



Garden Route Biosphere Reserve Annual

General Meeting

2024

Chief Executive Report

This report is focused on the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve's operational activities, and as we gather for this annual general meeting, I am filled with pride and anticipation. Pride in our achievements made over the past year despite the limited financial resources in a difficult economic climate, and anticipation for the exciting opportunities that lie ahead.

This past year we have seen the successful completion of **the UNIDO forestry education sector project** which saw the development of a public-private partnership model which provides a framework for government, industry, civil society and academia to work together and enable higher education to contribute to an innovative and sustainable forestry sector. In developing this model the biosphere reserve attended a workshop hosted by HAMK University in Hämeenlinna in Finland, where we learned about the innovative Finnish model. Then in April this year the biosphere reserve facilitated a second workshop hosted by the Nelson Mandela University where a South African model was finalised together with government, industry, academia and civil society partners.

The Garden Route Biosphere Reserve is involved as a co-principal investigator and in a supervisory capacity in the **Governance Research Project** led by Dr Kaera Coetzer at the University of Pretoria. The project aims to help understand how individual biosphere reserves balance and support biodiversity conservation with socio-economic development and poverty alleviation, and asks how biosphere reserves can help direct the landscape trajectories of 'resource use' towards more sustainable outcomes?

Under the auspices of this project, we are thrilled to see our youth director, Mr Michael Klaver graduate Cum Laude with his masters research this December. His masters work titled "*Collaborative conservation governance in multifunctional landscapes: a contextual analysis of two South African biosphere reserves in the Boland*", aimed to assess the interpretation and implementation of the Man and the Biosphere programme at a local level in the two biosphere reserves and explored how biosphere reserves and landscape level collaborative initiatives can support Cape leopard conservation in the region. Michael has also managed to publish two academic papers from the work prior to the submission of the thesis for examination, and a third is in the pipeline which is a highly commendable achievement.

Our **SWSA project** has been partially funded this last year which has seen continued activities in the Western Cape's Outeniqua Strategic Water Source Area (SWSA) where the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve has been able to host and facilitate one broad SWSA social learning network engagement which took place in George during March of this year, and two high level task team meetings, all with funding from the Department of Environmental Affairs and Development Planning, our Western Cape Government.

Furthermore, with additional funding from WWF we have also been able to undertake a GIS mapping exercise bringing together alien clearing data from the various entities working on the problem in both the Outeniqua and Tsitsikamma SWSAs, helping to provide a holistic picture of the issue and what has and still needs to be undertaken. Up until now these various entities have been working in isolation of one another and this mapping allows us all to collectively motivate for a landscape scale approach to tackling the problem. We however have not been able to secure funding for task team meetings related to the Tsitsikamma Strategic Water Source Area this year however, engagement with WWF for their support in the coming year has been ongoing and looks promising.

The role out of the **Honeybush Tea Sector Development project** experienced delays in 2023 due to a budget amendment motivated by the South African Honeybush Tea Association (SAHTA). The budget amendment process caused significant delays to the project implementation however, the project got underway in earnest during November 2023. The first tranche payment from GIZ has been spent on strengthening the Honeybush Tea sector through promoting access for all Honeybush Tea supply chain actors to an inclusive, equitable and transparent Honeybush Tea industry this past year.

Due to the budget amendment delays the GIZ offered an extension for the project and this year the extension documentation was submitted to the funders. We await the outcomes and hopefully payment of the second tranche to continue with the project activities going forward. These includes 1) strengthening the sector representing organisation, namely SAHTA, to inclusively support members and manage activities, 2) create market demand and ongoing awareness of Honeybush Tea in domestic and international markets, 3) ensure sustainable supply through improvement of wild harvesting practices which support the Biodiversity Management Plan (BMP) rollout with the Department of Forestry, Fisheries & Environment to ensure participation of all communities and geographical areas involved, and lastly, 4) to support research and development in the sector.

The Garden Route Biosphere Reserve is part of the Transdisciplinary Education Collaboration for Transformations in Sustainability Network, called TRANSECTS for short. A lot of our time this year has been spent on the **TRANSECTS** network activities. For example, I spent two weeks in Canada assisting with the mentorship of post graduate learners attending the **Transdisciplinary International Learning Laboratory** hosted by the Victoria Island University in the Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region in Vancouver, and I am also excited to announce that the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve has been selected to host the first South African learning laboratory taking place in 2025. We have been establishing a management team, a programming committee and have been developing a robust programme and projects for the students to work on together with our landscape partners, who include CapeNature together

with the Whale Heritage Area NGO, SANParks and the Natures Valley Trust. We are eager to host up to 18 post graduate students from a diversity of disciplines in Natures Valley during May next year.

Unfortunately, this year, we have seen the termination of the **Karoo to Coast Wellness Way Walk project**. We had hoped to develop a pilgrimage route starting in Prince Albert and traversing both the Gouritz Cluster and Garden Route Biosphere Reserves. However, after exploring the concept and opening communications with CapeNature to take the route through the Kammanassie Nature Reserve, it became evident that the route development would not be financially viable with the considerable infrastructure investment needed in the Kammanassie, together with the safety concerns related to taking the route on public roads and providing medical support in the Kammanassie. We also received mixed support from communities for the initiative and took note of the numerous walks and trails already in the region. Together with the Gouritz Cluster Biosphere Reserve we decided to terminate the project at this stage. The Garden Route Biosphere Reserve is still eager to continue work in the human wellness domain and will be seeking opportunities to do so in the coming year.

Looking forward to 2025, we have entered into a new project in collaboration with the Victoria Island University and the Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Research Institute called the **BR NEST Project**. This project seeks to build on existing partnerships among biosphere reserves to enhance and mobilize communication, coordination, and knowledge sharing in transdisciplinary settings to support solutions and transformations relating to the Sustainable Development Goals and United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The project asks how biosphere reserves/regions can accelerate transdisciplinary approaches to contribute to practical actions at the intersection and braiding of the SDGs and United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at the local level? Currently the project has passed the first phase of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada funding process and is currently in the second phase. We are due to hear the outcomes in April of 2025.

In terms of forums and engagements the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve has been participating and supporting the **Cape Nature Landscape East Stewardship working group**, the **SANParks Forum** and we have presented on our projects at the **Garden Route Interface Network** meeting, and the **Garden Route Environmental Forum**, and we have also presented at the **Constantia Kloof Conservancy** meeting. Our chair will furthermore be officially opening the **Wilderness Ratepayers Associations** Eco Centre tomorrow which you are all invited to. Details can be found on our Instagram page if you are eager to attend. We are also thankful of the work Hennie Swanevelder and the Greater Kablejous Partnership have been doing in extending the protected areas network in the Eastern Cape and particularly the promulgation of the **Papiesfontein Nature Reserve**. In fact I make an appeal to those in the area to support the establishment of this important nature reserve which is a very important site for Black Harrier breeding. The Greater Kablejous Partnership is in need of your support.

We are extremely grateful to the **Department of Environmental Affairs and Development planning** for the operational budget provided in the absence of National government support. We are also very grateful to the **WWF** for their ongoing support of the SWSA project and the

funds received from the **University of Saskatchewan** to host the 2025 Transdisciplinary International Learning Laboratory. With our limited operational funding we are also thankful to the **Safari Sisters** who have donated photographic material for the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve to use in their various outputs, and we look forward to working together with them in the new year on a video series. It is the kindness of volunteers such as the Safari Sisters who help us to achieve what we do despite our limitations.

I wish you all a restful Christmas season and sincerely thank you for your time.

Dr Bianca Currie

Chief Executive