



Chief Executive Report November 2021

This is the first Chief Executive Report in the history of the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve which marks the establishment of an operational level in the reserve's governance and management structure and signifies a turning point in the development of the reserve. The appointment of a Chief Executive provides a necessary face and feet on the ground to effectively manage the day-to-day operations, programmes, and projects of the biosphere reserve. It is therefore with great honour that I provide our stakeholders with an update on the current GRBR programmes, projects, and activities of 2021.

Landscape management co-ordination Programme

Strategic Water Source Areas (SWSA) project

The Garden Route Biosphere Reserve has entered a water partnership with WWF enabling the establishment of the Outeniqua and Tsitsikamma Strategic Water Sources Areas (SWSA) project. Water resource management within the Outeniqua and Tsitsikamma SWSAs is complex and requires a landscape level approach involving the collaboration of a great diversity of stakeholders from multiple sectors (e.g., agriculture, farming, government sector, non-governmental organisations), and from multiple levels (e.g., local, district, provincial, national). With the support of the WWF the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve now has the capacity to manage and coordinate partnership activities at a landscape scale, to ensure better water security of the Outeniqua and Tsitsikamma SWSAs through the establishment of a SWSAs Network and Working group. The network is designed to facilitate social learning, and the working group designed to facilitate adaptive management of water resources in the region. We have had our first network engagement and will be having a second engagement in March. We are also on the verge of establishing the SWSAs Working group to turn learning from the network into action.

Garden Route Biosphere Reserve Land Use Guidelines

During 2021, Mr Bruce Taplin from Apex Conservation Services was contractually appointed to formulate a set of land use guidelines for resource use planning and decision-making within the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve and its zones. The document was designed to assist local government agencies to incorporate biosphere reserves in their development planning. The task also involved facilitating the uptake of the guidelines by local government departments, district, and local municipalities. Mr Taplin's work has laid a foundation for the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve's relationship with local government agencies as the implementers of spatial planning policy. We believe the guidelines will be of great value to government and demonstrates the synergies between the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve and the domain of municipalities.

Human Wellness Programme

Development of Wellness Trails

COVID has precipitated multiple compounding disruptions to community-based activities in the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve. Activities designed to engage and connect residents of the reserve have been heavily curtailed. COVID has led to heightened anxiety and stress, with resultant chronic mental health issues emerging. This highlights the importance of outdoor environments. The mosaic of built and natural environments in the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve provides a critical part of the living fabric that shapes community identity and defines how communities live. The Garden Route Biosphere Reserve sees these spaces as a critical conduit for wellbeing through scientific-backed innovation and community-based practice, specifically in the COVID-era. We are excited to report that we are in the process of finalising the terms of reference to bring Dr Matt Zylstra on board as the Human Wellness Programme Manager. In partnership with our neighbouring Gouritz Cluster Biosphere Reserve, a first project Dr Zylstra will be driving is the development of wellness trails transcending the Garden Route and Gouritz Cluster Biosphere Reserves in the new year.

Research Programme

Biosphere Reserve Governance Research Project

The Garden Route Biosphere Reserve is participating as a site in the Biosphere Reserve Governance Research Project managed under a Memorandum of Understanding between the Nelson Mandela University, Universities of Witwatersrand, Venda, and Saskatchewan. This research aims to collate learning from the MAB community on innovative governance and institutional configurations necessary to respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene. Little is known globally how biosphere reserves as sustainability organisations operate internally and how these structures translate into implementation success. The planned research is a critical stock taking exercise of place-based governance approaches through the lens of South African biosphere reserves. It provides an opportunity to understand how such local organisations operationalise strategies in support of their own and environmental sustainability. Dr Currie will be playing a supervisory role in two MSc studies under the auspices of the project.

Collaborations

The Garden Route Biosphere Reserve is establishing a partnership with SANParks. The biosphere reserve is currently working on an Anglers Support Project with SANParks and is in the process of identifying other areas for collaboration. The biosphere reserve is pursuing a Memorandum of Understanding with SANParks to consolidate our relationship going forward.

The biosphere reserve is also establishing a collaborative relationship with the neighbouring Gouritz Cluster Biosphere Reserve. Several areas for the two biosphere reserves to work together have been identified and collaboration in the development of a wellness trail transcending both biospheres mentioned earlier is the first project to be pursued. The projects will form the foundation for the development of a strong relationship with our neighbouring Gouritz Cluster Biosphere Reserve, so together we can have an impact in the landscape.

The Garden Route Biosphere Reserve is also participating in several local initiatives. We are a participating member of the Keurbooms Catchment Ecological Infrastructure Investment Work Group and the SANParks Parks Forum. We are also a participating organisation in the Restore Eden Project.

Marketing and communications

Gerrit Wisseldorf from Sky Productions was contracted to produce a short film showcasing the biosphere reserve. The production is called the "Tour of the Biosphere Reserve" and was made as part of the Man and the Biosphere 50th anniversary celebrations. The production format, however, offers many opportunities for using the video beyond the celebrations, with communities inside and outside the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve.

Green Enterprise Development

Several proposals related to the establishment of a virtual training, employment, and mentorship hub as well a project to develop youth leadership skills was submitted to the Department of Environment Forestry and Fisheries in 2021. Unfortunately, these appear to have been unsuccessful. Other sources of funding are being sought for youth development.

Concluding remarks

While the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt activities across the region, the work of the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve has been ongoing and encouraging in these difficult times. The Garden Route Biosphere Reserve has been able to develop much needed capacity on the ground and make significant progress in the project arena. We have furthermore attracted additional funding through already established relationships to undertake a review of knowledge related to the Strategic Water Source Areas and the development of a knowledge repository in the new year. The review will assist us in making knowledge accessible to our stakeholders in the region and to identify research gaps for the biosphere reserve to pursue. Other areas of work, such as that around the development of wellness trails are gaining traction and we believe they will make a significant contribution to the wellbeing of those living and working in the biosphere reserve. The land use guidelines and the relationships now developed with our local government agencies provides opportunities for the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve to have a greater impact in the region.

The Department of Environment Affairs and Development Planning is owed a great deal of recognition and thanks for their continued support and operational funding received for the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve. We are furthermore immensely grateful for our new partners in water catchment management and the support from WWF who we consider our knowledge partners in conservation. With the increase in capacity the WWF support has provided the biosphere, 2022 holds promise for an engaged and active organisation in the landscape.

Dr Bianca Currie

Chief Executive

Garden Route Biosphere Reserve