
WESSA CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

2016 AGM



In 1994, I was lucky enough to have been taught the '7 Habits of Highly-Successful People' by the late, great Stephen Covey. One of the videos that was shown to attendees was called 'White-water' which showed a paddling team all rowing along a placid lake, in orderly fashion, whilst the coxswain called instructions and kept the tempo of their rowing under strict control. Stephen then went on to show two people in a canoe shooting down a white-water rapid, twisting and turning, instinctively doing what needed to be done to be able to make it down the river successfully. The analogy he was making is that everything is changing so rapidly these days and the pace is getting faster and faster – so that today as we row the race called 'our lives', there is so much white-water noise and 'busyness' that we can hardly even hear each other. He went on to point out that old success patterns soon start failing because the world and context in which they existed change so quickly. 'Nothing fails like past success.' The real point that he left with us was that in a world of all this white-water noise and change, you need a response that does not change – the anchor or true north that we instinctively aim for and react by, that speaks to and guides us in the turmoil. When an organisation has a clear Vision and Mission, and a strong common set of principles and values that everyone can buy into, then the Leadership work is primarily done. In all the turbulence, people have their compass bearings and are better placed to survive and prosper, and engage with authenticity and integrity with one another, and keep moving towards their goals.

So, now WESSA celebrates its 90th birthday. Although we trace back to 1883, we were officially formed in 1926 as The Wildlife Protection Society of South Africa, when a group of passionate individuals got together to campaign for the creation of a National Parks Board (now known as SANParks); to ensure the proclamation of the Kruger National Park, and to advocate the formation of other national parks in South Africa. As such, it is an exceptional occasion for me to be chairing my last Board and AGM meeting with WESSA in the Kruger National Park, and with my current vice-chairman being Dr Howard Hendricks, who is from SANParks.

Over the years, WESSA leadership has remained true to its strategic intent being "People Caring for the Earth". This honourable stewardship has been central to WESSA for decades. I recently read Vol.1 of the African Wildlife Magazine dated October 1946 penned by JH Orphen, the President of the Society at that time –

"The Society is fully aware of the conflict that exists and will indeed always exist between nature and man's economic development, but it believes that by the creation of a strong public opinion, that damage that is thereby caused to wildlife can be reduced The Society realises however, that what is most needed to further the cause of wildlife protection is the enlightenment of the public on the damage that is still being done..."

It could just as well have been written by me now in 2016.

Now more than ever we realise that with the world's population expected to grow to over 11 billion by the end of the century, and with most of the over 3 billion increase predicted for sub-Saharan Africa, never before has so much been at stake in respect of the sustainability of this planet and everything that exists on it. A few years ago, I realised that with the rapid growth of mobile technology, there was a tremendous opportunity to make the public, and especially the youth, aware of the necessity of caring for the earth. However, one of the unexpected outcomes of the increased technological connectedness has been that humanity has, until recently, never been so disconnected and disengaged from each other and society. Substantial portions of lives have been spent on social media platforms and the level of ego-driven activities has reached epic proportions.

One of the negative outcomes has also been that many membership-based organisations, societies and clubs saw large declines in membership. People's interests and activities became increasingly focused on on-line activities. Could any of us ever have predicted that many would spend the majority of their lives staring at a screen of some sort? "Selfies", the practice of taking photos of yourself as often as possible and posting them on social media, has become an almost sacred activity; on-line 'friendships' often between people that have never met and most never will; severe bouts of depression- even suicidal thoughts- because some on-line friend "unfriended" you. The whole system completely ego-centric.

However, during this heightened state of on-line connectedness, I became aware through personal experience, as well as surveys that I have read, that the youth of today *are* more aware of issues and much of that has been through information and discussions they have had 'on-line'. More and more people, everywhere, are aware of what is going on, what, when, where and how man is abusing this earth, and many are deeply concerned. Added to this, I recently discovered that the new trend with youth on social media is thankfully moving away from the 'me' mentality to an 'us' mentality – a new community spirit is developing – there is a move beyond just being 'aware', to wanting to do something together. As we all know, the new youth can also be assertive. As such, I see an incredible opportunity for WESSA in this new context. A few years ago, we took a strategic decision to become a 'leading implementer of high-impact environmental and conservation initiatives in Southern Africa, and a trusted and effective project execution partner.' I am proud to be able to say that WESSA has become exactly that. It also saved us at a time when membership funding was rapidly declining. However, I believe we can now complement our Professional Projects business by igniting a new social movement in Caring for the Earth by reaching the youth of South Africa under the WESSA banner if we:

- Create a more positive identification to environmental work especially with black youth. This will be needed if we wish to dramatically change the demographic of those becoming involved in such work. Caring for the earth should be regarded as honourable, value-filled employment and viewed as such by the public and private sectors. Everyone needs to feel proud of what they do. There needs to be a level of status attached to caring for the earth.
- We need to take note that tourism is viewed as a major contributor towards the economies of southern Africa and the most attractive aspect of that for tourists are our national parks and other conservation areas. We need to be part of growing projects in the green economy and eco-tourism so that a demand is created for environmental jobs, i.e. linking job creation and quality education to the green economy. The sooner communities start viewing their environment and wildlife as their assets because people come from all over the world to see it, and pay to see it, and that local livelihoods and jobs depend on it, the more the earth will be cared for.
- Going forward, how environmental work is perceived as a vocation by the youth will also be key and as such new perceptions have to be created – I believe this is best told in short, eye catching and heart touching digital film clips so that the youth may be reached where they are – i.e. on their phones and iPads. Calls to action need to galvanise them into wanting to become champions for the environment on their social media groups, as well as physically in their own back yards and communities. They should also have the effect of making the youth aware of career opportunities in conservation and related activities that are worth choosing.

So, after 14 years on the Board, the past 7 as Chairman, I have been able to watch the rapidly changing world and especially so in South Africa, and realise we have to seize the opportunity to grow the WESSA brand and its work in the hearts and minds of our youth, particularly our black youth. We are giving to them a troubled world that is environmentally stressed; let's hope the new informed youth can reverse trends as they become adults and hopefully leave a better world to their children.

I am incredibly proud of how WESSA has placed itself as a leading implementer of environmental projects and its status especially in environmental education – it has professionalised the organisation and created a sustainable funding model that has really served us well. For this I especially want to thank our CEO Thommie Burger and his senior management team, who together with our committed staff have brought about our strategic realisation. We are an incredibly well-respected, highly effective, very professional organisation that takes caring for the earth seriously.

The most important direct task that I was given as Chairman for the last 3 years of my tenure was to also ensure we transform the profile of the Board to more accurately reflect the demographics of the country and I believe I conclude my Chairmanship having succeeded in that. I honestly feel we have paved the way for a transformed Board, strong in competence and character, to steer WESSA to a stronger, more inclusive future.

Finally, my sincere thanks to the CEO, the Board, Regional Representatives, staff, members and all our stakeholders who in one way or the other have invested of themselves or their organisations in WESSA. Also my thanks to the past Chairman's under whom I served on the Board being Dr Graham Avery and later John Green. It has been a great privilege for me all these years. I assure you, I will in one way or the other continue to try and assist WESSA wherever and whenever I can, as my life determines. I particularly want to thank Professor Michal Kidd for agreeing to take over the chairmanship – allowing me to excitedly start what I now like to term 'the second half' of my game called Life.

WESSA, be strong, be true, be principled, be excited and value always the incredible work you do in Caring for the Earth.

RICHARD LEWIS
CHAIRMAN