

Many South African estuaries are popular holiday destinations. These estuaries are used for a variety of recreational activities. Which activities can be allowed and which activities could have negative impacts on the integrity of the ecosystem? Make general recommendations for the management of recreation in and around estuaries.

Estuaries are the meeting place of river and the sea. Estuaries are well known as nurseries for many marine fish species, feeding and nesting sites of many water birds, and host species of flora and fauna that have adapted to the intolerable changes in water temperature, salinity, and oxygen levels. This makes an estuary a biodiversity cornucopia and a unique blend of marine and freshwater flora and fauna as well as a recreation hot spot for resource users. South Africa has over 250 estuaries and activities that occur on estuaries include but are not limited to power boating, sailing, canoe/kayaking, surfing, surf skiing, sport/competition/subsistence fishing, bait collection, swimming, snorkelling, diving, windsurfing, water skiing/tubing, jet skiing, regatta racing, bird watching, crabbing, scenic ferry tours and dinner cruises.

Each estuary enjoys a varying amount of research, protection, regulation and accessibility. For example the Knysna estuary is part of the Garden Route National Park, is protected and managed by South African National Parks (SANParks), allows users of the estuary varying amounts of 'freedom of use' and is regulated by a permitting system. Jet skis and water skiing are allowed in controlled areas, fishing is designated in other areas, there are bait take and no take zones, and sailing a boating is allowed in other areas. Alternatively the Groot river estuary in Natures Valley lies adjacent to the Tsitsikamma National Park, it is also regulated by permits but motorized boating traffic is not allowed at all.

Due to the increased number of people visiting and moving to coastal areas there is an increase in the above resources being used, congestion on the water, increased amounts of pollution due to the use of the estuary and of course to accommodate the people, housing has been built, often on reclaimed wetlands. Marinas have also been developed creating a large amount of destruction to the habitat during the construction stage. With the major increase of activity on the estuary, recent studies on the Knysna estuary have shown that an average of 24% of international and 32% of national visitors would spend less time in Knysna if the estuary's condition deteriorated. This could be a potential loss of revenue of R26 million per annum (Turpie, 2007). An estimated 80% of respondents requested better estuary management and 64% were willing to pay to maintain the estuaries current status (Turpie, 2007).

Determining what would negatively impact the estuary would be like walking a minefield blind folded. There is always a trade-off between the desire to be in a natural area, and development and all the activities that follow with both. The many stakeholders on both sides of the coin would argue the loss of the use of their specific area of usage. This situation would be best handled by the idea of 'everything in moderation'. This is best explained by stating that even if construction or development creates destruction and damage to the environment, as long as everything that could possibly be done to protect the environment and rehabilitate it after the fact (and enforcing these policies) we could try to keep the balance. This is particularly important for development, for nature is the reason why people develop in those areas. By destroying the very thing that brought visitors to the area would be developmental suicide. Also, when marketing a holiday destination or a development, aesthetics is the primary selling point and will increase the value of the property and activities that are available to those same visitors/purchasers.

Similarly with fishing, as long as it is regulated and the bag and size limits are adhered to along with possible closure for certain species during breeding seasons, this can help to enhance fishing for all concerned. This also includes the activities that do not require direct removal of flora and fauna or destruction of the environment.

Power boating has a very distinct indirect influence on the environment. Power boats with their strong wakes will cause additional erosion to the estuary embankments which can increase the siltation problems already experienced in many estuaries. Additionally, anywhere where petrol or diesel is used, there is always some spillage which inevitably affects the environment. Even kite surfing and any other non-power sport, can cause destruction of the embankments where the people are climbing in and out of the water, damaging of the sand banks and wetlands on the low tide, specifically when they are not familiar with the tidal movement. Many of these activities also disturb the bird life and may be interfering in vital nesting sites.

Creating a culture of moderation for everyone and introducing the idea of a multi-user park will allow for everyone to have their day in the sun. Just like one would not try to fish in a swimming pool, swimmers should stay out of the designated fishing areas. There should be designated areas for activities, each with its own regulations. There will never be a blanket rule to satisfy the needs for each estuary, as each estuary and area has its own concerns and needs, but a general guideline of moderation and multi-user availability will be one of the easiest ways to accommodate all stakeholders.