

## GUEST EDITORIAL/GASSKRYWERSRUBRIEK

### THE ROLE OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

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The primary aim of the Wildlife Society of Southern Africa is to promote the conservation of the natural environment of Southern Africa so that in its modern definition, conservation is no longer simply the protection of our magnificent wildlife resources and the reprieve of our beautiful country from the onslaught of development. Rather it is the concern of man for his *Total Environment*, the wise use and maintenance of all our natural resources, in the full acceptance of the fact that we are dependent on nature and recognizing that there are finite limits to the earth's capacity to sustain mankind. Undoubtedly, the fundamental threat to the maintenance and enhancement of environmental quality in Southern Africa is the extraordinarily high rate of growth of its population coupled with an increasing desire for an improvement in the quality of life.

This has meant that the Society has broadened its objectives, accepting that conservation and economic development must work hand in hand. Holistic strategies have had to be developed and high on the Society's priorities is the development of responsible attitudes towards the environment and a national conservation ethic. Environmental conservation is everybody's business and our apolitical, non-racial structure allows us to speak for all sections of our first world-third world communities.

The Society's activities cover the whole spectrum of environmental conservation and almost every activity contributes towards creating environmental awareness and this in turn leads to conservation action.

During the past 60 years of its existence, the Society has played a key role in the creation of our National Parks system and nature reserves; the establishment of institutions such as the South African Association for Marine Biological Research, the Wildlife Management Association, the Eugene Marais Chair of Wildlife Management and the recent concept of Urban Nature Reserves (Metropolitan Open Spaces System - M.O.S.S.) and, from its earliest days, has involved itself in and supported all educational efforts.

The Society's journal, *African Wildlife*, has been a dominant force for conservation, creating awareness, educating and stimulating action as it documented the history and the conservation battles for over 40 years. We can say that 'we' have developed a broad-based, informed and influential membership of 24 000 served by more than 50 centres organized into seven branches administered by a national office. We also have a branch in the U.K., 494 Wildlife Clubs and associated societies in the Transkei and SWA/Namibia. We have representation on many national and regional conservation organizations, investigating commissions and international bodies, and have specialist committees to deal with Education, Environmental Law, Conservation, Publications, Administration and the management of our Trusts. This gives us an ideal infrastructure through which to support and promote environmental awareness programmes.

#### A POLICY AND STRATEGY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

In 1980 the Society commissioned its Conservation Committee, under the chairmanship of Mr. Brian Huntley of the National Programme for Environmental Sciences, to review its policies and goals. The

policy was published in the wake of the IUCN's *World Conservation Strategy* which called for individual nations to formulate national policies. The Society was the first non-governmental conservation organization to do so. It met with immediate acclaim as a constructive assessment of South African conservation challenges. Great emphasis was placed on the concept of environmental education because it was felt that only through a powerful, educationally based, strategy could we maintain the quality of our environment and resolve our environmental predicament. It recognized the key role of the teaching profession and the need to support and assist them in every way possible. This has received the total support of our membership and the public. Today the Society is becoming increasingly involved in providing facilities and opportunities for environmental awareness and educational activities throughout the country. Policy is set and appraised by an Educational Advisory Committee who work closely with the various education bodies. With so many educational institutions operating in South Africa, the question 'Should the Wildlife Society be involved in environmental awareness and education?' has often been asked. The answer is 'Yes, we have the ability to act promptly and the task is so great that we cannot afford to wait.' We must do everything in our power to support the formal education system and the individual teachers who serve the six million children at our schools.

#### WHAT DOES THE SOCIETY DO?

Presently the Society employs 16 education staff officers assisted by administration staff and many skilled volunteers. This is by far the largest Environmental Education organization in Southern Africa. There are 10 field study areas in use and the operational base for the National and Natal programmes is at the Society's Umgeni Reserve near Howick. Other centres are being developed in urban reserves including that at Treasure Beach near Durban. This will provide facilities for studying the marine and coastal environments and be within easy reach of almost one million school children.

The Wildlife Clubs scheme has some 494 clubs registered and has great potential. The African Conservation Education Programme (A.C.E.) continues to fill a unique role concentrating on teacher training, with participants coming from all over Southern Africa and through them we can at least do something to meet the needs of our underprivileged communities and especially those in rural areas. Over 80% of South Africa is in the hands of farmers and rural communities, both black and white. The provision of suitable back up material for educationists is another need to which we can contribute through our publications. These include the bilingual *African Wildlife*, English and Afrikaans issues of *Toktokkie* (our children's magazine), Wildlife Clubs newsletters, information brochures, posters and books on a variety of subjects. Other activities include wildlife hikes, public lectures, education and training courses, competitions and a close collaboration with the media, whose support is invaluable.

The Society also commissions reports and funds research, provides bursaries and grants and arranges

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