

# Making waves with plastic bottle boat

KAREN WATKINS

In the run-up to the official start of Cape Town's tenure as World Design Capital, Plumstead environmental activist Gavin Lawson designed a canoe using plastic bottles, silicone and conduit piping.

His plan was to build two boats that could be used in the annual Peninsula Paddle, an awareness event that takes place on World Environment Day when paddlers use local waterways to cross the peninsula from False Bay to Table Bay. The boats could then be used by Zandvlei Nature Reserve staff to educate residents and visitors to the vlei.

Mr Lawson collected mounds of used plastic bottles from local wetlands and rivers, in the meantime cleaning up local waterways and re-using and recycling plastic.

He had some help. When children playing in the Black River heard what he was doing, they joined in.

Glenda Samuels, a teacher at Steenberg Primary School donated a bakkie load from their eco-club. A man at Langevlei canal, just north of the Zandvlei

Nature Reserve boundary fence, told Mr Lawson that he knew where there were many bottles and filled four black bags in five minutes. He needed 400 bottles for the project of which 80 were used in the boat, which weighs 15kg.

Learning as he went along, he said the back-rest, made from brown Stoney ginger beer bottles were originally placed in a vertical row but hearing that they were uncomfortable, he staggered them. His original design comprised seven rows of bottles but finding it too wide to climb on and off, he reduced this to five rows. It is not as stable but he is confident that it will survive the open ocean and waves.

During his search for bottles, he came across a penguin and decided it would make a good mascot, hence the first boat is called Penguin. The second boat is named Dragon after he found a plastic toy.

On the morning of the peninsula paddle, while it was still dark, two Zandvlei staff collected the boat. Mr Lawson had completed it the previous day after working on it for three months. The second

one only took one week to make. Sadly, on the way to the start of the event in Muizenberg, they had two punctures and after two hours of trying to fix them, they watched the boats paddle past. They were just a stone's throw from where the boats entered the canal from Zandvlei at Marina da Gama. Now he is hoping to find someone to paddle the boats in this year's event.

He has been involved with Zandvlei since 1985 when he was a member of its bird club. "I was the only one with keys so it was basically my reserve," he laughed. The only other people who went there were two City staff and that was during summer; it was too wet in winter.

In 1998 Clifford Dorse took over as manager of the reserve and has made it what it is today, a protected area, said Mr Lawson.

He has also been very involved in the fight to preserve Princess Vlei. Mr Lawson's dream was to have a facility where people could go to learn how to windsurf or sail and hire equipment. He cannot understand why more people do not use Princess Vlei. "The wind is just right and it's deep, some say



PICTURE: KAREN WATKINS

■ Gavin Lawson with his first bottle boat "Penguin".

five metres in places. That's why there aren't many birds, it's not shallow at the edges and too deep for the weeds to anchor, hence no material for them to build their nests," said Mr Lawson.

Now, with the boats he hopes to inspire others and challenge them to take his design example further. "The boat is not only an enjoyable way to explore the waterways but also has the advantage of less plastic going into the landfills or being made into jeans.

Also it doesn't cost too much and can be done by a youth group anywhere. It's also a great way to have fun," said Mr Lawson who is now planning to build a sit-inside canoe from plastic wine bottles.

The Peninsula Paddle takes place on Sunday June 8. For more information about the Peninsula Paddle and to register for the event, you can visit the website <http://peninsulapaddle.wordpress.com>