

field sports

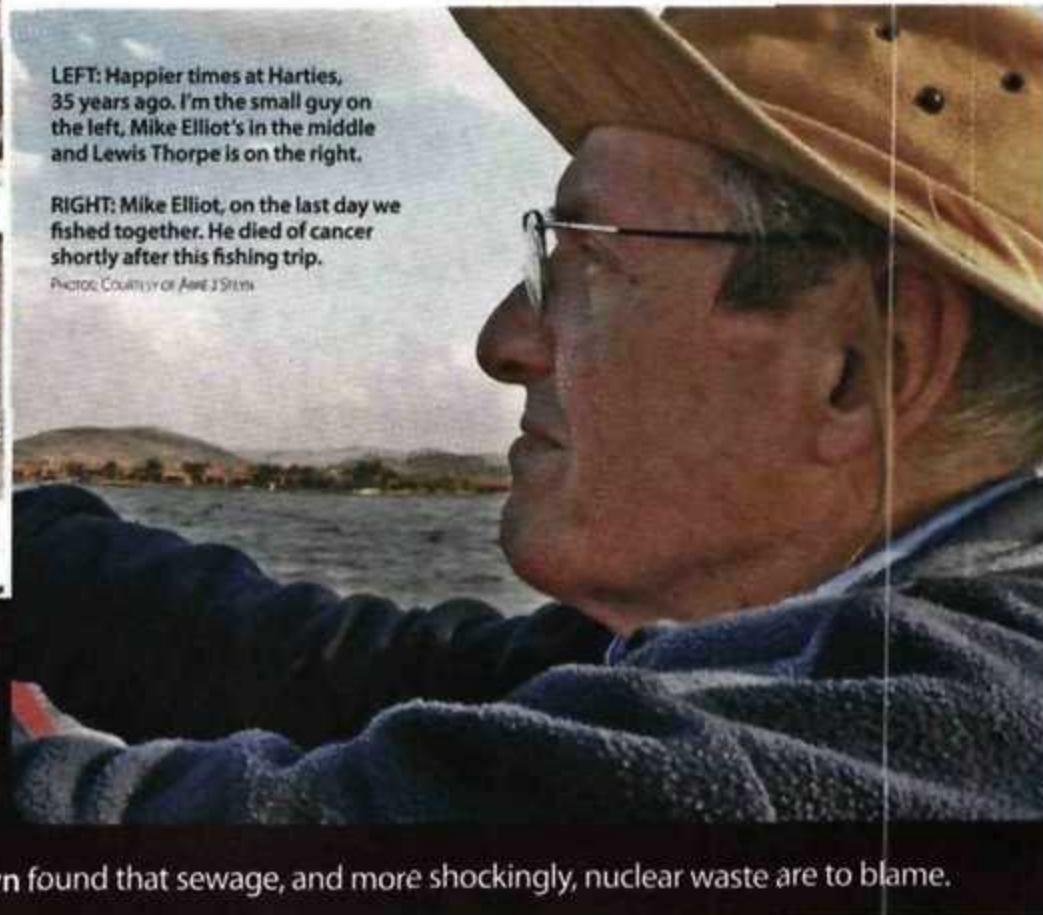
What's really wrong with HARTIES?



LEFT: Happier times at Harties, 35 years ago. I'm the small guy on the left, Mike Elliot's in the middle and Lewis Thorpe is on the right.

RIGHT: Mike Elliot, on the last day we fished together. He died of cancer shortly after this fishing trip.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ABRÉ J STEYN



Water Affairs's collapsed remediation project exposed the severity of Hartbeespoort Dam's pollution. While authorities seem to have turned a blind eye or have downplayed the danger, **Abré J Steyn** found that sewage, and more shockingly, nuclear waste are to blame.

LIKE SO MANY TIMES BEFORE, I recently fished Hartbeespoort Dam with my long-time friend, Mike Elliot. But this would be the last time as Mike was terminally ill with cancer. The dam was filthy and we caught nothing, so, filled with sadness, we left. Mike said, "Harties is just as sick as I am." He died a few days later. Harties still functions, but if it deteriorates further, the fish, and Harties, will die.

Sewage pollution only the start

To find what made Harties so ill, we must look to the past. In 1970 Mike and I founded the Pretoria Spinfishing Society, the oldest national lure-fishing association. Four years later I left Pretoria, but over the next 20 years I infrequently returned to fish Harties with Mike and the boys. The dam was our headquarters and between us, we spent thousands of happy hours on it, unaware of the deadly danger in its water. Every time

I returned, I saw how it was deteriorating. First water hyacinth choked the surface. Then blue-green *Microcystis algae* turned the dam into a massive bowl of pea-soup. Finally, great shoals of large blue kurper died *en masse* and washed up on the shore.

The hyacinth and algae were caused by a massive inflow of sewage, which came down the Jukskei River from Johannesburg – the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry granted exemption to the Northern Sewage Works, allowing them to "legally" violate stipulations of the Water Act. This has continued unabated ever since. Currently, two million litres of sewage – some of it raw – flows into Harties daily.

Too little, too late – nuclear waste pollution

However, it was what we couldn't see that was much more deadly. No-one knew that the Pelindaba nuclear plant was licensed to routinely dump vast quantities

of nuclear waste into the Crocodile River, just above the dam. When, in 1992, we found proof of radioactive contamination, after 100kg of uranium hexafluoride escaped from the plant, the University of Pretoria withdrew their investigative support. A mass of biological specimens collected by our members were then also mysteriously lost by Wits University.

Despite parliamentary discussions, the Atomic Energy Corporation (AEC) and the authorities dismissed it as a "minor accident" posing "no danger." It was minor against the background of the information I now have, which was suppressed by regulators and by those entrusted with custodianship of our environment and public health.

Of this mountain of irrefutable evidence and information, there's only space for the iceberg's tip – like the submission to a parliament portfolio committee, by a former employee of AEC (now the South

