Rivers of South Africa

Hi Friends,

This month we are exploring our rivers. We may take them for granted but they offer us great services. Rivers provide a home and food to a variety of animals. You will find lots of plants, insects, birds, freshwater animals and land animals near and in a river. You can say rivers are rich with different kinds of living things. These living things play different roles such as cleaning the river and providing food in the river for other animals. Rivers carry water and nutrients and they play an important part in the water cycle. We use rivers for water supply which we use for drinking, in our homes, watering in farms, making products in factories and generating electricity. Sailing, taking goods from one place to another and water sports such as swimming, skiing and fishing happens in most rivers.

Have you ever wondered where rivers begin and end? Well friends, rivers begin high in the mountains or hills, or where a natural spring releases water from underground. They usually end by flowing into the ocean, sea or lake. The place where the river enters the ocean, sea or lake is called the mouth of the river. Usually there are lots of different living things there. Some rivers form tributaries of other rivers. A tributary is a stream or river that feeds into a larger stream or river.

South Africa has the following major rivers: Orange River (Lesotho, Free State & Northern Cape Provinces), Limpopo River (Limpopo Province), Vaal River (Mpumalanga, Gauteng, Free State & Northern Cape Provinces), Thukela River (Kwa-Zulu Natal Province), Olifants River (Mpumalanga & Limpopo Provinces), Gamtoos River (Eastern Cape Province), Great Kei River (Western Cape Province), Komati River (Mpumalanga Province), Great Fish River (Eastern Cape Province) and Molopo River (North West Province).

They are all river systems. A river system is a main river and all it’s tributaries.
Let's look at a river system such as the Vaal River system. The Vaal River is the second largest river in South Africa, the largest being the Orange River. It does not reach the ocean as it is a tributary and joins the Orange River in the Northern Cape at Douglas. The Orange River eventually flows into the Atlantic Ocean.

The Vaal River begins on the Eastern Highveld plains in Ermelo, Mpumalanga. It then flows into the Grootdraai Dam. On its way to the Vaal Dam there are a number of tributaries that join the Vaal River namely, the Little Vaal River, the Klip River and the Waterval River. The Wilge River used to be a tributary of the Vaal River, but since the construction of the Vaal Dam, now flows directly into the dam. The Wilge River also has tributaries i.e. Nuwejaarspruit River, Elands River and the Liebenbergsvlei River.

The Vaal River and Vaal Dam work very hard to supply water to the economic heartland of the country, namely Gauteng. It is a place where there are industries that earn a lot of money for our country. However the water that they receive is not always enough to supply the needs of everyone. Two large water transfer schemes have been built to bring in more water from other catchment areas. A catchment area is an area where the water is drained by a river system. The water transfer schemes are the Lesotho Highlands Water Project and the Thukela Vaal Water Transfer Scheme in Kwa-Zulu Natal.

Rivers are very important in our lives as they are important for life. Without them there will be no fresh drinking water; no water to use at home and in factories; and on farms. The natural environment would also suffer. Everyday, rivers have to deal with pollution that is slowly destroying their water quality which then affects the animals and plants living in the river. The pollution is coming from industries, mines, homes and farms. It also costs a lot of money to clean this water for drinking.

Some pollution is from industries that pour chemicals into the river and affect the quality of the water, and kill many animals and plants in the river. Untreated sewage and leaking sewerage pipes can spread diseases and increase algal growth in the water which causes more problems in a river. People use a river as a dumping site and they throw their rubbish, used car oil and chemicals in the river. Often the chemicals we use at home such as washing powder and pesticides end up in our rivers. Even air pollution affect our rivers.
What can you do to stop the pollution of rivers?

• You can stop throwing litter on the ground because most of our litter will end up in the rivers, when the wind blows or when it rains.
• Plastics are a huge problem in rivers. Most of them are eaten by animals and they choke. It is best to use less plastic and to recycle, reuse and reduce our waste.
• Report anyone who uses the river as a toilet or throws litter in the river.
• Start a river clean up campaign in your community.
• Look at the washing powder and other cleaning chemicals that we use at home. Are they environmental friendly? If not, choose the ones that don’t cause damage to the environment.
• Don’t use harsh pesticides in your garden to control pests. Rather use natural ones.
• Respect our rivers, they give us life.

ACTIVITY

Let’s see if you can fill in the missing words:

• Rivers play an important role in the ________________ cycle.
• A place where a river enters the lake, sea or ocean is called the _____________ of a river.
• A ___________________ is when a stream or river joins a larger stream or river.
• A ___________________________ is a main river and all it’s tributaries.
• The __________________________ is the second largest river in South Africa.
• The __________________________ is the largest river in South Africa.
• The Orange River will eventually flow into the ____________________ Ocean.
• The most hard working dam in South Africa is the __________ Dam.
• A ___________________________ is an area where water is drained by a river system.

Until next time, take care my friends.
Respect our rivers so that we can ALL enjoy them.

Lots of Love

Manzi