

# Ear to the Ground...

Gauteng Conservancy Association newsletter: October (No 3)

## Grassroots in Action

*Conservation takes place in our own backyards and gardens, initiated and driven by "people with roots". Grassroots in Action looks at some of the small and large issues Gauteng residents and conservancies are dealing with. Plus lots of fun!*

### The value of nothing

"We are running out of space," said TV producer Jan Horn of Southside Productions, speaking at the Gauteng Conservancy Association's October meeting in Cullinan. He articulated what many in the audience felt but found difficult to put in words.

"When people look at undeveloped land and want to know what you are going to 'do' with it, and you say 'Nothing', you are often met with an uncomprehending stare. We humans have this extraordinary compulsion to 'develop', 'improve' or 'enhance' every square hectare of land, completely destroying space at a rapid rate. Space in itself has incredible value. We are running out of space in Gauteng. Conservancies should become custodians of space."

### Look out! Here comes the city!

"The eastern boundary of Pretoria moves closer by the day", said Jan Visser of the Seringveld Conservancy at the GCA meeting. "This urban wave is putting severe pressure on water sources and increasing light pollution."

Seringveld is famous for its annual Bird Bash. At a recent one 232 birds were spotted within a 10 km radius in 12 hours!

Dr At Kruger of the neighbouring De Tweede-spruit Conservancy echoed Jan's concern. "The beauty of our area is also its greatest threat as more and more 'developers' become interested in moving in. Everyone now wants a piece of it."

Another resident mentioned a developer in Pretoria who has bought up large tracts of land around the city. This developer is renowned for short-circuiting the development process and employs a full-time lawyer to fight off or stall local authorities. If actions entail fines, the fines are simply paid and the action carries on.

"De Tweedespruit is one of only three places in the country where the sedimentary geology is exposed," said At Kruger. "The result is visitors seek it out and steal rocks with abandon. We fall under the 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."

Seringveld's biggest immediate threat is the proliferation of sandworks. "With our deep sandy soil this is a fast-buck business and the Department of Mineral and Energy Affairs exercises very little control over it," says Jan Visser. "The area involved is growing steadily and the damage to ancient trees, rivers and streams is considerable as is the damage to our roads system by heavy vehicles transporting sand."

### **How not to choose a dump site**

Ollie Olwage and Anne Mearns are involved in 10 conservancies on the East Rand and are presently monitoring plans for a proposed landfill site in the Zesfontein Conservancy. "We are very concerned about Ekurhuleni Municipality's proposed choice of the site," says Ollie. "There are crevices in that area - you can hear water running deep down. This feeds into the Rietvlei Dam which supplies Pretoria. Pollution of this underground water source can have major implications."

When the municipality was asked how they had chosen that particular site, the answer was that they had flown over the area and it seemed to have a suitable depression!

Anne Mearns, who received the United Nations' Environmental Global 500 Role of Honour in 1998, spends much of her time building good relationships between conservancies, developers and the local council. Her approach involves communities: building awareness and appreciation of conservation issues and needs. "Some more enlightened developers even let us give their construction workers basic environmental training," she says. "That way we manage to save many plants, birds and animals."

### **Full-steam ahead**

Danie de Jong of Hartbeesfontein was upbeat about progress in their conservancy. "Dit gaan klopdisselboom hier by ons!" he said. This conservancy lies in the far north-west corner of Gauteng, between the Magaliesberg and the Witwatersberg to the south. They were delighted with the bumper sticker "Dust is a different kind of status symbol", which they promptly translated into Afrikaans: "*Stof is Status!*" Short, sassy and succinct.

## **Alberts Farm's future**

The fate of Alberts Farm, a 70 ha piece of land south of the Northcliff Ridge, hangs in the balance. Alberts Farm, a Johannesburg Council property, is unique in having an artesian spring which feeds into a dam, frequented by masses of waterbirds, which then runs into the Braamfontein Spruit. "When we applied for conservancy status to protect the farm, the Council was unable to make a clear decision or give direction," says Noel Perry, a local resident. "Three applications for conservancy status have been handed to City Parks. We are now considering motivating local residents in the surrounding area to form a conservancy, locking in the Farm and thereby saving it."

## **Gathering momentum**

At the beginning of 2003 there were two provincial conservancy associations: KZN and Gauteng. As more people concerned about community-based conservation heard about the progress being made, the momentum grew with leaps and bounds. Less than two years later there are now five provincial associations: Mpumalanga, Western Cape and Limpopo are also up and running. The AGM of the National Association of Conservancies of South Africa (NACSA) takes place in Willem Pretorius Game Reserve in the Free State on 19 and 20 November. The Little Green Book (How to Start a Conservancy) is being snapped up. "So many people have asked for the book, after reading about it in the Karee Chronicle, that we've had to print another batch," says Ivan Parkes, chairman of the GCA. About 300 have now been distributed.

## **Who deserves the Meerkat?**

The 2005 Meerkat Award for the Top Gauteng Conservancy will be awarded at the GCA AGM in autumn next year. Those wishing to claim this prestigious award can contact Ivan Parkes: [ivan.parkes@conservancies](mailto:ivan.parkes@conservancies) or (016) 590-2312 for details, criteria & deadlines.

## **GCA general meetings, 2005**

**January/February: Apple Orchard Conservancy (south of Johannesburg)**  
**April/May: AGM, Rhenosterspruit Nature Reserve**  
**June/July: De Tweedespruit**  
**October/November: Seringveld**  
**Everyone welcome!**