

# GC&SA Ear to the Ground

Gauteng Conservancy & Stewardship Association Newsletter – No 26 -  
September 2010

[www.conservancies.org](http://www.conservancies.org) / [www.nacsa.org.za](http://www.nacsa.org.za) [www.nacsa.co.za](http://www.nacsa.co.za)

*“When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world”. ~John Muir*

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## NOTICES



The banner features a red centipede on the left, the text '6 to 10 October 2010' in large white font, and 'Weekdays 9am to 4pm - Weekend 10am to 4pm' below it. On the right is the University of the Witwatersrand Johannesburg logo. At the bottom, it says 'DO NOT MISS THIS UNIQUE & EXCITING JOHANNESBURG EVENT WHERE LIVE & FASCINATING BUGS, PLANTS & ANIMALS WILL BE ON DISPLAY'. The word 'BIODIVERSITY' is written in a blue box with 'TEEMING WITH LIFE' underneath.

## GC&SA AGM

The 2010 AGM was held at High Performance Feeds, in the Vaal Triangle, within the Weltverdien Conservancy. It was very well attended, thanks to those that joined the committee for the meeting and the social afterwards, thanks to Reg and Charmaine Humphrey for allowing us to use their charming home as a venue. The committee for 2010 / 2011 is as follows:

Chairman  
Vice Chairman  
Members

Ivan Parkes  
Reg Humphrey  
Joan du Toit  
Anne Mearns  
John Wesson  
Cheryl Dehning  
Thys Venter  
Dave Smith  
Bob Dehning (Ad Hoc)

Minutes of the AGM are available from the office  
[conservancies@conservancies.org](mailto:conservancies@conservancies.org)

## ***GC&SA Awards 2010***

The entries for the 2010 Awards were of an exceptionally high standard, thank you to those conservancies that entered. EWT had an extremely difficult time deciding which conservancies should receive the trophies. They were eventually awarded as follow:

<b><u>Meerkat</u></b>	<b><u>Biodiversity</u></b>	<b><u>Wetlands</u></b>
Drumblade	Klipkop	Klipkop
	<u>Runners up</u>	
St Dunstans	Cullinan	Elandsvlei
	<u>Third</u>	
Elandsvlei	Elandsvlei	Cullinan

A special commendation was awarded to the new conservancy Korsman, for all the work they have done in such a short time.

Midvaal Councillor Rob Jones donated a new trophy, The Environmental Education Shield, this trophy is to be presented to the conservancy seen to be committed to educating the community within and around their conservancy on all environmental issues. This year the trophy went to Cullinan Conservancy, Elandsvlei was the runner up.

Further details can be found on the website [www.conservancies.org](http://www.conservancies.org)  
An extensive article was published in the Gauteng Smallholder Volume 11 no 9 September 2010 issue [www.gautengsmallholder.ning.com](http://www.gautengsmallholder.ning.com)

## ***GC&SA Symposium***

Those of you that were unable to attend missed an extremely interesting, informative day and the opportunity to network with members of conservancies around Gauteng and Gauteng Government officials.

The Symposium was held at Casablanca Manor a conference and wedding venue within the Cullinan Conservancy, to say it is unique is an understatement, it is far more than that.

For copies of the presentations, photographs and comments from attendees please go to the website [www.conservancies.org](http://www.conservancies.org)

## NACSSA AGM 2010 Howick KZN



Gauteng Delegates

Once again the Umgeni Valley in Howick proved to be the ideal venue for the 2010 NACSSA AGM. The meeting was well attended by delegates from the various provinces. Attendees were treated to some very informative presentations, which resulted in lively discussions.

## ***Snippets from around the province***

### **Elandsvlei Conservancy Quick mid Month Report Back**

On Saturday morning we received a call from Kaleidescope School Principal, Carol Gardner, who said a very large lizard was in the school garden. She called her school children to see this beautiful reptile in Nature, and the Conservancy as she was concerned the dogs would harm the lizard. On arrival, we found a 100cm Rock Monitor frightened, dehydrated and very thin.

We decided the best option was to release him immediately into an area with Rocks, water and plenty of food for him. Carol Gardner and the school children agreed.

With the aid of several Youth Rangers, children from the school and parents, the Rock Monitor was gently caught and released in a nearby Rocky Outcrop on the Conservancy.

After resting for 10 minutes he made his way into the rocks and to freedom.

Thanks to all concerned for the kindness and helping to keep our area Natural!



### **ADVENTURE DAY IN SERINGVELD CONSERVANCY SATURDAY JULY 17TH 2010**

An adventure day was held on Saturday July 17th in the Seringveld Conservancy, located in the Cullinan area of Gauteng. The aims of the day were to promote adventure racing as a sport and also to promote awareness of the Seringveld Conservancy and its unique biodiversity, as well as to expose threats to the Seringveld. (The term Seringveld refers to the indigenous wild seringa or red seringa trees (*Burkea Africana*, (Afrikaans "wildesering") which are common to the region, and should not be confused with the common invader seringa trees *Melia azaderach*). Local landowners work together towards this unique event, while local knowledge, technical skills and sponsors will be employed to execute this project successfully. Possible profits from the adventure day will be used towards conservation projects within the Seringveld Conservancy and also for

adventure racing development. The race was hosted at the Bufulong Wedding Venue situated within the Seringveld Conservancy, and the race routes crossed no less than 8 neighboring farms. The day comprised a 30km Adventure Race, 50km Adventure Race, 30km off road Duathlon and a 12km Trail run.

**Adventure Racing** is a sport wherein the endurance of the participants is tested to the limits. Adventure racing teams comprise 2 or 3 members, and they have to navigate from checkpoint to checkpoint using maps and compasses (no GPS's or radios are allowed!) over rugged terrain involving many different sport disciplines. Mountain biking, caving, field running, rope work, orienteering, kloofing and abseiling are only some of the typical sport disciplines involved. There is no individual glory: Either the whole team succeeds, or the team is disqualified even if only one member has to withdraw for whatever reason. Team spirit is of the utmost importance, especially constructive teamwork. The team has to function as unit, and needs to manage strengths and weaknesses of team members. Teams also focus to exploit weaknesses of other teams.

## Albert's Farm

**MANDELA DAY** was a huge success and our park is much cleaner than it was on 17 July. Grateful thanks to all the members of our community who participated as well as Old Mutual and Standard Bank. You all worked like driven slaves and we are extremely grateful. Thank you Pikitup for donating bags and for carting the rubbish away!!



## *Focus on a Gauteng Conservancy*

### **Seringveld Conservancy**

The Seringveld is part of the southernmost tip of the Waterberg geology and flora and is characterised by deep sandy soils, which support specialised plant and animal communities.

Underground trees, known as ***pyrogenic geoxylic suffrutices***, contribute to an extremely stable and unique ecosystem. These underground trees are an important characteristic of the Seringveld, as the top layer of soil accommodates a vast network of underground 'forests'. In the Seringveld, it is not uncommon for

the subterranean bio-mass (i.e. the total mass of all vegetation below ground level per hectare) to be more than the above-ground level bio-mass per hectare! **Prof. Braam van Wyk**, plant taxonomist from the University of Pretoria explains *pyrogenic geoxylis suffrutices*. "It is a very peculiar growth form that is associated with our grasslands, and it is very much a type of growth form in Africa. It is not found in significant numbers anywhere else in the world, except perhaps to a limited degree in South America. It is a growth form where you get plants, woody plants that can be compared to underground trees, and all that you see are these green twigs which can be compared with a canopy of the tree. And this is probably one plant sitting here, or maybe even this whole area may be one plant, and it's the canopy that just sticks out, the tips of the branches above ground. These tips may burn down every year, but the rest of the tree stays untouched underground. Why they have adopted this strategy... it is a very interesting challenge to come up with reasons. Fire, frost, a shallow water table and grazing have all been considered. There are lots of interesting things we can say about the reasons why plants have adopted this strategy and why it mainly evolved in Africa. They are called clones, and are essentially immortal; nothing can kill them, except for habitat destruction. Grazers can not kill them, fire can not kill them and they are drought resistant. They grow extremely slowly, and if you look at the diameter of some of these clones, they must be the oldest inhabitants of our grasslands. I would say easily more than a thousand years for many of these clones since the first seed arrived for that particular species. But I would not be surprised if some of them are one day shown to be perhaps more than 10 000 years old, amongst the oldest plants in the world, much older than any tree that you are going to see. They are very peculiar plants and we have quite a number of these species in our grasslands."

A specialised faunistic component of animals, reptiles, amphibians and insects live underground in the deep sands of the Seringveld. The Seringveld, which lies in the upper catchment of the important Crocodile River system, makes an important contribution to the hydrology of the catchment area. The deep soil profiles, with their associated vegetation, act like a regional sponge and have a massive water storage capacity that benefits the total water flow regime of a region through slow release of water over longer time periods.

The Seringveld has many wetlands. Wetlands benefit all wildlife and human communities down-stream because of natural flood control effects and the availability of moisture over longer time periods. The underground trees stabilize the soil, greatly limiting soil erosion.

The Seringveld is on the transition from the lower lying, warmer bushveld or savannah to the grasslands of the higher lying relatively cooler Highveld, and such transition or ecotone regions are complex and dynamic, and are characterised by the presence of plants with a high degree of evolutionary activity. Ecotone areas are therefore important in the enabling of biomes to adapt to change. With regard to climate change, increases in ambient temperatures in the Waterberg region may cause a shift in the typical Waterberg plant life (and associated fauna) to cooler areas towards the south. The Seringveld could be one of the last vestiges that could act as a replacement or substitute region where this specific plant life may continue to exist despite global warming.

The wild seringa or wildesering, (*Burkea africana*), after which the area is named, is one of the most obvious indicators of the sourish vegetation types on sandy soils. Other typical tree species include the Transvaal beech wood or boekenhout (*Faurea saligna*) and peeling plane or lekkerbreek (*Ochna pulchra*). The Seringveld is also home to both the silver and green variants of the silver clusterleaf or vaalboom (*Terminalia sericea*).

The simplistic view of this area as sourveldt with a low grazing capacity does not do justice to the delicate balance that exists beneath the soil surface: Unique and interesting relationships exist between the plants and a wide variety of insects. These relationships have however not yet been studied.

This complexity and our lack of understanding of it is never more clearly illustrated than with the fact that it is not yet possible to cultivate a fully grown wild seringa from seed, because the seedlings remain small and die with time. This indicates a deficiency of some as-yet unknown factor or symbiosis, which is

provided in the natural situation. It is believed that so-called rehabilitation of disturbed land in the true sense of the word of the Seringveld is not possible due to the existence of the numerous clonal underground trees. These plants represent genotypes that have been selected for this specific habitat over many thousands of years. It is seriously doubted if damaged areas (such as at sand mining sites) would be colonised soon (even within several decades or perhaps centuries), especially by seed (which is formed in limited quantities in the Seringveld), since these underground trees have to a great extent lost the ability to propagate through seed.

The fauna of the Seringveld is rich and varied, even if already severely disturbed by human activity. Large mammals such as kudu, ribbok, duiker, steenbok, warthog, porcupine, jackal, brown hyena, caracal, otter, genet, baboon, vervet monkey and bush pig are still present. Several sightings of leopard have been reported as well as isolated sightings of civets. The Seringveld sandveldt is also the traditional habitat of the aardvark. There have been a few sightings recently but it is uncertain to what extent they still exist in this region. The Seringveld is also the habitat of the unique and extremely rare underground aardvark cucumber (*Cucumis humifructus*), which lives in symbiosis with the aardvarks. The Seringveld has a high concentration of red data bird, insects, invertebrate and animal and plant species listed in one single area and biome. Rock python (Afr. luislange) and giant bullfrog (brulpadda's) *pyxicephalus adspersus* are seen regularly in our region.

### **Challenges**

The Seringveld Conservancy is blessed with many fountains and several spruits originate close to these fountains. These include the 2 branches of the Boekenhout Spruit, the Vis Spruit and the Krokodil Spruit, all of which are unpolluted and relatively undisturbed near their origins. Unfortunately, unchecked sand mining have disturbed and polluted both the Boekenhout Spruit and the Krokodil Spruit further down their courses. In the water-scarce South Africa, it is of utmost importance to protect water sources such as these. Unchecked urbanisation and development in the wetlands feeding these fountains are real and serious threats to Seringveld's existence. Habitat destruction and fragmentation of areas with good bio-diversity become an everincreasing problem and mainly occurs, amongst other things due to roads, subdivisions and development. In the past, unchecked sand mining undoubtedly contributed by far the most towards severe fragmentation. High intensity animal production, such as cattle feedlots, together with insensitive development, include some of the many challenges which threaten the Seringveld's unique bio-diversity. It is important to create corridors or connective refugia of continuous green zones wherein natural wildlife (fauna and flora) can exist, and more importantly, can pass through. Such continuous migration of fauna and flora is critical for the continued existence of fauna and flora, not only to find suitable habitat to survive in by being able to migrate, but also to minimize in-breeding. Connective refugia have a much greater chance of absorbing negative impacts and a much greater resilience against traumatic disturbance like pollution or habitat destruction, since their inherent buffering abilities allow nature to repair the damaged areas by itself when compared with unconnected regions.

The vast destruction caused by illegal and irresponsible legal sand mining over many decades has destroyed a significant part of these refugia, in some cases almost forever in terms of human life spans.

Landowners and residents in the Seringveld with few exceptions have established themselves in the area specifically with a 'sense of place' in mind to experience the peace and tranquillity and bushveld setting away from the hustle and bustle of everyday city life.

Ecotourism remains an answer to the preservation of the region's exceptional biodiversity. Ecotourism, as opposed to sand mining, intensive animal production and insensitive development, is a viable solution because if operated with sensitivity and responsibly, has little negative side-effects, is sustainable and has a much greater capacity to create longterm employment and to alleviate poverty. The Seringveld Conservancy, situated within the 240,000 hectare geo-spatial tourism destination Dinokeng, - which borders both Mpumalanga and Limpopo provinces and is resplendent with natural, cultural and historical attractions - was

established close to the metropolitan areas of Johannesburg, Pretoria and the East Rand to promote economic growth and social upliftment, thereby relieving the burden of poverty, particularly for the historically disadvantaged communities living in the area.

It is hoped that the Diamond Dash Seringveld Adventure day will contribute to create public awareness towards efforts to protect unique natural regions such as the Seringveld.

Each news letter will feature a different Gauteng Conservancy **WILL YOUR Conservancy BE NEXT.**

Please send us your news and notices of events for inclusion in *"Ear to the Ground"*. This e-newsletter goes to all the Gauteng conservancies and to a long list of "friends of conservancies" plus other interested people. The list grows by the day. If you would like to contact any of the conservancies or people mentioned in this "Ear", let us know.