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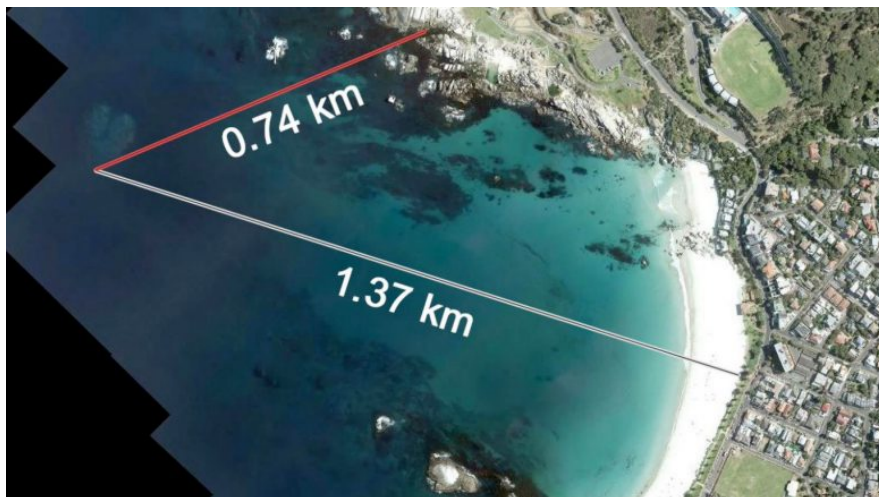
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CT desalination is no easy fix



BY JOHN FRASER DECEMBER 1, 2017

A study by a group of Western Cape academics warns that more must be done to control the discharge of sewage into the waters in Table Bay, off Cape Town. And water from desalination plants may need special treatment to make sure it is safe for drinking.

The researchers reported that a series of seawater samples were collected from approximately 500 m to

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1500 m offshore, in rock pools at low tide near Granger Bay, and at a depth under beach sand of 300–400 mm.

These were investigated for the presence of bacteria.

A second series of samples comprised of limpets, mussels, sea urchins, starfish, sea snails and seaweed collected in rock pools at low tide near Granger Bay, and sediment from wet beach sand and where the organisms were found, close to the sites of a proposed desalination plant and a number of recreational beaches.

“Intermittently high levels of microbial pollution were noted, and 15 pharmaceutical and common household chemicals were identified and quantified in the background seawater and bioaccumulated in marine organisms,” they reported.

“These indicator microbes and chemicals point to the probable presence of pathogens, and literally thousands of chemicals of emerging concern in the seawater.

“In respect of proposed desalination, the findings indicate that desalinated seawater must be subjected to treatment protocols capable of removing both bacterial loads and organic chemical compounds.

“The terms of reference for desalination plants must specify adequate testing and monitoring of chemical compounds as well as microorganisms in the intake and recovered water.

“Drinking water supplied by the proposed seawater desalination plants should be carefully tested for its toxicity.

“In respect of water management, our findings suggest the need for the City of Cape Town to move to an integrated water and sewage management plan that treats urban water, including seawater, as a circulating system that is integral to the health of the City, and which excludes marine outfalls.”

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They warn that sea water being sucked in for desalination may be too contaminated, and that this could threaten public health.

“Apart from the high microbial load being discharged into the ocean daily, the complexity and toxicity of chemicals that are being disposed into the City’s sewage are imposing a growing chemical pollution risk to the nearshore coastal environment, and thus to the desalination plant’s intake water.

“In the long term, it would be technically more efficient and cost-effective to prevent the sewage from entering the ocean in the first place.

“Compact, new treatment systems that can treat the sewage to high standards and recover the water before discharge to the ocean can eliminate the need for desalination.”

They warned that treatment of sewage and waste is just as important to public health as the supply of fresh water.

And they concluded: “Historically, cities were made possible by the development of infrastructure to adequately manage human waste.....the City itself is daily depositing a volume of many Olympic-size swimming pools into the ocean.”

Water strategist and member of the Water Leapathon Steering Committee Anthony Turton welcomed the research.

“Congratulations to the University of Western Cape, UCT and Stellenbosch, for this excellent research,” he said.

“It is pleasing to see that scientists are aligning their work with broad public interests. This is needed to inform policy decisions made by elected officials in any healthy democracy.

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“In this case, the issue of sewage effluent entering the ocean is one of growing strategic importance. This paper makes a strong case for the upgrading of sewage treatment facilities to harvest water and reduce the health risk from effluent discharge.”

The study was conducted by Leslie Petrik, Adeola P. Abegunde and Cecilia Y. Sanusi from the Environmental and Nano Science Group, at the Department of Chemistry at the University of the Western Cape, Cape Town; Lesley Green and Melissa Zackon from the Environmental Humanities South and Department of Anthropology, School of African and Gender Studies, Anthropology and Linguistics at the University of Cape Town; and Jo Barnes, Senior Lecturer Emeritus, Division of Community Health, Stellenbosch University

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