

# Ear to the Ground

Gauteng Conservancy Association Newsletter – No 14 - January 2007

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## Notices:

- **17 February:** A day course on **Organic Farming/Gardening** and the use of earthworms by Hennie Eksteen. Venue: Engedi, Rhenosterspruit Nature Conservancy. Cost: R550 incl catering. To book: Contact Helen : (011) 701-3176 or [duigan@global.co.za](mailto:duigan@global.co.za). Hennie is an acclaimed speaker and has been invited to present at a conference in Belarus in June.
- **3 Februarie:** **Veld-, Voëls- & Maanlig Stap** in Seringveld Bewarea. Almal welkom. Kontak Jan Visser: Sel: 082 785 7900 of [taem@lantic.net](mailto:taem@lantic.net).
- **25 February:** Thorntree 5 km and 10km **Fun Run** – all conservancies invited to join. Contact Robert Marais: [robert@robertsmobiledisco.co.za](mailto:robert@robertsmobiledisco.co.za). The Conservancy with the most entrants will take home the Hardekool Floating Trophy.
- **2 March:** "EIA Toolkit Course" presented by Endangered Wildlife Trust. Contact Anique Greyling: [aniqueg@ewt.org.za](mailto:aniqueg@ewt.org.za). Venue; Barloworld, Sandton. Cost: R750 incl lunch. A must for all confronted by rampant development.
- **31 March:** The next general **GCA meeting**: Engedi, Rhenosterspruit Nature Conservancy. Details and directions will be sent out in March.
- **Meerkat, Four Frogs and Cheetah Awards** up for grabs soon. Get your entries ready. Deadline: **31 March**.
- **May:** GCA AGM – date and venue to be announced.
- **Order now!** Agred's **Game Birds of Southern Africa** by Dr P J (Slang) Viljoen. Special offer via NACSA: R300 (selling price R454.) Contact Ivan Parkes to order: [ivan.parkes@conservancies.org](mailto:ivan.parkes@conservancies.org).

## Toxins in Thorntree hit the headlines

In the quiet week after Christmas Thorntree committee members discovered about two tons of extremely toxic Sodium Fluoro Silicate dumped in bags in the Walkerville landfill site. Urgent calls to GDACE, DWAF and to the Midvaal Council went unheeded – everyone was on leave. Finally experts from the Spillage Unit from Vereeniging came to Thorntree's assistance, cordoned off the site and warned residents not to go near it because of the danger of contact with the toxin. "We were even warned that breathing in fumes given off by the substance could be extremely dangerous," said Ivan Parkes, Thorntree's chairman.

When the media got wind of the situation Ivan was bombarded with interviews. It was main news for a week on Radio 702 and eTV, Jacaranda, SAfm, Beeld, Mail & Guardian and several other media also covered the situation.

Unfortunately the crisis was made much worse by the use of bulldozers to collect the bags, which broke open and spread even further. "When it started raining our main fear was that the stuff would leach into the underground water – we're all on boreholes in this area," said Ivan. "We have the details of the dumpers and action will be taken. This is a disgusting display of irresponsibility and we intend ensuring that whoever did this will be prosecuted. To date the cost of clearing the landfill, finding a suitable site and doing water tests is approaching R500 000."

Tests showed that the toxins did not get into the underground water, much to the relief of residents.

## *Seringveld feeds the Gautrain*

“Sandmining has gobbled up more than 1 000 ha of our conservancy,” says Jan Visser. “With our deep and sandy soil this is a fast-buck business and the Department of Mining and Energy (DME) exercises very little control over it. The Krokodil and Boekenhout Spruits are particularly under pressure. In some places they are simply diverted and mining does down 10 metres. There is nothing ‘sustainable’ in this – once the sand is gone, it’s gone.” Ground water is draining from large surrounding areas towards sandmining sites with obvious negative effects. Added to this is severe mud pollution of these rivers, he says. To add insult to injury, local roads are being wrecked by the heavy traffic.

Since Seringveld’s creation in the mid-90s countless letters appealing for assistance have gone to DME, GDACE and DWAF, to no avail. Meetings have been fruitless and DME has done nothing to ensure that legal processes are followed and that rehabilitation is done, Jan says. “GDACE, DWAF and DME give verbal warnings to the mines but there is no follow-up. It is meaningless. These meetings ended a year ago when DME pulled out without notice,” he added. “They were reinstated recently but still produce no results. This frenzy of mining is driven by the construction needs of the Gautrain and 2010 World Cup, but in the long term this area foots the bill.”

On a lighter note he says they are planning to work with the University of Pretoria to characterise Seringveld’s veld types. “We used to have a fascinating plant, the aardvark cucumber, which only grows around aardvark holes because the seeds need to go through the aardvark’s digestive system to germinate. These were last seen 40 years ago. We would be delighted to find it again.”

## *Welverdiend spreads the message*

“Last year’s Welverdiend Spring Country Fair drew about 6 000 people,” said conservancy chairman, Reg Humphrey. “While much needed profits were made by businesses and conservation bodies, the real gain was the conservation awareness and spirit it created in the local community and further afield. It drew people as far away as Nylstroom.” Midvaal Council gave wonderful support, he added with appreciation. “We are now talking with the Council about ecotourism opportunities.”

Welverdiend, adjacent to Suikerbosrand, is also beginning to feel the pressures of urban sprawl. “Factories and ‘eco’-estates are moving in and coal is mined close by. We are working with the Council to find common ground in the way to deal with these issues. Midvaal has an open-door policy and we are privileged to have a Mayor that is never too busy to hear about issues that directly affect the community.”

Another threat comes from annual runaway fires, says Reg. “Our local people need urgent education and we are approaching EWT for assistance in this regard.”

## *Will Zesfontein be buried?*

The issue of a proposed Ekurhuleni landfill site in Zesfontein Conservancy on the East Rand is still red-hot – and it’s not caused by methane but by the temperatures of local residents. “The plans to date are for the site to be operational by 2008,” says chairperson Anne Mearns. “This is in spite of objections and a 6 000-signature petition to save this site which harbours several red data species. In December 35 endangered grass owls were observed in the area. The proposed site also straddles underground streams feeding into the Rietvlei River which supplies water to Tshwane.”

To add to the problem, the Roads Department planned a major route through a wetland in the area. Fortunately, GDACE put a stop to that but the landfill proposal is still on the table.

A strong objection to the landfill came from Prof Gerhard Verdoorn of BirdLife Africa. Writing to GDACE MEC, Mosunkutu, he says: “Our concern lies deeper than our sentiments towards the birds; habitat loss in Gauteng has been unprecedented over the past five years.”

Ever-vigilant, Anne discovered SAA waste dumped in nearby Leeupan. She got SAA to clean up. A second dumper not only cleaned up but agreed to pay for the printing of conservation brochures!

**A question to GDACE: If “habitat loss has been unprecedented over the past five years” is GDACE failing in its mandate? If this department is not championing the environment, who will do it?**

### *First hospital conservancy*

Anne Mearns reports the creation of Gauteng’s first hospital conservancy. The Linmed Hospital Conservancy consists of several hectares of wetland and grassland. “Stormwater is collected in a dam which feeds the wetland. Indigenous reeds and sedges are being planted and we are planning a self-guided trail for staff, visitors and mobile patients. Who knows, maybe a buck or two can be added!”

### *Elandsvlei tackles the trucks*

Elandsvlei, situated on the East Rand, is one of the newest members of the GCA. Chairperson Gail McKerchar relates how they tackled a company that parked and serviced heavy vehicles on land zoned as agricultural. “About 300 truck trips take place daily,” says Gail. “They wreck the local roads, add to pollution and raise dust. About 100 people are employed there – we also have questions about accommodation and sanitation, so close to the Elandsvlei.”

Armed with petitions the conservancy committee wrote several letters to GDACE and DWAF, which resulted in GDACE and Ekurhuleni investigating the business. As this was a listed activity, a pre-compliance notice was then served on the owner to provide GDACE with reasons why the business should continue. Green Scorpion Douw Venter said a meeting would take place two weeks later and a final decision would then be made whether the business would be closed down.

Gail expressed special thanks to Douw and to GDACE official Harmen den Dulk for their help.

“We want to work with local informal settlements and farmers as well and will attend one of AgriSA’s meetings in February. But the main benefit of all these activities is the way they are drawing the community together,” she says.

### *Buffelsdrift – a lot of good and some bad*

The Pienaars River runs through Buffelsdrift in North-East Gauteng, a 1 000 ha conservancy established in 1998. “Buffelsdrift can boast exceptional biodiversity,” says Tom van Niekerk. “We have 350 bird species, large bullfrog populations and lots of game.” Threats include invaders such as Pompom, lantana and Queen of the Night.

“We are lucky to have an active social committee and they arrange star-gazing evenings, monthly walks and cycling events. We are part of southern Dinokeng where the focus is on eco-tourism and we are facing the challenges of many such rural areas close to cities – unsustainable division of land, improper land-use and encroaching urban development.”

### *Klipkop - developers’ tricks*

“Klipkop has just embarked on the erection of a 7.5 km game fence which will extend the enclosure by an additional 680ha to about 2 000 ha,” says Tony Prince. “Our battle is also with developers who, when it looks like they won’t get a favourable decision, turn to the DFA (Development Facilitation Act) process as an alternative mechanism to force through approval. The DFA was originally intended to speed-up low-cost housing. The Development Facilitation Officer at the local Council holds all the information and often makes it very difficult for I&APs to get involved. One has to read all documentation twice!”

### *Thorntree: chocolates, frogs and refuse*

Robert Marais of the Thorntree committee did not anticipate part of the job being rescuing bullfrogs, snakes and terrapins from certain death but he took it on with gusto. The stories range from hilarious (a snake emerging cross-eyed but alive from a tumbledrier) to horrific – a terrapin being used as a football. The local newspaper ran with some of the stories on its front page, sending a clear conservation message to the community.

Thontree was approached recently by the acclaimed Ferrero Roche chocolate company, which wanted to establish a factory in the conservancy. Chairman Ivan Parkes, backed by the committee, met representatives of the company and made it clear that there were more suitable places for such a factory in the Midvaal area and that Thorntree would oppose the application. "Planning follows precedent," he says. "If you say 'yes' to one factory, however prestigious, you have to say yes to the next and the next... It creates a domino effect.

"While inspecting the toxin dump in the landfill site we were advised that vagrants were living on the nearby koppie which is listed on GDACE's Conservation Plan as sensitive with red data species," says Ivan. "The amount of rubbish they left was mind boggling! Thorntree residents and the Sector Police helped to clean up – 80 bags of rubbish have been removed so far."

Carol Donachie of Thorntree has embarked on an energetic recycling campaign. She has contact numbers for various recycling agencies (glass, plastic, paper etc) and suggestions as to how to go about getting the community involved in recycling. Gauteng is running out of landfill sites and the issue of refuse is becoming urgent. The more we can recycle, the less has to be dumped on landfills. Call Carol on (016) 590 1474 or 082 773 5464 for advice.

### *Peglerae aims for the Meerkat*

At the recent GCA general meeting John Wesson of Peglerae Conservancy in the Magaliesberg gave a fascinating powerpoint presentation on this cross-border conservancy. Part of it falls in North-West and John is chairman of the Gauteng portion. "The lovely, endangered *Aloe peglerae* gave its name to this 50 sq kms of mountain, grasslands, pristine bush and wetlands," says John. The area from Wonderboom nature reserve to Rustenburg, including Peglerae has a grand total of 434 bird species and an attractive booklet listing these birds is available for R10. It also has tips on worthwhile places to visit in the area.

As with many rural areas, Peglerae is faced with destructive mining (Elandsrand Mine), housing developments going up without EIAs, appeals to North-West Province being ignored, quadbikes, pellet guns, poisons decimating the owl population, snares, gin traps and fires.

In spite of these problems Peglerae is tackling issues such as recycling, fencing roadsides to protect animals and educating the public about bullfrogs and poisons (Racumin) that kill rats but not owls. Add to that a Fun Run, an Anglo-Boer War Battles Heritage Trail, bird-ringing and eco-tourism focussing on the wealth of birds - and Peglerae could be the next Meerkat winner!

### *Kalkheuvel West: hot issues*

Sharon Ffoulkes from Kalkheuvel West - another on-the-border conservancy - reported that a fledgling North-West Conservancy Association has been established representing conservancies in the Brits, Rustenburg and Hartbeespoort Dam area.

The annual Spring Walk with Prof Braam van Wyk, author of "*Field Guide to Wildflowers of the Highveld*", is one of Kalkheuvel's attractions. "This region is a transition area between Bankenveld and Bushveld and well-managed burning programmes are essential," says Sharon. "Many grassland flowers need fire to grow in the spring but too frequent burning on north facing slopes and valleys is harmful. Prof Van Wyk says flowers make up 80% of our Bankenveld species and research shows that while grasses eventually return after ploughing, many of the flowers never do and are lost forever." Bankenveld is one of our fastest disappearing biomes because it is highly suitable for farming and housing. As a result, there is very little pristine Bankenveld left.

Sharon also reported on the issue of nearby Pelindaba and concerns about the new smelter which is being constructed. "We are very concerned about the radioactive pollution which they have said will be given off in the smoke from the smelter. Radioactive waste can find its way into Hartbeespoort Dam and, through irrigation water, contaminate our vegetables, milk and meat. There is also evidence to suggest that South Africa could be processing waste for other countries." Earthlife Africa has been on the news recently with reports of previous employees of Pelindaba contracting cancer. The Pelindaba Action Group (PAG) has been established to monitor Pelindaba developments. (*Contact persons' details at end of "Ear"*).

## *Hartbeesfontein – klopdisselboom, sê Danie*

Danie de Jong is upbeat about their 5 000 ha conservancy on the southern side of the Magaliesberg in the far north-west corner of Gauteng. Two recent projects entailed working with the local council to ensure that a proper EIA was done for a new cemetery on Hartbeesfontein's border, plus 150 low-cost houses for local people.

### *A new name for Cullinan?*

"This conservancy is also known as the BWS conservancy – Bluegum, Wattle and Syringa," says Joan du Toit, chairperson, with a sarcastic twinkle. "We've launched several alien removal initiatives, with the much-appreciated help of Harmen den Dulk and Nic de Klerk of GDACE. This included training local workers."

Cullinan is very active in involving members in environmental activities. "We did tree identification with the Tree Society, updated our muti plant list and the Spiderweb Club for kids (6 -12 years) will be launched soon. This follows on a very exciting spider and "gogga" day we had last year. Other plans involve sponsoring two guys to be trained in capturing snakes (rather than just chopping them to pieces) and a zebra rehabilitation centre," Joan reports.

"We have our share of greedy efforts to divide agricultural land, factories being erected in inappropriate places and a multi-purpose pipeline being built from Kendal to Watloo, right along our river. And again – no public participation and no reply from the authorities to our requests for information.

"One success, however. We traced toxic waste dumped into the Wilge River to a company in Silverton. They had to clean up the waste and the responsible people have resigned from the conservancy."

### *De Tweedespruit's 16 swimming pools*

Louis Ruysenaers, chairman of De Tweedespruit Conservancy, is justifiably proud of their 11 000 ha valley. "With over 600 species birds and game we have a wealth worth conserving," he says. "DWAF has been very helpful in helping us to tackle Queen of the Night and other pests."

But the beauty of the area is attracting more and more developers. "We managed to stop a property owner from building 16 swimming pools for a planned hotel and chalets!" says Louis. *(Some people must have water on the brain to even consider such a venture.)*

De Tweedespruit is one of only three places in the country where the sedimentary geology is exposed. The result is that visitors seek it out and steal the rocks with abandon. The conservancy falls under Nokeng Tsa Taemane municipality, meaning River of Diamonds. It's a lovely name except it encourages hopefuls to try their hand at diamond digging! This creates a lot of damage along rivers and streams.

### *Lammermoor challenges a consultancy*

Just before Christmas a resident of Lammermoor Conservancy found a partially-hidden notice of a proposed upmarket housing development, giving the date for comment and registering as I&APs as 24 December. The consultant was immediately challenged and extended the period to 25 January. But by then the Scoping Report had been finalised with no input from the community. No public meetings had been held to give residents the opportunity to raise questions about water, sewage, roads, a proposed cemetery, density and stormwater. Letters of objection have been sent to the consultant, copied to GDACE and the CEO of the Cradle of Humankind in whose buffer zone this development would fall.

### *Rhenosterspruit under siege*

Rhenosterspruit may be the first conservancy established in Gauteng. *(Any challengers?!)* It started in a small area as Kareebosrand in 1987 and eventually developed into the 10 000 ha

Rhenosterspruit Nature Conservancy (RNC), straddling the Hennops, Crocodile and Jukskei Rivers, south of the Schurveberg.

With Thorntree, the RNC was one of the pioneers in creating the GCA, four years ago.

During the past year a lot of energy went into monitoring upmarket developments in and adjacent to the RNC – seven in two years. Some of these were done “by the book”, others were not. One that was not done by the book and which was challenged by the RNC was Blair Atholl, near Lanseria. The developer, Wraypex, sued five members of the RNC for a R210 million – a typical SLAPP suit (Strategic Litigation Against Public Participants).

A final decision from GDACE is awaited on the future of a three-hole golf academy on the Jukskei River. This was virtually completed without approvals from GDACE, DWAF or Tshwane Council. The MEC ruled that the property had to be rehabilitated. The owner has appealed.

The RNC has been in the forefront of fighting the insidious Pompom Weed. Thousands of rands have already been spent privately and by the RNC committee on herbicides, equipment and training a crew to tackle the weed.

Almost the entire conservancy falls in the proposed Buffer Zone of the Cradle of Humankind. Clear guidelines on what will be allowed in this zone could be a great help in stemming the tide of rampant development.

A document titled “**Am I Legal?**” detailing the listed activities of the new environmental regulations is regularly circulated to residents in the RNC, so that nobody can claim that he/she “did not know”. Another useful document is “**Question to ask developers**”. This deal with a myriad of issues and is a help in preparing for public participation meetings. These documents are available – see “Useful numbers” below.

## *SOAPKIDZ!*

No, this has nothing to do with blowing bubbles. It stands for Sunrise over Africa’s Peaks and it endeavours to take kids from homes and orphanages out into the veld. This is often combined with a clean-up or alien removal campaign – part of introducing the kids to nature and teaching them about conservation.

Based in Pretoria it consists of volunteers who give their time to take groups of kids on nature trips. Conservancies that are interested in working with SOAPKIDZ can contact Karen: [noeksie@soapkidz.org](mailto:noeksie@soapkidz.org). GCA has already supplied SOAPKIDZ with several hundred plastic bags, donated by the Plastics Federation of SA.

## *The Battle for Roodepoort Ridge*

The Sisulu Reserve Working Group (SRWG) is taking the government to court to halt the controversial construction of a massive water reservoir within Johannesburg’s last remaining intact mountain wildlife ecosystem. It is also submitting a review application to the high court to stop the development of the remaining phases of the Sugarbush Estate on the Roodepoort Ridge.

Mogale City authorized the construction of a 6-million litre reservoir on top of the ridge which is managed as part of the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden.

Arthur Albertson, chairperson of the SRWG, said court papers would be served against Mogale Council and GDACE because their approval of the reservoir was not “properly considered”.

“The site is just 700m from the nesting sites of the only breeding pair of black eagles in an urban area in the world, he said, and could destroy untouched protea grassland vegetation over which the eagles hunt,” he said.

In May last year, MEC Khabisi Mosunkutu caused an uproar when he authorised construction of the reservoir, partly to boost the development of mushrooming cluster complexes that have stalled because of water shortages, according to an article in The Star. The SRWG claims Mogale City has not properly investigated options at less sensitive sites, such as near Silverstar Casino in Muldersdrift, and that insufficient ecological studies were done.

The proposed Reserve aims to protect a remarkable mountain ecosystem currently being destroyed by uncontrolled urban residential development in the West Rand. Located only 24km from the Johannesburg CBD, the envisaged 2 000ha Reserve will link the Botanical Gardens via a wildlife corridor to the Cradle of Humankind.

### *Warning from the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*

Climate change stands alongside the use of nuclear weapons as one of the greatest threats posed to the future of the world, the famous Cambridge cosmologist Stephen Hawking has said. “We stand on the precipice of a second nuclear age and a period of exceptional climate change, both of which could destroy the planet as we know it. We are learning how **human activities and technologies are affecting climate systems** in ways that may forever change life on Earth.”

Humankind's collective impacts on the biosphere, climate and oceans were unprecedented. These environmentally-driven threats should loom as large in the political perspective as did the East-West political divide during the Cold War era.

The board of directors of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists said the threat of nuclear apocalypse was now almost matched by the environmental threats posed by climate change.

**Question: Is this not what conservancies are about - steering human activities into a direction that will not damage the earth further?**

**Greetings from the “Ear to the Ground” patch!**  
**Helen Duigan**  
**(011) 701-3176**

### **Useful numbers**

**Birds of the Magaliesberg: R10.** Contact John Wesson - [janejohn@mweb.co.za](mailto:janejohn@mweb.co.za).

#### **Recycling:**

- Advice: Carol Donachie: (016) 590 1474 or 082 773 5464 or [carol@donsa.co.za](mailto:carol@donsa.co.za)
- Plastics Federation of SA: Melisizwe Bleki: 011 653 4795 or 083 288 3878. [meli@plasfed.co.za](mailto:meli@plasfed.co.za). (They will supply bins only – you have to find a recycling plant nearby willing to take it.)
- Reclam (tins): Marti le Roux: [mleroux@reclam.co.za](mailto:mleroux@reclam.co.za).
- Reclam (glass): Head office: 011 880 6410. They will supply bottlebanks and collect.

**Organic course, 17 February:** Info and bookings: [duigan@global.co.za](mailto:duigan@global.co.za) or (011) 701-3176.

**EWT's "EIA Toolkit" workshop, 2 March:** Anique Greyling: [aniqueg@ewt.org.za](mailto:aniqueg@ewt.org.za) .

**SOAPKIDZ:** Karen: [noeksie@soapkidz.org](mailto:noeksie@soapkidz.org).

**Game Birds of Southern Africa** by Dr P J (Slang) Viljoen. Special offer via NACSA: R300 (selling price R454.) Contact Ivan Parkes to order: [ivan.parkes@conservancies.org](mailto:ivan.parkes@conservancies.org).

**“Am I legal?” and “Questions to ask developers”:** Available from [duigan@global.co.za](mailto:duigan@global.co.za).

**Pelindaba Action Group:** Sharon Ffoulkes, 012 205 1766 or Dominique Gilbert: 012 205 1927.

#### **ACRONYMS:**

NACSA:	National Association of Conservancies of SA
GCA:	Gauteng Conservancy Association
GDACE:	Gauteng Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Environment
EWT:	Endangered Wildlife Trust
DME:	Department of Minerals and Energy
DFA:	Development Facilitation Act
DWAF	Dept of Water Affairs and Forestry
EIA:	Environmental Impact Assessment
I&AP:	Interested and Affected Party
SLAPP:	Strategic Litigation Against Public Participants