

ZWARTKOPS CONSERVANCY CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2022

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OVERVIEW

The Swartkops Conservancy emerged from the Covid 19 pandemic unscathed while the battle to save the Swartkops River continued.

The highlight of the year was the realisation of Arthur Rump's brilliant idea to divert water flowing down the Motherwell Canal away from the river and into the dry and dusty ex-salt pans.

In one fell swoop, decades of foul water flowing into the river came to an end, within hours of the water beginning to flow into the pan birds appeared, and the spoil from the trench effectively blocked any illegal vehicle access into the nature reserve.

However, the never-ending work of the Conservancy in many other areas continued unabated, as explained below.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

During the pandemic, EXCO held its monthly meetings via Microsoft Teams, and we have continued to use this method as it has proved to be an efficient method of communication and saves much time and travel.

Many thanks to Sue Crear for looking after our minutes so well during the past couple of years.

Subsequent to the yearend we welcomed Nina Bodisch as our new minutes secretary, and Tony Anthony has also joined the committee and brings with him decades of experience with the Metro, which I am sure will be very helpful.

Sub Committees

Administration

Hon Sec Arthur Rump and Hon Treasurer, Ken Flugel are experts at handling the reams of red tape which are a permanent feature of any entity interacting with government. Many thanks to our admin team!

Legal

Advocate Richard Buchanan SC and his team Gitesh Gajjar, Dino Koutsoudis and Jaden de Villiers have put together a frightening document which will be served on the Metro within the next short while, which will force the local authority to address the problem of failing sewerage infrastructure that so badly affects the river.

Attorney Francois Swanepoel also attacks the Metro on a regular basis, forcing the officials to produce the results of their water quality measurements.

We sincerely thank these gentlemen for their pro bono services to the Conservancy.

Fund Raising

Donations during the 2022 financial year totalled R366 000. The list of our major contributors follows. We are always most grateful to all who made donations.

Donations –Corporate R366 000	Spar EC	R240 000
	Orion	R 56 200
	Jendamark	R 50 000
	Zipski	R 12 000
	Soroptomist Society	R 5 000
	Wessa	R 2 800
Boat & Trailer Fund R30 000	NMU	R30 000
Motherwell Clean-up R57 024	Plastics SA	R57 024
Members’ donations R20 075	Various members	R20 075

The annual Metro Grant-in-Aid is running one year behind but we are ever hopeful that the backlog will be resolved in due course.

Public Relations

The positive image of the Conservancy has resulted in a growing number of supporters who wish to get involved in the various activities in which we are engaged.

This is very largely due to the excellent work in the field of public relations done by Dale Clayton. Dale has gathered together a small army of helpers and somehow persuaded them to get involved in difficult tasks such as removing alien vegetation, cutting trails through the reserves, and removing snares.

Dale also launches articles on our Facebook page which really do make an impact, judging by the statistics showing the number of people who read them.

Education and Awareness

Jenny Rump and her head teacher Patricia Ntabeni assisted by Shirley Towa and Zoliswa Ntabeni have been very busy, despite Covid impacting on the number of lessons they have been able to do and the number of learners per lesson.

From March 21 – February 22 they gave 20 Masifundisane lessons to primary and high schools mainly in Motherwell, but also in Kwazakhele, Swartkops and Wells Estate. This includes the 4 lessons they taught during Marine Week in October but does not include the “town” schools and small groups they also taught. This means approximately 1500 learners benefitted from our lessons.

During winter terms the lessons have been at the Aloe Reserve and during summer terms at Dufour Park on the Swartkops Estuary. Each lesson includes a lesson at the Motherwell Stormwater Canal and artificial reedbed. This section of the lesson has become increasingly important as it is here that we teach about pollution and how especially plastic litter affects our lives. They also cover how to use flush toilets and what not to put down them, in order to avoid sewerage pipes blocking resulting in sewage flowing down stormwater canals into the Swartkops Estuary.

Our grateful thanks as always to Patricia who does amazing work as well as Shirley and Zoliswa.

In May, thanks to sponsorship from WESSA, we launched our illustrated "Swartkops Field Guide" in Xhosa, so that learners can read about our area - both the reserves and the estuary. These we give out mainly at our lessons.

Our lessons would not be possible without funding from Orion Engineered Carbons who also get their kitchen to make lovely fresh sandwiches for the learners for each lesson.

Our teachers got very involved in other tasks, as we found we need to do more and more ourselves, especially in our two reserves, as Metro does less and less. Our teachers have helped with the eradication of alien jointed cactus plants and trail maintenance in both the Aloe and the Swartkops Nature Reserves. They joined our WESSA Interns with rehabilitation work in the Swartkops Nature Reserve to prevent erosion. They have also been involved with Shaan Keegan and her Sisterhood SA project to introduce reusable sanitary pads to schools and the community.

Our Environmental Educators have been very involved assisting with the planning for and building of the Motherwell Community Enviro HUB to upgrade the Motherwell Buy Back Centre. This is where our education facility will be in future. The Motherwell Buy Back Centre consisted of 4 partly burnt out containers surrounded by a half broken wall. It now has 4 "new" containers and 3 of the original ones which have been repaired with a high roof over them to make a sheltered area for activities to take place. The wall has been heightened and secured and sliding gates with sturdy locks fitted. There are 2 toilets and running water from tanks. It is an amazing achievement all thanks to Dr Belinda Clark (our speaker at last year's AGM) whose idea this was and who secured the project with overseas funding as well as local. We need to also thank the architect Johann Lochner for his exciting eco friendly design. These 2 professional people have used their skills without charging for the benefit of the community, the Noziqhamo Art & Craft & Recycling ladies and the ZC.

The ZC Motherwell Enviro Club has grown in numbers to over 130 primary and high school learners. Under the guidance of Patricia Ntabeni they have taken part in numerous clean-ups mainly in Motherwell. During the September 2021 International Coastal Clean-up on the sides of the Motherwell Stormwater Canal 50 Enviro Club members collected 148 bags!!

The Enviro Club also participated in beach clean-ups, some sponsored by SST who gave them practical lessons on the harm litter causes to the environment. The Club did a hike in the Swartkops Nature Reserve, made Eco-Bricks for the HUB and floating wetlands for the Department of Water Affairs. They visited SANCCOB thanks to sponsorship from BCLME.

The highlight of last year was the 4-day Environmental Training Camp at a school in Motherwell during the April holidays. Various organisations presented on different topics and a test was written after each session. Orion provided sandwiches and our teachers and parents made a hot meal at the end of each day. We are so proud of Patricia and team who organised this event. The 50 learners who attended begged for the camp to go on for longer!

During the year the ZC helped a number of varsity students as well as schools with projects and research.

Pollution and River Clean up

Litter

In the year under review (March 2021 to February 2022) our dedicated team of litter pickers has collected 7803 bags which is an average of 650 bags/month. Dale Clayton is the dedicated organiser, supervisor and transporter of the team and it is thanks to him that so much has been achieved

This is very similar to the previous year 2020 where 7842 bags were collected for a monthly average of 653 bags. Both these years were affected by Covid.

In 2019 a total of 9688 bags was collected for a monthly average of just over 800.

Since January 2017 until February 2022 a total of 56915 bags has been collected. Our 'best' ever month was March 2019 when 1368 bags were collected by 5 litter pickers working a 5-day week.

Since mid-2019 when Metro ceased direct payment of our litter team, financial constraints have necessitated that we operate with 4 litter pickers on a 4-day week.

For clarification, our main focus is to keep litter out of the entire 16 kilometres of estuary; mostly concentrating on cleaning up after our main polluter which is the Motherwell canal.

We also, on occasion, collect litter along the old Grahamstown Road from John Tallant robots right up to EnviroServ; the M19 up to and including Redhouse and Perseverance Industrial as well as Amsterdamhoek, Tippers Creek, Weinronk Way, Surf Life Saving Club and under Settlers Bridge.

On occasion, we assist with beach clean-ups; usually on a Saturday and in partnership with WESSA.

Alien Vegetation

The entire Swartkops Estuary and surrounding nature reserves have aliens growing in them.

The worst alien is the jointed cactus which spreads very easily by clinging onto animals and people via its spiky thorns and then being brushed off to grow somewhere else.

Good news is that after 5 years of dogged persistence we have cleared about 90% of them from the estuary banks right from Bar None, past Redhouse to the Markman canal.

We have also cleared the area behind the Swartkops Police Station, commonly referred to as the horse fields, up Tippers Creek Steps as well as stretches on the old Grahamstown Road facing the Fishwater Flats Waste Treatment Works and a big patch behind Swartkops Village near the bridge.

In 2021 we put in a huge effort. A dedicated team of enthusiastic volunteers worked twice a week in the mornings and collected a total of 496 bags of cactus. This works out at about 40 bags/month.

We pay tribute to our dedicated team under Dale Clayton ,especially Margreet Koch, Karin Keulemans, Mabelle Du Plessis and Louise Frier. They have been awesome!

Many thanks to Pete Senn and Rod Lochhead who skippered Curlew and transported us up and down the estuary and collected full bags of cactus. Thanks guys!

A special note of appreciation to EnviroServ who have once again disposed of the cactus. Without their assistance it would have been almost impossible to properly dispose of it. Thank you, Sue Alcock and Dawid Malan.

In 2022 it was noticeable that our bag count had dropped so we have reduced our effort to once a week on Thursdays.

We are now turning our attention to the next range of aliens: Agave is on our radar as it multiplies at a frightening rate; we are especially concerned about a huge outbreak behind the Scout Hall at the bottom of Tippers. It is threatening to engulf part of the Aloe Reserve.

Reserves

Our two reserves have been neglected because the three Metro Rangers were moved to Baakens Valley some years ago.

However, we have done what we can.

In the Aloe Nature Reserve, we have on occasion conducted trail widening exercises on all the designated trails. We kept any spekboom branches for planting elsewhere. Spekboom is a great carbon sequestrator and is at the forefront of the fight against global warming. We have also informed the Metro (Housing) that they should rather locate future housing projects in less environmentally sensitive areas. The Wells Estate housing project has probably consumed 60 % of valley thicket in this area. We also recommended that a massive tree planting project be implemented in Wells Estate especially spekboom and wild olive.

Snares and hunting dogs are a constant problem in the reserves; animal life is greatly reduced. We organise snare hunts, when possible, in both the Reserves. In this regard Andrew Clayton and Joel Marais have been at the forefront.

We are especially proud of the fact that the Zwartkops Conservancy and WESSA assisted Groendal Cape Nature Reserve in removing a potentially serious outbreak of prickly pear along the trail from Vyeboom to Fern kloof.

Infrastructure

Dale Clayton's patience and persistence in his negotiations with the Benguela Current Convention team from the Department of Environmental Affairs resulted in the welcome addition of a new boat to our fleet. Whimbrel is a slightly smaller version of Curlew II and is mainly used by Metro officials for removing gillnets from the river. They also assist in removing bags of litter and alien plant life from the banks of the estuary..

Peter Senn and Rod Lochhead put in many hours carting litter pickers, the alien vegetation team, and sundry visitors up and down the estuary, and in looking after Curlew II and its engine, for which we are profoundly grateful.

Many thanks to Oscar Mouton of GPI who has redone the buoyancy on Curlew II and preparatory work on the channel between the artificial wetland at the Motherwell Stormwater Canal and the abandoned salt pan.

Saltpan Rehabilitation

October 12, 2021 was a most exciting day!

A 300 m trench, a metre wide and half a metre deep, was dug from the Motherwell Canal reed bed to the south-east corner of the former salt pan opposite Redhouse, using earthmoving equipment provided by Oscar Mouton and Aldo Scribante at very low cost. Many thanks to these two gentlemen.

After only 13 hours of work, water which had been flowing over the concrete spillway directly into the river for many decades was diverted into the dry and dusty salt pan, running at a rate of nine megalitres per day.

It was amazing to see how quickly birds began to return to the pans.

As this report is being written, our construction team is demolishing the old pump house on the east bank and doing its best to remove infrastructure from the river.

The next phase of the project will probably be to run a pipeline from the top of the reed bed at the Motherwell Canal, along the foot of the escarpment for approximately 2.9 km, to join the existing under-river pipe, so that water will be transferred into the dry salt pans on the West Bank.

We are most grateful to the advice and guidance provided by our friends and supporters from Nelson Mandela University.

Prof Nadine Strydom is the expert on all matters pertaining to fish and is a member of EXCO. Prof Janine Adams and her team have spent much time analysing the new wetland and Johan Wasserman wrote a thesis on the subject.

Dr Paul Martin is vastly experienced on all matters ornithological and Dr Daniel Lemley guides us on the subject of exotic algal blooms, from which the estuary has suffered in recent years.

We are considering a number of future projects, including the diversion of the Markman canal through its own wetland in order to reduce pollution before its outflow meets the river.

The idea of gabions designed to promote the growth of reeds in the lower regions of the Chatty River before it joins the Swartkops is under discussion.

We also dream of driving culverts through the causeway of the M17 bridge so that when floods finally arrive some of the water will flow down Tippers Creek, thus reducing the damning effect caused by the single exit under the railway bridge, which results in silting in the islands area of the river.

A "Pans Project Team" exists which provides a wide range of experience most useful in our planning.

Many thanks to Ralph Hodgen, retired mining engineer and the fount of a never ending stream of good ideas, John Lochhead, retired civil engineer now sending us advice from his yacht in the Caribbean, Craig Milne and Alan Moore, whose Land Rovers have proved invaluable in our reconnaissance of the terrain between Redhouse and Perseverance, Pete Senn and Rod Lochhead, who cart us around to when we need waterborne transport, and Peter Reed, Project Manager, and Nkosi Ntombela, Contractor, who are carrying out the many and varied tasks required to restore the wetlands to their former glory.

Frank Collier 6th August 2022