



Chair's Report
Garden Route Biosphere Reserve
Annual General Meeting
3rd December 2020

The COVID-19 global pandemic was the great 2020 disrupter, changing our world as we know it, turning our lives upside down, and disrupting our “normal”. It impacted on how we work, live, and engage with one another in fundamental ways. The pandemic has presented itself not only as a serious health issue, but also a wider societal one which has revealed deep social chasms across the world. In South Africa, it has brought our vulnerabilities into stark light, especially inequality and food insecurity, as our government attempts to balance the economic impacts with the ongoing health risks the pandemic poses.

Although the pandemic can be viewed as a significant disrupter to our social-ecological systems, it can also be seen as an opportunity. There are several scenarios, all dependent on how leaders, governments and society respond to the virus and its economic aftermath. I believe the pandemic provides us with a window of opportunity to reflect on our world and to refocus our attention on what we value. We can choose to use this crisis to reimagine our futures and create a more humane, equitable and better world.

So, in our rush to return to “normal”, I hope we consider what it is we wish to rush back to: Will we take the chance to change some of what we do, and how we do it?

Impact on the GRBR

During 2020, the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve (GRBR) and its activities were severely impacted by the pandemic.

Strategy Development Workshops

We were in the midst of a large-scale participatory strategy development process when the country went into a national lockdown. The reports from the two workshops we managed to conduct before March [can be found on our website](#). However, the numerous workshops scheduled during the months of May and June, as part of this process were cancelled, as the preferred in-person methods of engagement were inappropriate for these times. A fully inclusive participatory process still seems distant, given ongoing trends. ,

Changing GRBR Landscape

Furthermore, the regional social landscape is changing in light of the pandemic and what we were planning for then, is no longer the world we find now, or will find post-COVID. With this in mind, the GRBR chose to put our collaborative strategy development process on hold until such time we can fully engage and reassess what a post COVID-19 world may look like.

Opportunities for the GRBR

Despite the setbacks, we nonetheless choose to seize the window of opportunity to reflect, reprioritise, and refocus toward being responsive to the immediate needs of our stakeholders during these times. While staying true to our focus areas, we chose to prioritise fundraising for food security, water, sanitation and employment. We believe these focus areas respond to the immediate needs in the landscape and works toward making the GRBR more adaptive and resilient going forward. We spent time finding ways to support our stakeholders in COVID recovery strategies and working with others in leveraging and applying for funding.

Strategic Water Source Areas

One of the wins from these efforts has been working with the WWF to secure funding for landscape coordination in the Strategic Water Source Areas in the GRBR over the next two years. This funding will provide the GRBR with much needed capacity on the ground which we have sorely needed. The focus will be on securing the environmental integrity of these strategic areas to deliver ecosystem services to the important economies, and over 500 000 people living in the GRBR.

Stakeholder Engagement

Further enhancing our capacity on the ground, and thanks to additional funding from the Department of Environmental Affairs and Development Planning we are now also a position to employ a stakeholder engagement officer on a three-month contract to specifically engage with municipalities on behalf of the GRBR, to help them work with us in terms of spatial development planning and sustainable development projects. The position of Land-Use Engagement Officer was [recently advertised and can be found on the GRBR website](#).

Keurbooms River Catchment

The GRBR has now also joined the “Keurbooms Catchment Ecological Infrastructure Investment Work Group” which has been established to act as a platform for collaboration between ecological infrastructure role-players in the Keurbooms River catchment, including those that supply and those that use key ecosystem goods and services. The aim of the working group is to promote and facilitate enhanced investment in ecological infrastructure restoration and management.

Crèches Project & Youth Leadership

In an effort to help our younger communities to be more sustainable and resilient during these times, the GRBR is currently developing a proposal to support the collaboration between the Landmark Foundation and the George Municipality for a Crèches Project. The Landmark Foundation project focuses on encouraging new attitudes toward the environment and instilling sound values in society that will benefit the community. In its two-phased approach, food gardening and recycling are coupled to promote sustainability and resilient communities. The project is set to be introduced in all municipal creches in the Garden Route. Furthermore, together with the Sustainability Research Unit at the Nelson Mandela University, South African National Parks and the Knysna Municipality, the GRBR applied for funding from V.Kann Rassmussen Foundation for a youth leadership project. Unfortunately, this proposal was not successful but alternative funders are being sought.

Freshwater & Terrestrial Observation

One of the more significant proposals the GRBR has been working on this year was the nomination of the GRBR and Gouritz Cluster Biosphere Reserve (GCBR) domain as an EFTEON (Expanded Freshwater and Terrestrial Environmental Observation Network) instrumented landscape. This means that EFTEON aims to provide and operate a network of instrumented landscapes (i.e. areas equipped environmental monitoring capabilities) for the South African environmental research community, gathering socially relevant data on ecological and hydrological systems.

Garden Route Gateway Site Proposal

The GRBR together with the GCBR, Nelson Mandela University, SANParks, Living Lands and Land Care proposed the Garden Route Gateway site. If successful, it will hopefully result in a substantial investment in research instrumentation and infrastructure in the region and will generate social and ecological data to help us better understand the anthropogenic influence on our environment in the face of climate change. Excitingly, the data will be Open Source and available to all stakeholders in the country. Operations within the landscape will also strengthen our relationship and collaboration with our neighbours, the GCBR. The proposal has been submitted and we eagerly await news which should come soon.

Eastern Cape Engagement

Another progress area is our reach in the Eastern Cape. Until now, we have had limited reach in these eastern regions of the GRBR, but this is changing as Wentzel Coetzer drives more activity and involvement in the area. There has been engagement with the Kouga Local Municipality on numerous occasions throughout the past quarter to find ways to secure a number of municipal properties in the Cape St Francis area for conservation.

Stakeholder Communications

Although we would like to do much more, we have nevertheless made strides in communicating more frequently with you, our stakeholders. In 2020, we revised our website, posted materials relevant to our activities, and released interim newsletter updates.

Summary

Despite our world being turned upside down by the pandemic, and the deviations we have had to make from our collaborative strategy development process, we are hopeful that we can recommence the process sometime in soon this year, although the exact timing remains uncertain.

I am pleased with the progress and achievements we have made this past year and feel our effort will lead to a better 2021, where we will have more capacity and funding to play a role in the landscape.

Although we have strengthened our capacity for stakeholder engagement and coordination in the GRBR, we are still limited in our ability to be an implementing agent in the landscape, and rather see our strength in collaborating with our stakeholders on the ground. I believe our achievements in 2020 are testament to that. We would not have achieved what we did without the efforts of many and the willingness to work together.

I thank you all.

Dr Bianca Currie

3rd December, 2020