

# Ear to the Ground No 9

Gauteng Conservancy Association e-newsletter - December 2005

(with acknowledgement to the **Karee Chronicle** for information)

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## Growing network

The Gauteng Conservancy Association holds quarterly meetings in different parts of the province every year to enable as many people as possible to attend the get-togethers.

The last general meeting of 2005 was held in Hennopsvallei in October. Each conservancy had an opportunity to present its victories or problems and it was most encouraging to see how generously mutual help and solutions were offered.

The Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA) recently spearheaded a meeting of environmental organisations in order to create a stronger, united lobby for the environment. Bob Dehning of the GCA was elected onto the Steering Committee which has already had meetings with top officials of GDACE, DWAF (Water Affairs & Forestry) and DME.

## Ten grand! Thanks!

The Midvaal Cycle Challenge, sponsored by the Midvaal Council, took place on 6 November. After the race, Councilor Marti Wenger, Executive Mayor of the Midvaal Council, handed a cheque for R10 000 to Ivan Parkes Chairman of the Gauteng Conservancy Association. This is great news. To date GCA committee members have paid for transport, telephones, stationery and postage out of their own pockets.

## A fair with flair

Thorntree Conservancy's annual Country Fair on November 6 again attracted thousands of people. The country feel was enhanced by a collection of old agricultural engines,

dating back to the 1940s, which greeted visitors at the entrance. Many of these are still in perfect working order and chugged away merrily all day.

The lush green Arboretum in Walkerville was a perfect setting for the myriad of stalls. Cullinan, Apple Orchard and Rhenosterspruit Conservancies showed support for Thorntree by taking stalls, showcasing their own products.

## School conservancy gets going

The first school conservancy on the East Rand is up and running. The Kathstan College Iselesele School Conservancy chose the name in honour of the endangered Bullfrog. (Iselesele is the Zulu name for a bullfrog.) “They organised a poster colouring-in competition and now they are busy identifying local birds and plants,” says GCA committee member, Anne Mearns, who has been helping them.

“After the rains, the Gauteng Conservancy Association committee members on the East Rand will assist with a bullfrog census in the Benoni area,” says Anne. “We’d like to know about significant sightings in other areas as well.” Information can be sent to Anne at: [a.mearns@absamall.co.za](mailto:a.mearns@absamall.co.za).

“Dynamite comes in small packages”, the saying goes and the diminutive Anne underlines it. Not content with kickstarting new conservancies, Anne wants to publish a book of children’s poems on nature. “I invite kids to send me poems (English and Afrikaans) on anything to do with nature plants, animals, birds whatever they fancy.”

She has already compiled several booklets for the GCA. including ‘Starting a School Conservancy’ and ‘Projects for Conservancies’. She is now working on information booklets on grasslands and bushveld regions.

## Quads explosion

Following the report on problems with quad bikes in the August **KAREE Chronicle** and a discussion on Radio 702, the GCA received nearly 100 complaints from all over Gauteng about the damage caused by some drivers of these vehicles. “We intend approaching the Minister of Environment and Tourism to lobby for a more integrated and stricter approach to their use,” says Ivan Parkes, GCA chairman. “Far tighter regulations are necessary, regarding where and when and by whom quads can be used.”

## Parasite or partner?

The Ebotse Golf Estate in Benoni is showing the way for partnership with the community where it is situated. The local conservancy has a seat on the Ebotse Management Committee and Ebotse is putting R350 000 into a facelift for the Vic Penning Bird Sanctuary. ‘This includes fencing the sanctuary and building a bird hide and boardwalk,’ says Anne Mearns of

the GCA. 'If developers follow the proper processes, we are always willing to meet them halfway.'

## Collapse of a Mine

An application for a dolomite quarry in Hennopsvallei Conservancy has been rejected. "We were not satisfied with the way the environmental consultant managed the application process," says Wolf Gribnitz, a local resident, "so we withdrew from their public participation and approached the Department of Minerals and Energy (DME) direct. With a petition of 2 700 signatures and our own experts' reports the matter was finally sorted out."

## The rabbit doctor

Dr Vicky Ahlmann of Loxton in the Northern Cape wears several hats. She represents the provinces Conservancy Association, affiliated to the national association (NACSA) and she manages the Riverine Rabbit Working Group. These rabbits are an endangered species. Working in the arid stretches of the Northern Cape, miles away from support systems most people take for granted, is a daunting task. Save the Rhino whips up far more enthusiasm than Save the Rabbit.

But Vicky's dedication and hard work were noted. She was voted Conservationist of the Year by the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) and received her prize at a year-end function recently. Congratulations, Vicky!

## We're clean, aren't we?

When Reg Humphrey, chairman of the Welverdiend Triangle Conservancy, southeast of Johannesburg, was offered the plastic refuse bags donated to the GCA by the Plastics Federation of South Africa, he looked surprised. "What are we expected to do with a hundred bags? Our conservancy is clean!" he declared. Until Reg took a good look and organised a clean-up campaign, "What a surprise! Our trailer was full!" he exclaimed. "Thanks to all the people who pitched in and helped."

## Pink peril season

The destructive Porn-porn Weed (below) is decorating the road verges in *Gauteng again*. For the past three years private landowners have had a double battle on their hands - clearing and reclearing their own lands of this wind-blown weed and trying to get the authorities to take action.

Working for Water (WfW), together with Gautrans, GDACE and other agencies, will launch an offensive on the Porn-porn in January 2006. "A hit squad of 350 weedbusters will be moving along selected roads in Gauteng," says Didi Skinner of WfW. The herbicide to be used is Brush-off 360SL. The roads to be targeted are R21, N14 and R55.

Funding of hundreds of thousand rands had to be sourced and delays meant that many Porn-porn are already seeding. The R511 and the R512 past Lanseria are not

on WfW's hit list and huge swathes of Porn-porn flourish on this road to Broederstroom. Part of the road falls under North-west Province and will have to be tackled by that province.

On private properties small stands can be controlled by cutting and burning flowers and digging out the rhizomes. This must be repeated, as new plants grow. For large stands a herbicide is recommended.

Information on **Brush-off: Contact Jannie Engelbrecht at Qwemico on 073 179 0105.**

## **Mining messes**

Seringveld Conservancy north-east of Pretoria is opposing a new sand mine threatening the area with further potential environmental damage. The conservancy has taken the issue to GDACE and the GCA.

Their concerns include what they claim is a flawed public participation process and no evidence of a rehabilitation plan for the area when the mine is worked out. "The company responsible for the final rehabilitation has a very poor track record in this area," says Seringveld chairman, Dr Pete Irons. "We've lodged complaints over the years about previous sand mines and their effects but with little success. Sections of the Boekenhoutspruit have been completely wrecked by sand mining."

An EIA is being done but the public participation process has been flawed, says Pete. "No meetings have been held. The consultant visited a few people in the area, but what he says does not tally with the facts given in the Scoping Report. We have asked GDACE and GCA to investigate."

## **Fed-up with litter**

The Hennops River Friends of Rhenosterspruit Nature Conservancy (RNC) have had enough of the mess along their stretch of the R511 and have arranged a clean-up of the road where it winds through Hennops. Date: 21 January 2006.

Our aim is to highlight the diversity and sensitivity of the environment we are fortunate to live in, by organising events that focus on the conservation of our area," says organiser, Karen Schimmel.

"Conserving our environment for future generations is going to take dedication and time, but it will be worth it!" A meeting has been set with Gautrans, she says, who's been very supportive.

"Our sponsors are: Plastics Federation of SA (200 refuse bags); Tatz Restaurant (cooldrinks); Gautrans (cones, safety personnel, removal of full bags). We're still trying to source fluorescent safety jackets." Contact Karen on (012) 659-0101

## **Ridges and Red Data**

Developers' plans for high-rise flats on Silverton Ridge, adjacent to the Botanical Gardens in Pretoria, may be held up.

For years local residents have been campaigning to save this ridge. "To the east the ridge has already been lost, due to housing developments. We're hoping to save at least the remaining part of the ridge," says Graham Read of the Silverton Ridge Coalition. "As far as we know no Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has been conducted on this area and no building plans for the site have been approved. When we discovered renewed activity on the slope we reported it to GDACE."

A site inspection conducted by GDACE officials -in October revealed that pegging of the site had commenced. GDACE notified the owner/developer that, as an authorisation for the change of land use had not been obtained from the Department, the activity should cease with immediate effect.

The physical characteristics of the ridge, in particular the north slope, are such that it would be very expensive to erect buildings and supply them with services.

A GDACE botanist visited the site with Bob and Cheryl Dehning of the Gauteng Conservancy Association (GCA) before Christmas and found a red data plant species. It may also be Juliana Golden Mole country, another endangered species, according to the official. "Finding a red data species supports the need for an EIA," says Bob.

GDACE's Department of Compliance has requested a set of specialist studies to be done on the site.

## **GDACE plays hardball**

A Sasol filling station, built on a wetland in Libradene, Boksburg, may have to be demolished because it could be in contravention of environmental legislation.

Early in December GDACE issued a directive to Petro-Props, the developer, to halt development. 'Its construction is contrary to the Department's policy and legislative mandate,' a GDACE media release stated. "In this regard, **it** will be noted that wetlands are amongst protected repositories of biodiversity."

Nicole Barlow, a spokesperson for the Libradene Wetland Association, welcomed GDACE's directive. "It confirms the power of a community to highlight irregularities and to prevent damage to the environment."

In a typical case of 'shooting the messenger', Nicole has been visited by police and served with a warrant for arrest /execution, charging harassment and intimidation.

GDACE's directive also stated: "Continued development on the site will expose the developer to litigation, as such development will be in contravention of the Environment Conservation Act. Such contravention may invite a fine of up to R100

000 or imprisonment for a period of up to 10 years, or both. The culprit may also be instructed to rehabilitate any environmental degradation caused to the environment.”

In an interesting twist, GDACE is questioning the authenticity of the signatures on the copy of the positive Record of Decision (ROD) given to Petro-Props. It has requested the original document for a forensic investigation.

GDACE’s directive also acknowledges “the calls and complaints from local residents, environmental activists and from the business community.” It concludes: “The issuance of this directive should send a firm message to other developers that we shall not deviate from our principled approach.’

## **Blair Atholl pipeline**

The 10km water pipeline for the Blair Atholl golfing estate development is marching across the Diepsloot Nature Reserve despite disagreement over whether an EIA is required. By mid-December GDACE had not ruled on the issue.

Roger Wood, manager of the Northern Farm which contains the nature reserve, had requested that an EIA be completed before work was done on the pipeline due to the sensitivity of crossing the nature reserve and a wetland. Engineers for the developer, Wraypex, said an EIA was unnecessary, claiming it was included in the original environmental assessment done for the Blair Atholl development itself.

Approvals had also been obtained from Johannesburg Water to cross Northern Farm and from the Department of Water Affairs to cross the Jukskei River, according to Wraypex’s engineer.

In a letter to Roger Wood on 8 December, Wraypex states that the confirmation they seek from GDACE (regarding an EIA) “is not our responsibility however we have undertaken to provide it”.

The Wraypex letter concludes: “You do not have the authority to stop the work and we will seek damages if you attempt to do so.”

**The Management Committee of the  
Gauteng Conservancy Association  
would like to wish all our  
members and associates  
a happy and safe festive season**