



WESSA Eden Chairman's report 2015-2016

presented by Annemarie Gebhardt at AGM 19 April 2016

This year WESSA National celebrates its 90th year of existence. WESSA was officially established in 1926, when it was known as the **Wildlife Protection Society of South Africa**. Their mission at that time was to lobby for the establishment of a National Parks Board. This was in order to facilitate the proclamation of the Kruger National Park and several other National Parks that followed. Much later WESSA's name changed to the **Wildlife Society of South Africa** and **more recently to the current Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa**. Throughout its 90 years of existence, WESSA has lived up to its Logo: "*People Caring for the Earth*". WESSA has a proud record of several major achievements which includes saving the St. Lucia Wetland ecosystem from mining explorations. The reward of their efforts was that the International RAMSAR Convention declared St.Lucia Wetlands a World Heritage Site, now known as Isimangolisa. WESSA remains partners with several national environmental organisations, which includes WWF, EWT, BotSoc, SANCCOB, ORI and the Cape Leopard Trust. WESSA also remains partners with international bodies such as the IUCN and UNESCO.

In this report we will introduce you to our current committee; share with you our events since the last AGM and give you an idea of our local partners and networking scope.

Allow me to introduce you to the **WESSA Eden committee**: Claude Marechal, our Treasurer who joined us just over a year ago. Previously, Claude served on the WESSA Pietermaritzburg Committee before joining us; Lorraine Mc Gibbon left a deep void in our committee when she left us in December. She is now in her new post as the Provincial WESSA Eco Schools Co-ordinator in Cape Town; Roz Schubert who holds the record for being our longest serving member; Christine Ridge-Schnaufer, our Honorary Secretary and frankly, WESSA Eden's phenomenal Engine Room; Hester Greef who liaises with the local Kos and Fynbos project; myself; Linda Widlake, our Assistant Secretary who has just left us due to other pressing commitments in Groot Brak. Monica Vaccaro remains a stalwart in co-ordinating the WESSA EDEN FM radio slot as well as the WESSA Eden Facebook. However, she is unable to attend our monthly meetings due to additional commitment overload. She is also environmental education officer for Landmark Foundation and co-convenor of Kos en Fynbos.

As you may gather by now, our committee is in need of additional man-power. Pretty please, do volunteer your services. You will be well rewarded with the new experience as well as lots of fun and camaraderie from the existing committee members.

We kicked off our events in April last year with a **Geology Coastal Tour** that stretched from Mossel Bay to Victoria Bay. Those of you who participated in this event will agree that this was a thrilling and most enlightening adventure. We were almost overwhelmed by the amount of information imparted by our three ever loyal and always enthusiastic Geologists.

WESSA Eden remains indebted to Peter Ginn, Paul Rixom and Colin Ralston for their ongoing support, guidance and incredible generosity in sharing their in depth knowledge of regional Geology. They have done this with WESSA participants over the last three years. Since these Geology Tours began, we have never looked at our local rocks and landscape in quite the same way as before! Our heartfelt thanks go to Peter, Paul and Colin!

During May, we visited Pietersrivier Nature Reserve to celebrate the adventures of the Pioneer Naturalist and Explorer, **William Burchell**. Katot Meyer, owner of the reserve, has turned this reserve into a monument for Burchell. This is on account of the fact that Burchell camped on the farm in the early 1800's. To the best of our knowledge, Katot is the only person in the world to have created such an extensive monument to Burchell on his farm, now known as Pietersrivier Nature Reserve, near De Vlugt.

The public response to participate in the Burchell outing was so overwhelming that we were obliged to do a repeat visit later in August. Our host Katot Meyer and local Burchell History expert, Lynne Thompson, had us spell bound on the life and times of William Burchell on both these outings.

In June we had another successful outing, this time to **Noetzie Conservancy**. Our hosts, Julie Gosling and Wendy Dewberry shared their expertise in setting up a home completely off the grid in terms of water and electricity. Several of the participants have since returned to their Noetzie home for assistance in converting their own homes into greener residences.

In addition to being off the grid, Julie and Wendy converted the property next door into a magnificent Fynbos Outdoor Classroom. This was done after clearing the heavy infestations of Wattle and Pine and other alien invasive plants. This Outdoor Classroom is open to the public and it resembles a mini Kirstenbosch with the added bonus of magnificent views of the Indian Ocean.

Again the public responded so enthusiastically that our waiting list soon morphed into an additional outing to the Noetzie Conservancy later in October.

Later in June we hosted a talk by Kate Muller, entitled "**Talking with Animals**". This occurred at the Botanical Gardens Moriarty Centre. Kate shared her empathy and inborn skills in communicating with animals. She illustrated, using examples, how this has helped her to

resolve conflicts between humans and animals. This introductory talk was so successful that 20 of the attendants enrolled for a 3-day Seminar on the topic, which took place the following week.

Early in August, participants were thrilled to watch the antics of whales and the rare humpback dolphins. This excursion was arranged in partnership with **Ocean Odyssey** (a Blue Flag enterprise) at Knysna. This was an exhilarating experience for all those on the boat, everyone clinging on for dear life as the boat speeded through Knysna Heads! A spotter, perched on the cliff with powerful binoculars, directed the skipper towards the location of the whales and dolphins. Participants were even greeted by a playful blowing whale, as if to say he/she was enjoying their company!

We celebrated the **National Coastal Cleanup Day** in September, again at Great Brak with a team of eager folk of all ages. The participants included some families with their children from Aurecon Consulting Engineers in George, youngsters from Holy Cross Primary and girls from the local Brownies Group.

These young citizen scientists completed data sheets in which, *inter alia*, the mass of various classes of litter was recorded. The resulting data was then forwarded to Plastics South Africa, the official co-ordinators of the annual National Coastal Clean-up enterprise.

Closer to home, we participated in the annual **George Open Gardens** in November, for the second time. Christine Ridge-Schnauffer's garden was entered as an example of how an existing garden can be transformed into an indigenous garden.

The rules of permaculture were applied and without the use of any artificial materials a new ecosystem was created, complete with a large pond. This has resulted in the subsequent arrival of a myriad of birds and butterflies to boost the biodiversity of her garden! The growth rate of the Fynbos species has been astonishing and home-grown organic vegetables have also been enjoyed in a move to self-sufficiency.

Christine's garden is living proof that rebukes the idea of indigenous plants taking so long to become established! Currently, only 18 months old, the rear fence is fast disappearing from sight. This creates the impression that the garden stretches way beyond its boundary.

In December WESSA Eden, together with some of our enthusiastic partners, staged an open stall at the **Mosaic Market in Sedgfield**. Kirsty Hofhuis from Interwaste enlightened the public on all matters regarding the process of recycling waste in the Eden district. Michelle Schubert of permaculture fame demonstrated the use of Wonder Bags and Suzie Lauer demonstrated Rocket Stoves as strategies to save energy at home. This event at the Mosaic Market provided plenty of opportunities to interact with the public on local environmental matters.

Ten days ago thirty participants experienced a memorable day with the **Knysna Basin Project**, in search of creepy crawlies in the estuary at Bollards Bay on Leisure Island. Prof Brian Allanson opened the events with a talk on the history of research and function of the estuary. Louw Claassens, a PhD student added information on the structure of the Lagoon estuary.

Louw Claassens and her team of enthusiastic volunteers guided smaller groups into the estuary and the participants left with wonderful memories of first discoveries, which included the cute sea hare, cuttle-fish, a tiny estuarine octopus and polychaete worms. I can verify that the latter bites!

To all our **presenters and hosts**, WESSA wishes to express our sincere and enormous thanks for your generous hospitality and your willingness to share your world and expertise with the wider public, via WESSA Eden events.

In terms of networking WESSA Eden has accrued most valuable partnerships:

- **WESSA Eden Newsletter** – This remains our pride and joy. Christine continues to beat her own records in co-ordinating Environmental news in the region. She now seldom has to fish for information because a deluge of relevant correspondence keeps on streaming into her Inbox.
- **Kos and Fynbos Project** – WESSA Eden continues to support this amazing grass roots project. We donated some of last year's excursion proceeds towards seeds, trees and garden implements for Kos & Fynbos.
- **Garden Route Biosphere Reserve** – WESSA Eden attends meeting and has sent a letter of support to facilitate the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve application to UNESCO. This was necessary to back up the process required for the reserve to be declared as an International Biosphere Reserve.
- **SCLI – South Cape Landowners Initiative** – WESSA Eden attends their annual Seminar and this is always very informative.
- **Weeds Forum**: WESSA Eden remains an active member of this vibrant group.
- **SC Botanical Gardens and EPIP Science Centre** – It can be said that WESSA Eden is married to the Botanical Gardens! We will continue to support the new Science Centre as it approaches completion.
- **GCBR and VWD Primary School Project**. Two of the WESSA Eden committee members serve on the GCBR (Gouritz Cluster Biosphere Reserve) Board of Directors. WESSA Eden initiated the launch of the Vanwyksdorp Primary School Environmental Project.

From small beginnings in January last year the **Vanwyksdorp Primary School** Environmental Club project has grown from strength to strength to now include the entire school and personnel. Monica Vaccaro has taken over the leadership and with the assistance of partners, which include the GCBR, WESSA, Jobs for Carbon Team as well as other residents of Vanwyksdorp. This project is set to become a model for empowering youngsters in rural communities.

- **Monthly bird counts at the George Heronry Sanctuary** continues and we are happy to report that all is well with the residential birds at the old crocodile farm despite great neglect of the property and the infamous earth movements that drained the dam.
- **Eden FM** – WESSA Eden’s weekly Thursday morning radio slot continued until December. Monica now requires assistance for the radio weekly inset to continue.
- **WESSA Eden Facebook** – this is continuously updated by Monica Vaccaro and the total of “friends” now exceeds a thousand.
- **NMMU partnership**– We attend public lectures and seminars and continue to enjoy the support of lecturers in various ways.
- **SAASTA National Science Week in August** – Five committee members gave presentations on Alternative Energy Sources at Blanco Primary-, St. Mary’s Primary-, Pacaltdorp Primary- & George South Primary School.
- **WESSA Knysna** – Some of us attended their AGM and future plans are afoot for closer collaboration between the two neighbouring branches.

WESSA Eden and WESSA Knysna partnership.

At our most recent committee meeting, we had the pleasure of hosting members of the Knysna committee, as well as our local ‘honorary’ members, Colin Ralston and Ken Gie. Steve Gettliffe, Chairman of the Knysna Branch, and Ken Gie gave us feedback on the Provincial WESSA 90th Anniversary Celebrations that they attended in Cape Town. Pat Nurse, Knysna's secretary and Barbara Gettliffe also participated.

At that meeting we decided to meet twice per annum for mutual support and to cross-pollinate ideas and share our aspirations. It was also at this meeting that we took leave from Linda Widlake, with the help of a chocolate cake to conceal our sadness!!