

PI: David Whitley

Scheme: Follow on Fund

Project Title: [Healthy Waterways: Connecting communities locally and globally](#)

Case Study Title: Healthy Waterways: Connecting Communities, locally and globally

Human civilization only exists as a gift of free flowing, fresh water. But despite our complete dependence on a supply of clean water, we are as a species notoriously neglectful of our rivers and lakes.

The Aller River Pilot Project (ARPP) set out to work with people who lived alongside one such neglected waterway and engage these communities in its rehabilitation. Its goal was to build links between those who lived along the catchment and involve them directly in its restoration and maintenance.

The project stems from a current **Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Pathways Project on Understanding the Changing Climate**, and is the second phase of a pilot project, focusing on a 6km stretch of the Aller River, located just west of Durban in South Africa.

This project is led by **David Whitley of the University of Cambridge, with Research Associate Elsa Lee** liaising directly with South African colleagues.

At the beginning of the project the Aller River was in a terrible state and posed a serious health risk to local communities. It suffered from three major problems: invasive plants; effluent caused by overloaded sewage systems; and solid waste, caused by littering and ineffective waste management practices.

But if the river were clean, local inhabitants could use it for irrigating vegetable gardens, and for other activities such as washing and recreational bathing.

The first phase was developed by the Kloof Conservancy, a local conservation forum, who encouraged young people to become 'eco-champs' and raise awareness of the problems in the community.

They were charged with monitoring the sewage system and restoring and overseeing the river's health. Another local organisation was involved, on a voluntary basis, to remove the invasive plants - an ongoing project.

The second phase of the project was funded via the AHRC's Follow on Funding for Impact and Engagement scheme. "Once we knew about the funding, I went out to South Africa to talk about how we would do the second phase, which in turn enabled the first phase to run more smoothly," says Elsa Lee.

One of the key points of the second phase is to try and forge links between the three communities that use – or could use – the river: one affluent, one poorer and one industrial.

Although to date there has been little success in engaging the more affluent community, young people from the less affluent community have been fully involved from the start and are now being trained to become co-researchers to work out how best to connect all of the communities with the project.

"We are keen to involve all three communities, although the river is more significant in the daily lives of those living in the less affluent areas," says Lee.

Links are starting to form between young people and the industrial community. And the local

municipality - who funded ARPP Phase 1 - have been fully supportive of the project.

The AHRC-funded Phase 2 element of this project will also bring into play a connection between the eco-champs and a group of young people in the UK who are working on waterways in the Norfolk Broads.

The aim of this is to share experience and knowledge between settings with different cultural and ecological features. This intercultural interchange creates an innovative setting with the potential to explore water security issues, as framed by the global sustainable development goals.

"The original idea was to enable these two groups, in the UK and in South Africa, to respond to issues that arise in their respective countries and learn from each other's experiences," says Whitley.

Intended outcomes and impact

- Networking between these local and international communities is beginning to bring change, both on a personal level for the participants and to the river itself. For example, a recent water test on the Aller River revealed that the levels of E.Coli in the river are now no longer hazardous to human health.
- The challenge now is to maintain these improvements beyond the lifetime of the project.
- "One of the greatest impacts is giving the ownership of the waterway to local people and facilitating their motivation to maintain a healthy river," says Lee.