

Liesbeek Project – Statement of Concern

**To: The Observatory Civic Association & Goringhaicona Khoi
Khoi Traditional Indigenous Council
From: Ronnie Kasrils**

South Africa's birth is steeped in the violence of colonial, apartheid and corporate relations that ripped apart the umbilical cord between people and their relationships with water and land.

This set in motion a self-perpetuating pattern of exploitative and extractive relations that continuously marginalises citizens' voices at the expense of transnational corporations. The Liesbeek development plan approved by the City of Cape Town exemplifies this dynamic, as it legitimises the obliteration of a communal sacred riverine valley and the memories of resistance and conquest it holds for our indigenous peoples. A parallel is evident in the state of Israel's

continuous dispossession of Palestinians from their homeland and occupation of sacred sites.

Let's look at the history of the site the DA administration wants to give over to imperial, neo-liberal power relations and objectives.

The location of this city and environs is a birthplace of Apartheid. From this epicenter of oppression, the techniques of occupation fanned out across the southern tip of Africa and spread ever northwards. But this was also the fountain head of glorious resistance; which became the First Frontier Wars, and thence the liberation struggle in the 20th century. Now a new peril; a new post-democracy occupation that threatens to supplant this memory on sacred terrain.

Back in history, the Cape escaped the yoke of the Portuguese slave trade route when the Khoi people defeated Portuguese commander Francisco D'Almeida's fleet in 1510 – on this site.

· It is also here where the land was dispossessed for the first time by forcibly relocating

the Khoi inhabitants and the 'granting' of farms to 'Freeburgers' of the Dutch East

Indian Company (VOC) – imposed through alien Roman Dutch law.

· We are talking about the very soil and water that bore witness to the first evictions, of

forced removals, and serfdom. Along this river a system of access and denial of the

indigenous people's rights were developed and perfected; later to be replicated throughout southern Africa, as elsewhere.

The story of loss emanating from this site also represents sustained heroic resistance against slavery, colonialism and theft during the one and a half century years between D'Almeida's defeat and the Khoi's eventual subjugation. In 1659, Jan van Riebeeck, an emissary of the

world's first mega-wealthy corporation, eventually dispossessed the indigenous Khoi people – here at the

confluence of the Liesbeek and Black rivers. Two late South African economic historians Hosea Jaffe and Sampie Terreblanche have noted that an estimated 2 000 ships rounded the Cape in the intervening 150 years. The depth of resistance is not always appreciated.

But this is also a seldom-told story about the 'ubuntu' spirit of the Khoi people who shared their water with sailors, on their own terms. It speaks to the astute diplomacy deployed by the Khoi Khoi. These ships anchored, passed, conversations were had, agreements made, and lines of knowing and custodianship were made clear. Now the valley that fed these encounters and holds traces of these encounters has been handed on a silver platter to the wealthiest man of our times, Jeff Bezos and his private empire.

It is tragic that such an historic and ecologically sensitive site could be dispossessed from the public at bargain price at the time that PRASA (Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa) was being gutted. PRASA had custody of the land, zoned as 'public open space', and it was sold off at way under market value in 2015 to private developers at the time that PRASA was in state capture sell-off mode

A quarter century into

democracy, there is little evidence that our cities have been able to restore equitable relationships between people and their environment. Apartheid spatial planning lives on as the poor is deprived of even basic potable water.

When we look to the future, it is important to emphasise the need for restorative justice in its broadest sense: spaces for the restoration of humanity based relationships between all our people and with the

environment. To do so, means restoring the ecological health and integrity of watercourses in a manner that repairs relationships between people, rivers, land and memory. Restorative justice also means acknowledgment and redress (as far as we can) for the harms done to the Indigenous peoples, and to their connection with the rivers, the landscape, the mountains, the stars and all living beings. Our indigenous cultures embody recognition of these deep connections of persons to place and can provide valuable guidance on how to restore damaged relationships.

I do not have to be a former minister of water affairs to know that land and water forms the basis of our social, reproductive and economic lives. South Africa's water laws and Constitution makes clear that people have the right to a healthy environment and this includes

the right to healthy rivers. Filling in of floodplains and wetlands, in general, is not legal, more so, because we will need them to attenuate floods associated with climate change. The desecration of a living and historic river would not just fly in the face of local and national climate mitigation commitments. It would also obliterate all hope of restoring the ecological integrity of the flood plain and the heritage memories its flow represents for the indigenous inhabitants

of the Cradle of Humankind, found in many diverse parts of our country and region.

The developers' plan to 'enhance' the river by diverting it and filling it in parts of its flow, and then to recreate a river from an artificial canal, is not restoration. Restoration would entail embracing earlier plans to repair the rivers as corridors for biodiversity. I want to emphasise that such biodiversity would also mean connecting people with water and heritage. It would connect areas segregated during apartheid and allow their voices to be heard about the future of the city and its commons. By approving this development, the Province and City have reversed that socially and ecologically restorative trajectory.

If a project, whose only justification is commercial profits, is allowed to divide and truncate this ribbon of connection, the opportunity for memory and healing will be lost for many generations to come.

We must unite to save this river, its environment and our heritage.


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