
WESSA CEO'S REPORT

2016 AGM



WESSA is a two-faceted organisation; its membership body of volunteers and its professional staff component. Both of these, volunteers and permanent staff, encompass a broad range of opinions on issues that are unified by the values and aims of WESSA. The unity of purpose within WESSA can easily be diminished and cause reputational harm, if the greater body of stakeholders do not have a common vision and purpose that act as the glue holding the WESSA brand together.

I am glad to report that a lot of progress was made to put the focus of specific accountability between professional staff and membership in the appropriate context. Regular meetings are taking place and the synergy between these two groupings will support future membership strategies. During the 2016 Staff Safari, we also reiterated the importance of alignment between our WESSA Values and its role in building greatness as a service provider of choice.

We are aware that we will have to hone in on very specific strategies with respect to social media and the youth and find ways to engage the youth and define membership towards creating a cause first and then to enlist supporters and brand followers, i.e. the new membership. This is equally true for renewing the passion around our professional WESSA brand.

Our reputation as a professional “implementer of choice” in the areas where we chose to operate and influence society to care for the earth, is growing positively and strongly. This is evident from the consistent good feedback we are receiving from our funders and other customers where we execute projects.

From a Conservation perspective, we focus on the natural environment as the core infrastructure, which is much more intricate and sophisticated than the built infrastructure and more critical to our survival. This ‘ecological infrastructure’ comes in the form of wetlands, mountain catchments, rivers, coastal dunes, vegetation and the like. These give us a whole suite of ecosystem services.

Ecosystem services, just like municipal services, also play an essential role in supporting social development and economic prosperity. South Africa is very well recognised for its species diversity as well as its diversity of ecosystems. These and other biodiversity assets offer significant opportunities to support the country’s development path.

These rich endowments of biodiversity assets and ecological infrastructure provide immense opportunity for WESSA to support South Africa’s development path and play an important role in underpinning the economy and it is for this work specifically that the Conservation Unit would like to become the “go to” implementer.

The Foundation for Environment Education (FEE) has approved WESSA’s application to be the South African representative of the Green Key programme, which means that WESSA now implements 3 FEE Programmes in South Africa, namely Blue Flag, Eco Schools and Green Key.

The most exciting news for the year has been the announcement by the Minister of Tourism that the National Department of Tourism has entered into a partnership with WESSA for the Blue Flag Ambassador Programme. This has been under discussion and negotiation since early 2014 and we are implementing this partnership with great enthusiasm.

Over the last three years, more than 300 young recruits have successfully completed the Department of Environment Affairs funded Youth Environmental Services Programme in the Western Cape which WESSA implemented between 2013 and 2015. Four district municipalities were targeted within this region including Eden, Cape Winelands, Overberg and the City of Cape Town. Youth living in areas with the poorest socio-economic circumstances, high unemployment rates and lack of basic infrastructure were targeted within these municipalities.

This programme is an empowerment model designed to provide youth (18 to 35 years) from historically disadvantaged backgrounds an integrated yearlong training and workplace learning programme. This has provided opportunities for young people in the Western Cape to broaden their environmental knowledge and gain practical skills to prepare them to enter the 'job market' and contribute to societal and environmental sustainability.

WESSA produced the "Stories of Change", a collection of these experiences, written by the participants themselves. They talk about the learning that took place during training and at workplaces. Some are more profound stories about how the programme awakened something deep within them – a desire to enrich the earth or contribute to saving the planet in some way. Some tell of how they found their calling in life and have emerged with a stronger sense of purpose. Some have been inspired to make small changes in the way they live and respond more sensitively to their immediate environment.

In addition to the above world class achievements, there are many more reasons that we can be very proud of the people in WESSA, their professionalism and dedication in making us a highly sought after organisation to partner with. We have a diverse service offering, based on our solid youth development, accredited training and conservation credentials. We continue to contribute immensely to youth development and schools programmes, including the exposure of our youth groups to nature and the environment with our four education centres. We are venturing into responsible tourism initiatives on the back of our well established Blue Flag programme, which essentially supports local governments to prepare and uphold the beauty of our beaches within a context of international and local tourism investment.

WESSA is celebrating its 90th birthday this year, but it is very clear that we are a very young 90 year old indeed. As a collective organisation, Board, Membership and WESSA employees, we are making a strategic point of renewing ourselves regularly and effectively. We do not have the boredom and experience of 1 year, 90 times over, not at all, we are resilient and strong and on a deliberate and well thought out strategic path that will take us to even more exciting next generation tactics in Caring for the Earth.

I want to express my sincere appreciation to our outgoing Chairman, Richard Lewis. After 14 years on the WESSA Board, 7 of which as Chairman, he has left a great legacy of steering WESSA through very challenging times. His very valuable and strategic contributions will be missed.

Thommie Burger
CEO