

CEO's Report

Dear WESSA Directors, Staff, Members, Affiliates, Supporters, Partners and Funders,

The past financial year has been a defining period for WESSA, one in which we demonstrated the **agility and focus required to deliver meaningful impact** in line with our strategic intent. Guided by our preferred strategic pathway, the **Leopard Scenario – which signals an organisation that is lean, patient, and focused** – we sharpened our priorities around climate action, biodiversity integrity, and reducing pollution, ensuring that every programme, partnership, and project delivers measurable outcomes.

Our operational performance has been rooted in our theory of change: **Educate, Advocate, Act**. This has translated into wide-reaching and tangible outcomes: More than 35 000 youth took part in the Youth Leading in Water Resilience Project in partnership with UNICEF. We expanded our Eco-Schools Programme into Zimbabwe, while the Green Key Programme certified pioneering environmentally conscious hotels across South Africa. Our Coastal Programmes (Blue Flag and Green Coast) continue to enable and celebrate excellence in coastal stewardship, amplifying marine conservation. 2025 marks the 25th anniversary of Blue Flag in South Africa, and we are excited to be extending the programme to the Northern Cape, investigating sites from Port Nolloth to Hondeklipbaai. Looking ahead, we want citizens to understand and embrace Blue Flag – enabling communities to act as stewards of safe, inclusive, well-managed, and transparent coastal and marine environments.

To deliver at scale while staying true to our strategy, **we invested in key appointments**: a Head of Philanthropy and Resource Mobilisation, a Head of HR to strengthen organisational culture and talent management, and the onboarding of Voxeon as our Marketing and Communications partner to strengthen our storytelling. We also secured Norton Rose Fulbright as our formal legal consultants – a significant milestone that has already strengthened our confidence in negotiations, decision-making processes, and engagement on critical legal frameworks such as the Climate Change Bill. Similarly, our partnership with ngoLAW has also been crucial in ensuring that WESSA remains compliant as a leading environmental NPC.



Remaining lean and focused has required some difficult choices. We transitioned the WESSA Pangolin Programme to trusted partners including EWT, Pangolin.Africa, and the Kalahari Wildlife Project. We also pressed pause on the WESSA Academy, continuing only custom training until a full relaunch becomes viable. In addition, we finalised the sale of the Bush Pigs Environmental Education Centre in Limpopo – a tough decision made in the best interests of both WESSA and the groups who cherished this space.

We undertook a deep and honest assessment of our home base, **uMngeni Valley Nature Reserve and Education Centre (UV)**. UV is **at the heart of WESSA's identity** – a sanctuary of local biodiversity and a living classroom that has inspired generations of South Africans. Yet, UV now requires significant intervention, both ecologically and in terms of its built infrastructure. Invasive species, ageing facilities, and shifting socio-ecological pressures all demand urgent attention. Over the past year, we have mapped the status quo, identified critical risks, and begun to explore scenarios that honour UV's ecological value while reimagining it as a **flagship hub for conservation, education, and inclusive community engagement**.

I am particularly excited about our renewed focus on strategic partnerships. As an organisation approaching 100 years, we understand the true value of working together. WESSA is a living testament to the African proverb: "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together."

Our growing collaborations with SANParks, the EWT, the IUCN, and others reflect not only our commitment to collective impact but also our determination to ensure that WESSA remains relevant, resilient, and impactful for the next 100 years

And just like that, WESSA is almost 100!

Legally, our centenary will be celebrated in 2026, marking 100 years since WESSA's formal establishment in 1926. **But our story and lineage stretch back to 1883**, when early conservation pioneers and individuals in South Africa first organised to protect their natural heritage. This makes WESSA the world's oldest environmental movement, predating the Sierra Club that was founded in 1892.

It is humbling to reflect that what began informally in 1883 as a grassroots movement has evolved into the vibrant, youthful WESSA of today. Our centenary in 2026 is therefore not just a milestone of formal recognition, but also a celebration of a much deeper lineage – a moment to reflect and to galvanise our members and partners around a bold vision for WESSA's next 100 years.

None of this would be possible without our community of members, volunteers, funding partners, staff, and the WESSA board. **I am continuously amazed by the energy, dedication and passion of our members as they drive local initiative for the environment across the country.**

WESSA is the world's oldest environmental movement.

Our membership arm has significantly contributed to how we move forward as **a growing movement of People Caring for Our Earth** – and these changes will be implemented next year.

To our funders, strategic partners, dedicated staff, and committed board members, I extend my deepest gratitude. You have ensured that **WESSA remains a credible, capable, and influential force for environmental and social justice**.

What I am most proud of this year is **our collective ability to refocus and to make tough strategic choices without losing sight of our mission**. As we prepare for our 100th year, our priorities are clear: deepen our impact, grow financial sustainability, inspire more South Africans to become active custodians of their natural heritage, and enabling people to care for the earth in the way that best represents them.

The leopard moves when the time is right. For WESSA, that time is now.

With gratitude,

Cindy-Lee Cloete
WESSA CEO

