

Cam McLeay

Wildwaters Reserve

Since the beginning of mankind, the most sophisticated of our societies have worshipped the natural wonders; the sun, the moon, mountains, seas, lakes and the rivers; appropriately known as the arteries of our planet. However, the development of the first world societies, particularly in the last couple of centuries, has been at the expense of these natural resources and this is increasingly the case. Forests are being destroyed at an alarming pace, millions of tonnes of pollutants entered our atmosphere every day and we haven't even begun to count the cost of the contamination of our waterways.

No river has played such a monumental role in the history of mankind as the Nile. From the earliest recorded history it has been evident that ancient Egypt was 'nothing without the Nile'. However, despite the roles that the mighty river has played in the history of mankind; development has been at a huge cost to the Nile. Crocodiles, Hippos and Eagles who represented gods in ancient Egypt are now extinct in the country, annual floods that gifted Egypt with rich silt for growing crops are now drowned in Lake Nasser and the what is left of the river trickles into the in Mediterranean.

In the most developed or industrialised parts of the river valley the damage is greatest and over 60 million people in Egypt seem oblivious the mighty river on which they still depend so greatly. The river in Cairo has been transformed to an open sewer unfit for human or animal consumption with a bleak future.

Ironically, it is in the least developed countries where the real wealth of the Nile is still alive. In South Sudan and Uganda where civil war has raged over the past couple of decades; human populations have suffered terribly but the Nile has thrived. Animal populations have soared, water-bird populations have grown exponentially and fish species are thriving. However, with relative stability in these areas in terms of civil unrest, the human populations are now expanding rapidly. The environment is under real threat with the 'development' imposed upon it and we threaten to destroy the fragile eco-systems which are unique.

There is real hope to protect these areas. In the industrialised nations; leisure time has increased dramatically, disposable income has grown and these funds can be channelled in the direction of these fragile eco-systems. African open-billed storks, giant Nile monitor lizards and regal fish eagles are just a few of species occurring naturally in Wildwaters Reserve. The reserve is a privately led initiative to protect the Victorian source of the Nile in Uganda; a 50 km section of river that has become the most popular tourist destination in the country. The area is primarily a destination for whitewater rafters; but in a bid to protect this section river, Wildwaters Lodge is being constructed on one of the mid-stream islands and another will become a refuge for a wild chimpanzee sanctuary.

There is no future for the reserve or others like it unless the local communities living adjacent to the protected areas benefit directly from the initiative. High infant mortality rates, the prevalence of aids and an increasing scarcity of agricultural land mean it is simply not enough for westerners to advocate the protection of these areas. In what is becoming the reserve, local communities have been making money from converting giant hardwood trees to charcoal, they fish aggressively in the river, cultivate fragile wetlands adjacent to the river and

claim 'ownership' of these resources. However, with some imaginative projects, we know the reserve and others like it have a real future and the local communities can benefit more from their preservation than their destruction.