Living on a country estate with a river running through it has to be one of life’s great pleasures – unless the river is choked with rubbish or is full of stagnant water that is infested with a million mosquitoes.

Careless humans or communities living without proper waste management and sanitation services can quickly turn a beautiful stretch of water into a smelly, dangerous mess. To prevent this from happening at Waterfall, the Estate managers are working with environmental health experts WET Africa to ensure that the Jukskei is returned to – and then remains – a thing of beauty.

WET Africa – with WET standing for Water and Environment Transformation – is an organisation dedicated to restoring our rivers by creating waste separation and recycling operations in the communities through which they flow. The programme establishes monitoring systems to ensure that dumping and sewage spills are remedied and prevented in the future. Bank stabilisation is also performed to prevent erosion.

For the Jukskei, and its impact on Waterfall Estate and downstream landowners, (that means Alexandra), WET Africa founder Kim Kieser is about to launch a clean-up campaign. This campaign will see an initial 100 members of the community given a job
and an income based on keeping the river clean by maintaining the systems established by WET.

It’s a format that has worked for several rivers already, but this is the first time in South Africa that a housing development has waded in, to finance the operation.

Waterfall will set up a page on its community portal dedicated to the project, with satellite images, photographs and videos showing the cleaning activities and the results. Satellite imaging will also allow the management team to identify dumping offenders.

As well as keeping the river clean for residents of the exclusive Estate, the project will also benefit the contrastingly poor community of Alexandra by creating 100 jobs. For many, this new wage may be the only source of income for an entire family.

The beauty of the idea is its simplicity. Instead of throwing rubbish into the river, teams of workers — mostly unemployed women — will be hired to run recycling operations at strategic points in Alexandra. They will also physically clean the river and its banks by removing the rubbish already there and hand dredge the beds removing all litter, metal and household goods dumped in the river.

Each worker will be fully equipped with a uniform and protective clothing because the work is messy and sometimes dangerous, depending on what has been lobbed into the water. Transportation systems to remove the waste will also be established.

The rubbish will be removed and sorted, along with any new rubbish that needs to be dumped, and transported to recycling plants instead of thrown into the river. Waste disposal firms including Petco, Plastics SA, Polyclo, PPC, Collect-a-Can and the Glass Recycling Company will then collect the relevant rubbish and pay WET, generating income for the programme to ensure sustainability.

To ensure continuity, the process also needs an educational component to be introduced, so that people don’t return to their bad habits after the initial launch phase, allowing the river to degenerate again. To avoid that happening, WET Africa will run Train-the-Trainer programmes to create project leaders within the community. The project leaders will take over the daily operations and ultimately establish businesses contracted to WET, to ensure that the river remains clean and healthy. Cost sharing components for all downstream landowners who will benefit from the programme includes stakeholder engagement and participation, ensuring long term sustainability and benefits to river front landowners.

“This is vital work,” says Kieser. “Waterways are literally the natural arteries of the earth. They are home to countless species of organisms, flora and fauna and they provide drinking water, irrigation for the foods we eat and recreation to millions of people throughout Africa. The sad truth, however, is that most of Africa’s rivers are badly polluted through human activity, negligence, stupidity and greed. WET was formed to provide know-how and resources to help rehabilitate the most fundamental of natural resources and human rights - clean, safe water.”

So far, the various projects run by Kieser have cleaned up 80km of rivers in South Africa, removed 22,000 tons of solid waste and recycled 10,000 tons of household and industry waste. The scheme has trained and employed 1,000 people, developed six project managers and 10 team leaders, and recruited 1,600 households to recycle their waste at home.