised by Drs Deacon and Willem Gertenbach, also formerly of SANParks. The first caretaker was Gerhard Strydom, who went to much effort to turn the temporary structures into a real home by planting trees and shrubs. The second caretaker was Dr Pieter Kotze, also known as Piet 'Vis'.

Dr Dirk Roux, SanParks Freshwater Conservation Specialist, who was a junior scientist in the mid-1990s, remembers the River Park Homes as a place to meet with, and learn from, South Africa's greatest thinkers around rivers and river ecology. "It was amazing to see how scientists from different institutions as well as water resource managers

worked together to enable improved understanding and more informed management of rivers. Working together included sessions of intense debate, which typically continued long into the night when the participants would move from the lounge area to the communal fireplace for the daily braai."

For Professor Emeritus at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Department of Environmental Sciences, Charles Breen, the River Park Homes served as a monument to the efforts of aquatic scientists to engage in interdisciplinary research and to be acknowledged for their own contributions. "At the time that the homes were built, the tradition of wildlife research, and more particularly, large animal research, was so entrenched in SANParks and collaborating institutions that research and researchers on aquatic systems had an uphill struggle to gain acceptance," he explains.

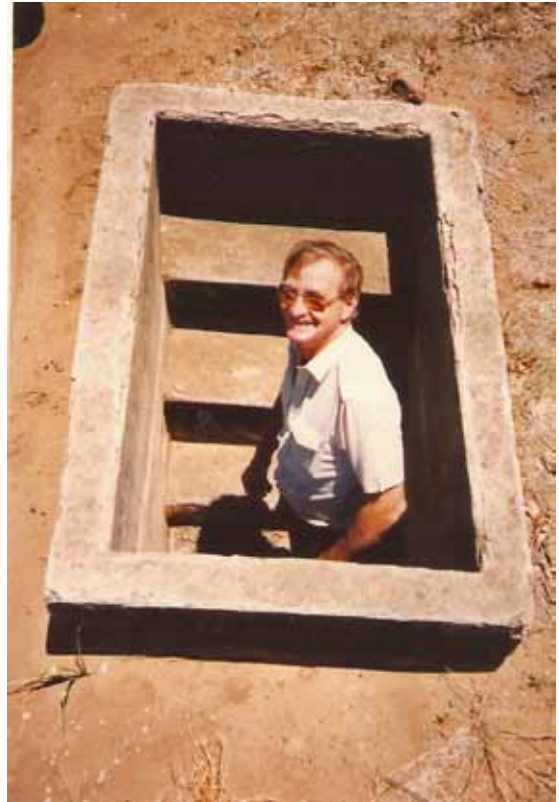
"As a result, most of the aquatic researchers felt somewhat alienated from what some considered

Right: The homes' first caretaker, Gerhard Strydom.

Far right: Former Water Research Commission Research Manager, Dr Peter Reid.



Andrew Deacon



'mainstream research' in the Kruger National Park. The River Park Homes for the first time gave a formal identity to aquatic scientists in the park. This was a very significant step in progress toward overcoming the feeling of alienation that dominated at the start."

As the work of the KNPRRP gained recognition the meaning of the River Park Homes changed subtly. However, while river researchers were increasingly accepted into the fold and gained access to accommodation in the research camp, the homes remained a symbol for many

of the struggle that attended attempts to break down disciplinary barriers in research. "I guess, for me the park homes were, in a way, a monument to the efforts of aquatic scientists to engage interdisciplinary research and to be acknowledged for their contributions," says Prof Breen.

Wild animals form the centre of many a story of the river park homes (they were sited in a national park after all). Dr Roux shares one such a story: "I was part of a meeting that continued late into the evening in the lounge area of one of the homes. Among the participants, were Profs

Jay O'Keeffe and Kevin Rogers. Sitting around the table our deliberations were frequently interrupted by a hissing sound.

"We looked out the window, but could not work out where the sound was coming from, until Kevin realised it was not coming from outside the house, but from inside. More specifically, the sound was coming from a box under the window right next to him! It turned out to be a snake."

Ever so calm, the group called on Nick Zambatis of SANParks to remove the snake while they

Right: If this braai area could talk it would probably have quite a few stories to tell.

Far right: An empty shell was all that remained in the end of the former accommodation for senior academics and water affairs staff.



Dirk Roux





Andrew Deacon



Andrew Deacon

continued their meeting. Taking one look at the snake, Nick declared it to be a black mamba and promptly ordered everyone to retreat to a safe distance. "This 'safe distance' turned out to be three metres, and there we stood in a semi-circle watching Nick capture the two metre-long reptile with his snake-catching tool and throw it out the door. Afterwards, Nick said that he did not realise that the snake was quite so large. Did he know, he probably would not have attempted to catch it himself!"

Dr Deacon shares another story which involved a visit to the homes by Dr Salomon Joubert, a former

Park Warden of the Kruger National Park. "Arriving back one night Dr Warden found a pride of lions in front of the park home gates. Since it was a narrow area situated between fences, he had to drive them out of the enclosed area with his vehicle before he could get out to open the gate to the homes."

The KNPRRP contributed much to the foundation of the National Water Act and, particularly, the policy around the Reserve. Having a place where people could meet face-to-face and interact and negotiate on neutral ground was critical, notes Dr Roux. "These homes served that

purpose for many years. Many individuals continued with this culture of small-group retreats to work on an issue of concern even after the River Park Homes era."

While the homes are now no more, it is hoped that the spirit of cooperation and memories they brought to the South African water sector will live on. Hamba kahle, River Park Homes. □

Above left: Former SANParks Scientific Services manager and instigator of the River Park Homes, Dr Andrew Deacon.

Above: Dr Pieter Kotze, also known as Piet 'Vis' was the second caretaker of the homes.



Dirk Roux



Far left: Inside the river park homes prior to their demolition. Meetings used to take place in the far corner.

Left: It is out of this door that a black mamba was once removed from the homes.