

# SALUTE TO THE RIVER CHAMPIONS

Eight days into the UMgeni River Walk – From Source to Sea. I sat on the bank of the UMgeni River in the shade of a mulberry tree, with my dog Vico, thinking about what “we” likely to achieve from this project. I could see a neighbour, Chris Slater, sitting on his stoep on top of the hill with his bino’s scanning the valley when the intrepid team of champions popped unexpectedly out of a grove of wattle and gum and crossed a well maintained pasture at the bottom of Ralph Correia’s property.



Although I have been following the blog, this was my first encounter with the team in person and I was wondering if the high spirits and enthusiasm that comes through the daily blog posts was going to be evident 8 days and some 90kms into the 'expedition'. I was not disappointed, as they approached I could hear a constant banter as they passionately recorded, in note books and voice recorders, by photograph and on film, various aspects of the river.

After a lively greeting from Vico we fell in step with this team of champions for the short section of about 3kms from the King/Correia boundary to my property passing the Slater's, Robart's, Hebron Haven Hotel and my immediate neighbours, the Taylors. They asked me what they could expect ahead of them and sheepishly I had to admit that in the 15 years I have lived on the uMgeni I had never walked this far!!

We spent time chatting with Chris as we crossed his section of the river. Along the way I pointed out where, in the old days, wagons crossed the uMgeni as pioneers made their way into the interior of the greater midlands.

On this section of the river, Mulberry is a major problem. I asked when they had encountered the first Mulberry tree and was surprised that it was only on the previous afternoon, less than 10km upstream.

A further down the river we came across the first Syringa, only the day before I had pulled out the first syringa on my section of the river and wondered where its seed had come from. Suddenly, I realized that although there are some big challenges, such as bramble and wattle, there are other invasive species such as mulberry and syringa that are not an insurmountable problem to overcome.

Once again it hit me that the uMgeni is much more than just a river, it really is a life line connecting millions of lives of every race and economic strata of our society. Not only those dependent on its waters for domestic and agricultural but also those that are employed by industries that are dependent on its water, it must be millions. It is so important that nothing less than a 'green belt from source to sea' is needed. As a custodian of the river that passes through my properties I suddenly feel the weight of responsibility to ensure that not only my section is healthy but to encourage my neighbours up and down stream to do the same by adopting a philosophy of ensuring that the first mulberry or first syringa (and so on) is not going to be on my property!

I am thinking, is it not a worthy challenge for the KZN Conservancy movement to strive to have every inch of the river from source to sea incorporated into a conservancy of one form or another?

To this team of uMngeni Champions, I salute you. Thank you for showing me that this river is not only about the ‘science’ of a healthy river system but equally importantly it is about the people and communities that live along its course from source to sea. Thank you for the encouragement your bold project is having in urging me to take up the challenge to protect it AND through the efforts of organizations such as DUCT, Dargle Conservancy, the Midlands Conservancies Forum and the KZN Conservancies Association to find ways of engaging with government, on behalf of the millions of people who are indirectly dependent on the uMngeni, to support landowners in conserving and managing its integrity.

Source: <https://umngeniriverwalk.wordpress.com/2012/05/07/salute-to-the-river-champions/>