

## A Light Conversation with IWMI's Karen Villhoth



Vibrant, passionate and clearly dedicated to her work, Karen Villhoth works with the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) as Principle Researcher-Groundwater Management.

Following a USAID grant to IWMI in August 2015 to implement a transboundary water resource project, Karen took up an additional role as project manager for the USAID Ramotswa Aquifer project. The initiative aims to develop a scientifically informed, integrated and participatory approach to the transboundary management of the Ramotswa aquifer, improving both our biophysical as well as our socio-economic understanding of the groundwater system.

The point however of the "Spotlight Corner", is to get to know the other, inner personality. This is what we may not have known about Karen:

### **What do you wish other people knew about you as a person?**

"That I live what I preach. I try to have as small an ecological footprint as possible. Almost all my clothes are second-hand, and have lived vegetarian for 20 years".

### **What might someone be surprised to know about you?**

"That I have been a single mother for many years, raising my kids on my own in an international atmosphere while building my career in research for development. I have been a devoted acrobat for many

years".

### **What is a typical interesting work day for you?**

"A day full of challenges where my think-tank and networking abilities come together in new and interesting constellations of committed and competent people who are dedicated to solve tough problems related to groundwater".

### **What would you say are some of your strongest beliefs about the work you do? And why?**

"That you can make a difference in the way people think and that you can contribute toward more accountability and responsible behavior through awareness raising, knowledge generation and sharing".

### **What do you find most challenging about your work? And why?**

"Demonstrating the necessary diplomacy while convincing people to join team and trust building efforts that will eventually result in partnerships and solutions that are 'out of the box', but breaks the habitual ways of thinking".

Karen is not a typical groundwater scientist. She strives to break boundaries in her analysis of problems by looking at groundwater in food production, poverty alleviation etc. The most rewarding part of her work is the opportunity to see people from different backgrounds, roles and disciplines start talking about common problems, joining forces and spearheading the change needed toward better solutions that benefit more people.

## Fighting Alien Invasive Species; Improving Livelihoods

In partnership with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Desert Research Foundation of Namibia (DRFN), USAID Southern Africa is working with communities in the Gibeon area of Namibia to clear Prosopis, an invasive alien tree species commonly found along the banks of the Fish River.

Prosopis species are highly invasive and have detrimental effects on biodiversity, ecosystem services and livelihoods. Each Prosopis tree has a potential of consuming up to 50 litres of water per day, presenting major challenges in water scarce Namibia. The pilot project has taken a win-win approach to the invasive species by exploiting its economic benefits while reducing impacts to biodiversity and water resources through clearing. The project has built the capacity of over 30 previously unemployed community members in plant identification and processing for firewood and other livestock and domestic uses.

In December 2015, Namibia's Deputy Minister of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, Honorable Lucia Witbooi launched the Prosopis Clean-Up Campaign in Gibeon. Over 100 volunteers attended the launch.

**Building Capacity**



**Clearing Alien Invasive Species**



**Creating Alternative Livelihoods**



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