



Volume 1 2008

EASTCAPE

Environmentalist

WESSA

news about people caring for the Earth

Newsletter of the Wildlife and Environment Society of S.A. - E.P. Region

An Overview of the EP Region

by

Cheryl Gibson-Dicks—Regional Manager

Looking back on 2007, WESSA EP expects that a number of environmental issues that have been raised in profile over the past couple of years will continue to grow in significance and impact. Particularly, we expect that concerns over energy consumption will again be in the spotlight; the effects of global warming will continue to escalate in frequency and severity; international oil costs will continue to rise forcing consumers to reconsider their choice of transport and loss of critical habits due to rapid and unplanned developments will also dominate.

We also anticipate that the recent startling statistics on the state of our national rivers and consequent water quality, will become more newsworthy and citizens will have to consider various actions (State of the Environment Report – Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism). South African rivers are amongst the most polluted in the world and according to the United Nations definition we are a “water scarce country with a water availability of only 1100 m³ /person/annum”.

So where does all this leave us? Well on the positive side, there are huge strides been made in the development of renewable and alternate forms of energy, which to their credit, our own Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality are initiating through the Renewable Energy Programme. For individual consumers, there are now far more options available to explore, especially with regard to solar energy. And in case you aren't aware, at a recent Nuclear Meeting, ESKOM themselves announced that international studies have placed **South Africa number one in the world in terms of bankable solar hours!** *All we need to do now is to convince ESKOM to invest more R&R in solar instead of building more nuclear plants!*

Equally, a number of consumers are re-evaluating their forms of transport and questioning if it is *really* necessary to drive 10kms to the shops in a gas guzzling, carbon emitting 3 litre, double cab, SUV if a smaller more eco-friendly vehicle will do the trick? Motorbikes are also becoming more popular due to their excellent fuel efficiency (*the Vuka Scuta averages 45kms per litre!*) and with our wonderful climate, it's a great way to travel around.

So environmentally, there are a number of challenges on the horizon for all South African residents with the key mantra of “sustainable development” as the guiding principle. To cement this required paradigm shift, here is an excerpt from Minister Van Schalkwyk's introduction to the above mentioned report:

“It is clear from the information contained in this report that the state of our environment will determine the level of our prosperity now and for future generations. Over-exploitation of our natural resources is increasingly leading to environmental degradation and contributing to reduced ecosystems services. Reduced ecosystems services in turn contribute to poverty. As we strive to address social equity and economic development in the years to come, our ability to improve the state of the environment and secure environmental sustainability will shape our future.”

Cheryl Gibson-Dicks

Eco Schools Bethelsdorp



Bethelsdorp Eco Schools worked towards a healthy environment and whole school development this year by taking care of their school grounds, celebrating days like arbour day, weed buster week, environmental week, water week, family day, marine week etc. Looking at issues on health and safety and taking part in environmental competitions.

Triomf Primary entered the Pick n Pay “**SAVE OUR WATER**” poster competition. The school received a microwave for the school with most entries.

Winners

Candice Roberts (1st prize)
Reece Browen (3rd prize)

Category

6 - 8 years
9 - 12 years

Triomf Primary collected more than R4000.00 on casual day for the disabled. Ingrid Leo from **Association for Persons with Physical Disabilities** donated 2008 CASUAL DAY CALENDARS “free of charge” to the school for being “STARS”

Bethvale Primary collected “Coppers” for **St Francis Hospice** during breast cancer month in memory of a dedicated Environmental educator Mrs I Prinsloo.

Learners from **Gelvandale Primary** donated goody bags they collected and flowers they received from Woolworths to the elderly at **Gelvandale Frail Care**.

Republiek Primary keeps the flag flying by keeping the school grounds and the area near the school clean.

Rehabilitation after clearing invasive alien plants

As is well known, many of our river systems have been invaded by woody alien plants which replace indigenous vegetation and alter healthy ecosystem function. Working for Water, an innovative national project initiated in 1995, has made huge progress in clearing our catchments but the vast seed-bank left behind requires many follow-up treatments and inhibits the natural recovery of the vegetation. WESSA-Grahamstown recently had the pleasure of hearing doctoral student, Saskia Fourie, of the Rhodes Restoration Research Group (R₃G) at the Department of Environmental Science, describe her progress in developing guidelines for rehabilitation of invaded areas, based on her research in our local hills and on her current involvement in a pilot rehabilitation project in the Kougaberge.

Saskia reported on some of the negative consequences of invasion and current follow-up treatments: a burn of a cleared site in Featherstone Kloof in 2003 reverted to a wattle monoculture within two years; slashing results in a build-up of fuel, causing very hot fires often followed by erosion; and incorrect use of herbicides can destroy the indigenous vegetation as well as the weeds. Saskia's research in our hills included a study on the alien and indigenous soil seed bank after clearing. Although there was a significant *Acacia longifolia* seed bank of over 2 500 seeds/m² in areas next to the river, there was also a viable (able to germinate) indigenous seed bank consisting of 48 species, with an average of over 2 200 seeds/m². Also, working on experimental plots after fire, she found that rehabilitation using grasses (a rehabilitation method initiated in this area by Jonathan Pryor of Albany WfW) appeared to be the most successful method of suppressing regrowth of alien species.

A pilot riparian rehabilitation project in the Kouga River valley, co-funded by WWF, Working for Water and Working for Wetlands, has been initiated to develop best management practices for the clearing and rehabilitation of invaded riparian systems at an operational scale. The baseline research has been done and clearing of the sites began in July. A large nursery at Kouga dam is growing a number of fynbos species, local to the rehabilitation site, to use for planting. A considerable amount of monitoring and evaluation, undertaken by various partners like R₃G, the Department of Geography at Rhodes, the River Health Programme and the South African Institute of Aquatic Biodiversity, is taking place on plant survival and changes in vegetation, geomorphology, erosion and soil quality, water flow, quality, and aquatic biodiversity during and after clearing and rehabilitation. The pilot project is potentially of huge importance to the future well-being of our river catchments; we wish Saskia and her team great success. For more info on the project, contact Saskia at 082 474 5593 / saskia.fourie@ru.ac.za

Chairman's Chat

The start of a new year is apt for reviewing the state of our region.

I start with the lifeblood: money. The decline of our established source of income, the wildlife shops, led us to engage in funded projects instead. That has entailed significant operational adjustments. The staff have shown determination and dedication throughout the difficult period, and our finances are now healthier.

The chief outstanding problem is our slender capital base, and consequent hand-to-mouth existence. Income from projects is intermittent; but salaries and overheads must be covered regularly. And, as our activities expand, we need both more staff and more office space.

WESSA has an increasingly important watchdog role. Environmental threats are growing exponentially, and overwhelming our office with EIAs for evaluation. That work is essential, yet unpaid: we have to find the money to pay the staff who do it. Happily we have acquired funding for an assistant-intern specifically for this work, who started on 1 January. A warm welcome to Mmamohale Ngoasheng, affectionately known as Phuti.

As well as EIAs our non-stop Environmental Officer keeps our eyes on Coega, Madiba Bay, hazardous waste disposal and sundry other local issues. He also travels within the region, partly to manage the very successful Blue Flag Beach programme, partly to keep up with issues such as the recent threat to the Tsitsikamma Marine Protected Area., which WESSA helped to avert.

Environmental Education may well be our most important activity of all, for how else is the next generation to learn to outdo their elders in caring for the earth? Our Education Officer and her team, working within the Eco-Schools framework and using materials provided by the Out of the Box programme, are working wonders with both pupils and teachers at schools in the northern areas. It is a joy to attend the annual presentations.

A major gain from our project work has been the synergies which have developed from cooperation with other conservation bodies in our region. Moreover, a strong relationship with NMBM has been developed in the course of the past year by our environmental awareness courses delivered at appropriate levels to their various departments. More will be required next year.

Cooperation between WESSA and NMBM makes good sense. It is essential for the success of the Metropolitan Open Space System pioneered by WESSA and awaiting final implementation by the Metro. It seems that some politicians have still to be persuaded that public benefit should occasionally prevail over private profit.

We are also cooperating with NMBM and other groups in initiatives in the Baakens Valley and out at Van Stadens.

WESSA's structure locates the interface between region and members at branch level. At present the EP region has two branches. Grahamstown is thriving, thanks to a vigorous committee and active membership. Algoa Bay is planning to follow suit during 2008. (The branch committee would welcome members willing to participate in their work.) We are also busy establishing or re-establishing various Friends groups.

The region has a strongly committed Executive Committee, and, still more crucial, professional staff of exceptional calibre. Thanks to them all, our prospects look good. The office will be keeping you informed of progress. Members are vital to the society, so thanks for your continued support, and best wishes for 2008.

Chris Jeffery

CONSERVATION SNIPPETS

Tsitsikamma Fishing Poaching

The WESSA-EP Regional Manager and the Conservation Officer launched an investigation into the armed invasion of approximately 70 fishing poachers into the Tsitsikamma National Park in September. This was done as part of an effort by the Storms River Village community to gain recreational and subsistence fishing licences, to fish in the Park. WESSA-EP received information from this local community that the invasion had occurred, which may have been abetted by SANParks staff acting on instruction from National Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism. WESSA took the matter up directly with DEAT HOD Pam Yako. Eventually Minister Van Schalkwyk ruled that the fishers had no real historical claim, nor a real necessity for the fishers to access this coastline. He also stated that allowing fishing in the Park would set back the entire SA fish protection programme, which would significantly impact on line-fish stocks, the formal line-fish industry and the biological wealth of the area. These were the very arguments forwarded to DEAT why the fish poaching should be stopped and why fishing should not be permitted in the Tsitsikamma National Park. WESSA-EP applauds the Ministers brave decision and trusts that SANParks will continue to act against poachers in this extremely important marine protected area.

Blue Flag

The Conservation Officer helped to organise the National BF Season Launch, which took place at Wells Estate, Port Elizabeth, this year. National BF Manager, Alison Kelly was overseas and the Conservation Officer acted in her place. It has been a difficult year for BF beaches, with many damaged during the tumultuous March and July storms. Kelly's Beach at Port Alfred suffered severed erosion damage. While Gonubie lost their flag due to poor water quality, Plett and Knysna have joined the BF Programme as pilot beaches. Gonubie has re-entered as a pilot beach as well. Some beaches have already suffered the temporary suspension of their flags because of poor management found during control checks by the Conservation Officer. But these have quickly been put to right. He will continue to conduct checks through the Eastern Cape Blue Flag season (ends 30 April), to ensure that bathers can enjoy the highest standards of sea-water quality, safety and security, clean ablations and environmental management at our Blue Flag beaches.

Eastern Cape Implementation Committee

This committee of senior biodiversity and conservation planners in the Eastern Cape meets quarterly under the mandate of South Africa National Biodiversity Institute. WESSA-EP and the NMBM jointly presented on the three CAPE Projects at the 18 September meeting. This meeting also examined the plans by the National and Provincial Agricultural Departments to massively expand by 500 000 ha of maize and canola farming in the Eastern Cape, to provide the basis of a large new biofuels industry. The 18 November meeting then examined the impacts of the DOA's biofuels plans and how they were unlikely to succeed. A small thing like the fact there are not enough bees and bee-keepers in the Eastern Cape to pollinate the crops, which will cause a substantial crop failure for the planned massive rollout of biofuels crop planting. WESSA-EP is also concerned that the planned crops are GMO crops, which are known to fail without substantial fertiliser and pesticide/herbicide use, the cost of which radically cuts back on the promises of economic wealth to community farmers. The ECIC is formulating a response to the DOA, for them to carefully re-consider their plans before rushing into a programme which has had disastrous results elsewhere in Africa and South America.

CAPE Conservation Projects

The CAPE Co-ordination Unit and NMBM have initiated three pilot projects in the Metro to develop the recommended action plans of the NM MOSS. The NM MOSS was developed for the NMBM by WESSA-EP and partners in 2004. Some \$40 000 was made available by CAPE to catalyse these projects, with WESSA-EP appointed to project manager all three. The Regional Manager, Conservation Officer, representatives of the Baakens Valley Preservation Trust and staff of the NMBM spent considerable time and effort in developing the three application documents. These projects are true partnership efforts, which have been strategically advised by Dr Mandy Cadman.

NM MOSS Action Plans

This project has developed detailed action plans recommended by the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Open Space System Plan, to protect 28 priority conservation sites and threatened vegetation types within the NMBM. This project started on 16 July, with Richard Sylvester appointed as Project Officer and the Conservation Officer has been the project manager. Abigail Kamineth of the NMBM have been providing strategic guidance to the project. The Project Officer has undertaken an assessment of all the current and proposed planning and biodiversity conservation plans that have bearing on the NMBM, in order to inform the development of the action plans. There is a plethora of conservation, planning and development policies and guidelines to be assimilated into a cohesive document. Subsequently, he has developed a visionary, yet practical set of Action Plans to give implementation expression to the MOSS Plan (recently updated and incorporated into the NMBM Spatial Development Framework by SRK Consulting). This project is on track and should be completed by mid-December.

Baakens Valley Restoration Project



The Baakens Valley Preservation Trust (BVPT), the NMBM and WESSA-EP developed this project to galvanise community-based actions to restore two sections of the Baakens Valley, particularly focusing on security issues, so that PE residents can reclaim this recreational and educational resource. Jill Manuel was appointed the Project Officer at the beginning of May; having previously worked with the Baviaanskloof Mega-Reserve Management Unit. This project was completed in mid-November, having met all its project deliverables. These included providing training to the Baakens Valley Rangers, getting schools involved in the Baakens Valley, engaging with community groups, improving security and public involvement, through an honorary Baakens Ranger programme. Howard Bulkin of the BVPT and the Conservation Officer were the co-managers of this project. Jill has done sterling work to uplift the public image of the Baakens and to

mobilise communities to get involved in the Valley. Jill has been retained by the NMBM to develop a funding application to develop this project further in 2008. Jill will be employed with the NMBM from January 2008 to co-ordinate their Green Procurement project.

Van Stadens River Stewardship Programme

The NMBM and WESSA-EP aimed to catalyse a conservancy in the Van Stadens River Corridor, to conserve the threatened biodiversity and ecological river corridor in this area. Inge Shovell was appointed the Project Officer and has been jointly supervised by Wesley Berrington (NMBM) and the Conservation Officer. The project started mid-July, and after a Priority Land Parcels Assessment of the VSRC was conducted, the project steering group re-focussed the project to develop non-contractual stewardship agreements with priority landowners in the VSRC. In the long-term a conservancy may be established. This phase of the project is due to end in mid-December, with various training activities of the friends of Van Stadens members and signing ceremony with the five landowners who have agreed to sign non-contractual stewardship agreements with the NMBM. This is a tremendous achievement, considering the short duration of this project. The Programme has also invested in developing a NMBM rate rebate, proposing that landowners that agree to and meet stipulated conservation objectives, may qualify for a rate rebate. The Botanical Society of SA has helped us to develop this proposal, which will be submitted to the NMBM Council for decision. WESSA-EP is in discussions with the NMBM to develop this project over 2008, absorbing Inge into their staff structure.

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Global Warming

While the polar bear's plight has become one of the most potent symbols of climate change, a report reveals warming at the other end of the world has put penguins in similar straits.

Warming is occurring five times faster in the Antarctic Peninsula than on average around the globe and threatening the survival of four penguin species - emperor, gentoo, chinstrap and Adelie - that breed on the continent, a report by conservation charity WWF said.

Melting sea ice is destroying the nesting sites in which some of the continent's penguins raise their young and, alongside overfishing, is also reducing the amount of food available to some of the birds.

The Emperor penguin, the largest in the world, has seen some of its colonies halved in the past century as warmer temperatures and stronger winds force them to rear their young on increasingly thin ice, the report published at the UN conference on climate change in Bali said. WWF said in recent years sea ice had broken off early and many eggs and chicks had been blown away when they were too young to survive on their own.

The charity warned the emperor penguin was the most vulnerable of Antarctic bird and mammal species in the face of climate change, as it needs stable, land-locked sea ice on which to breed because it is too clumsy to climb over icy coastal slopes.

The melting sea ice - which covers 40% less area than it did 26 years ago off the West Antarctic Peninsula - has also led to reduced numbers of krill, the main source of food for chinstrap penguins. Some colonies of chinstraps have seen reductions in numbers of up to two thirds because reduced food has made it more difficult for youngsters to survive, the Antarctic Penguins and Climate Change report said.

The gentoo penguin has also seen numbers shrinking because they are increasingly dependent on the krill as their usual food sources have been depleted by overfishing, the report said. And on the northwestern coast of the Antarctic peninsula, populations of Adelie penguins have dropped by 65% in the past quarter of a century.

The report said the penguins had been suffering from scarcer food supplies and encroachment by gentoo and chinstrap penguins who were taking advantage of higher temperatures where warming has been most dramatic.

Scientists are concerned for the Adelie, which lives on sea ice but needs the ice-free land to breed, where they line their nests with pebbles which they often steal from their neighbours.

WWF is calling for the Bali summit to agree a process which will lead to comprehensive and fair emissions reductions after phase one of the Kyoto Protocol ends in 2012. The charity also wants to see international action to protect Antarctica from other pressures such as fisheries and tourism.

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