

Need for effective control of boating on Kromme River

There was 90% consensus from all respondents to the recent Kromme River survey that there is a need for effective control of boating on the Kromme, especially over peak holiday seasons. Major reasons were: siltation from west of River Tides to the mouth; the number, speed and size of modern craft; disregard for by-laws (91%); inadequate law-enforcement (92%); and lack of adequate finance for river management (95%).

These were some of the finding of the Kromme River Joint Committee (JRC).

Many of the respondents to the survey placed safety, law enforcement & siltation as the top priorities. There are different requirements for the Lower Kromme (from River Tides to the mouth); for the Upper Kromme (above River Tides); and for the Geelhout, which is a very different proposition from the Kromme. There was strong support for temporary additional strengthening of rules over peak holiday periods.

The Joint River committee conducted the survey on the management of the Kromme River in view of safety, social impact and environmental considerations, arising from two factors. These were: siltation of the Kromme River from River Tides to the mouth; the on-going increase in the number, speed & size of modern craft, especially over peak holiday periods. These have created a potentially dangerous situation. It was considered that present river management by the Kouga Municipality was inadequate, and that some changes were required, but that, where possible, these should reflect the majority opinion of river users and other affected parties, and be as unrestrictive as possible. We believe that the survey has achieved this goal, and we have gleaned very valuable information from the responses received. This will be passed on to the responsible authorities, and this summary will be posted on the relevant websites. The detailed responses will be kept in the offices of the St Francis Bay Residents Association, and can be seen there. All responses have a coded reference to protect privacy.

Our thanks are due to all those who responded, especially to those who took the trouble to comment, to those who assisted with the processing, and to the SFB Residents' Association for the use of their office and secretarial facilities.

The Kromme Joint River Committee

This is a fully constituted body, set up in the 1980s on the initiative of the St Francis Kromme Trust, in an attempt to monitor developments on the river, and to act as advisors to the then Algoa Regional Services Council. It comprises nominated representatives from DEDEAT, Kouga Municipality,

all constituted home-owners' associations on the Kromme & Geelhout, together with the St Francis Bay Residents' Association, the Riparian Homeowners Association (canals) and the St Francis Kromme Trust. It is still only an advisory body, and reports to the Kouga Municipality and the Department of the Environment. Recent national legislation requires the municipality to form an Estuary Management Committee, which would have more formal status than the KJRC. To-date this has not happened.

The Sand River

Siltation of the Kromme from the Sand River was repeatedly and correctly blamed for many, though not all, of the safety problems experienced. This is fully accepted. It is a serious threat to the whole future of the area as a holiday destination. Siltation is a direct consequence of sand from the Sand River, and construction of the Mpofu Dam. Correcting this is a major exercise and is unlikely to yield quick results. However it will be a priority for 2015, as part of an ambitious integrated plan to control the Sand River, dredge the Kromme and restore the beach. The technology is understood. The problems are bureaucracy & finance.

The survey

This ran from August until October, and was restricted to affected parties, namely riparian property owners on the Kromme, the Geelhout and the canals, other river users, and businesses deriving revenue from the sale or rental of boats on the Kromme, but not to the general public. It was sent to all member bodies for distribution to their members, and was advertised widely in the local press and social media. There was difficulty in communicating with absentee property owners who do not belong to any of the affected community bodies, and with casual users of the river.

185 responses were received by closing date: 74 from riparian owners on the river; 68 from canal property owners; and 43 from other river users. Each response and all comments have been recorded and are in the process of being analysed. What follows is a summary of the results.

Findings from the survey

The problem

- There was 90% consensus from all three groups that there was a need for effective control of boating on the Kromme, especially over peak holiday seasons. Major reasons were: siltation from west of River Tides to the mouth; the number, speed and size of modern craft; disregard for by-laws (91%); inadequate law-enforcement (92%); and lack of adequate finance for river management (95%).

- Many of the returns placed safety, law enforcement & siltation as the top priorities.

- There are different requirements for the Lower Kromme (from River Tides to the mouth); for the Upper Kromme (above River Tides); and for the Geelhout, which is a very different proposition from the Kromme.

- There was strong support for temporary additional strengthening of rules over peak holiday periods.

Proposed solutions

Predictably, there was less consensus on solutions.

- There was virtually unanimous agreement that adequate law enforcement was essential (92%), and that this is the responsibility of the authorities, which should be paid for out of licence fees (90%).

- There is a need to demarcate areas to give priority to specific activities such as fishing, water skiing and wind & kite surfing. Demarcating for jet skis on the Kromme presents major problems, but it may be possible to improve on free style provision on the sea.

- Much of the questionnaire was focused on restrictions on boat size & power, and whether jet-propelled craft should be permitted on the river.

- 57% believed that there should be limited power capacity, whilst 43% disagreed, arguing that the problem was behavioural; had nothing to do with engine capacity; and could be resolved with a reasonable enforced speed limit. A 60h.p. rubber duck could be just as dangerous.

- 58% agreed that the maximum power should be 250 h.p., whilst others argued for a much lower figure.

Others pointed out that sea-going fishing craft require the higher horse power, and would be penalised.

- 59% argued for a ban on all jet-propelled craft, whilst 41% disagreed, arguing that there was no scientific evidence to ban jet-propelled craft; that some countries favour them over propeller-driven; and that they can cope better with shallow water. This, too, could be addressed by a sensible speed limit.

This was the biggest area of disagreement between the various groups. 80% of Kromme property owners wanted them banned; 59% of other river users agreed, but only 38% of canal property owners agreed.

- 72% argued that there should only be traversing by jet skis between the lower canal entrance and the sea.

- 77% said that free style activity in the mouth should not be permitted. However there was a case for demarcating a free style area in the surf to the north of the Kromme.

(This was investigated some years ago, and turned down on the grounds that this was a rocky section, and could be dangerous. Currently free style in the surf is permitted for 400 metres to the south of the river, but it is very disruptive to houses on the ski basin in an easterly wind. Apart from this, jet skis are required to remain 200 metres off-shore from the low water mark. This is supposed to be demarcated by buoys in the sea. HT).

- 72% accepted the sliding scale for licence fees, based on size & engine capacity, provided the money, or much of it, was spent on river management, and did not disappear into a black hole.

- 70% disagreed with increasing licence fees, especially if there was no guarantee that the money would be spent

on the river. This would make river usage too expensive for many current users.

- 67% agreed with the proposed river zoning. Some felt that the "No Wake" zone between the canal entrances was too radical, some suggesting that a reasonable speed limit should suffice, one arguing that it should only be from 07h00 onwards to accommodate sea-going fishing craft. Others pointed out that this was a prime fishing area, and should be demarcated as such. Others thought the No Wake zone should extend to the bridge & even further, and that there should be "No Wake" sections

opposite parts of River Tides.

- 86% agreed that the zoning map should be carried on board, with the skipper's licence.

- 66% felt that it was now too dangerous to allow water skiing below the bridge, at any rate during peak periods. This is a high traffic area, used by powered boats, canoeists, swimmers and fishermen. It has now become very dangerous, even at high tide, with branches and rubble below the surface. Recent changes in the outflow from the Sand River have led to the near total blockage of the channel.

There were several suggestions that water skiing should be restricted to the demarcated area above River Tides, but not be permitted in the gorge.

- 90% agreed that the municipal by-laws should be scrutinized for consistency with Coastal Management legislation. There is currently no reference to speed limits in the by-laws. Many responses argued that the solution lay with reasonable speed limits, strictly enforced.

- 94% agreed that an applicant for a river licence should sign to confirm that he/she is fully aware of, understands and will observe the boating by-laws. One suggestion was that this should include a warning that non-compliance could include a fine or impoundment of the boat.

- Others argued that the skipper licensing process was too complex and expensive, and should be simplified. Also that pre-licensing courses were needed over the holiday to accommodate visitors.

- 88% agreed that a licence application by an absentee boat owner through a third party should contain a signed document from the owner, confirming acceptance of the by-laws and their implications. No licence issued without such confirmation.

- 92% agreed that the owner of a licensed craft should be responsible for the behaviour of others using it with his/her permission. However scepticism was expressed regarding the legality of this.

- Almost 100% agreed that there was a need for strict tightening up of bait collection.

Local by-laws do not mention this, and it may be a Sea Fisheries responsibility.

General comments

- There was widespread dissatisfaction that so little of the licence fees charged over the years had been spent on the river. Lack of finance has led to lack of policing, lack of signage, and danger to river users through irresponsible driving.

- Don't overdo control measures, thus killing the goose that lays the golden egg.

- Reasonable speed limits, properly enforced, could solve many of the problems.

- Restricting jet-propelled craft to the Ski Canal entrance would place further pressure on the pan handle between the small boat harbour & the Ski Canal. Tidal flow, and consequent damage to canal walls has increased since the construction of the new canals, and this would exacerbate the problem.

- Environmental controls should be relaxed to allow for dredging and pumping to the beach.

- R500 fines are inadequate for wealthy boat owners. Impounding the craft or withdrawing the skipper's licence would be far more effective sanctions.

The way ahead...

This is only a public opinion survey. It now needs to be digested and a policy developed. There should be no illusions regarding the complexity of the strategy to move forward. Professional help may be needed. The municipality has committed to having two law-enforcement officers on the canals, and two on the river for November to January, and some signage. It remains to be seen how effective they are. Current environmental legislation is increasingly complicated and the processes slow-moving. Once our policy objectives have been finalized, it will be necessary to set up a formal meeting with the affected authorities, including Kouga Municipality, Cacadu District Municipality and the Departments of Water Affairs, Environment and Mining, to negotiate a way forward.

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