



GARDEN ROUTE BIOSPHERE RESERVE (GRBR) AGM, NOVEMBER 2024

Chairman's Statement

The context in which we work remains crucial. Last year I reflected on the rapidly changing nature of the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve (GRBR). I recently had the opportunity to travel widely in both the Eastern and Western Cape components of our Biosphere. The trip reinforced the sense of vibrancy, change and challenges of the region. Rapid urbanization, rural development and a range of environmental challenges were all too evident. Climate change is challenging agricultural practices, alien plant infestations still bedevil the landscape and conflict at the interface between urbanization and development and the environment are pressing issues to those community members I engaged on the trip.

Into this context, we find our Biosphere, one of many of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) sites around the world. The overarching intention of the biospheres is to promote sustainable development and the impact of development on people and biodiversity. That trip reinforced the growing human impact on our biosphere. It, therefore, remains crucial to reflect on our work in this context. And how well we are doing. Have we achieved important milestones in our work over the last year? Let me briefly reflect our project work in the light of this question.

We have some magic projects, working at a strategic level where we are building partnerships to achieve desired outcomes. A prime example of this work is reflected in our collaborative project on the Strategic Water Source Areas (SWASA), the Outeniqua and Tsitiskamma catchments in particular, in collaboration with WWF. In this work, we have developed a body of supporters, not least of those being the Western Cape Department of Environment and Development Planning (DEA&DP), and to them our thanks is extended, especially to members of the department such as Lynn Jacobs and her colleagues who have been both partners and financial contributors to our work. Growing understanding of the role of farmers, municipalities, conservation agencies and other partners is emerging as we strive for a shared vision of challenges and their solution at the landscape level.

If I reflect on the research footprint we have in the biosphere, I am happy to say that that is growing in an effective way. Not simply for the sake of research, but to tie research to application of our thinking on the ground and in our project work. One of the highlights for me has been the collaborative program and partnership we have been developing with the Canadians through the TILL/TRANSECT project. And the University of Saskatchewan in particular. I am really delighted to look at the way Dr. Currie has visualized and contributed to this joint venture. Next year, in May, we will have an extended program of research and support for young conservationists to develop their skills base right here in the Garden Route. It will bring students from various parts of our country, Biospheres and from Canada and Germany, to name a few who will partake of this learning program. And it is outcomes that will be felt as we develop the capacity of young people to actively work in the biosphere context, as well as to look at strengthening our project work on the ground.

As I reflect on the work, again, over the last year, it strikes me how much we have been able to achieve with the limited staff compliment we have. The work has been, as I have said earlier,

at a strategic level, and our partnerships have reflected that strategy. Going forward, we need to change gears to strengthen our work with organizations and communities that are working on the ground. With one of our board members, Hennie Swanevelder, we have already engaged in support for the Papiessfontein conservation area near Jeffrey's Bay, which has been under threat from land invasion. It looks like he has been able to engage with government and other organizations to start turning around the view about the critical importance of nature in our landscapes, and we will continue to support that work as we look for a Nature Reserve status for the entity.

Likewise, our civil society engagement is growing and work with Natures Valley Trust (NVT) will bear fruit as we host the TILL program in training young conservationists. The NVT is going to be an important partnership. Its leader, Dr Hendrik Coetzee is a visionary at facilitating critical work on the ground and with communities. The aim is to strengthen the conservation ethic and landscape management in communities and that will be to our benefit going forward. We have likewise worked with the Wilderness Ratepayers and Residents Association and deepened our commitment to community development and well-being in other communities. I see this as an exciting but challenging new layer of work that we want to engage in 2025 and beyond as we further commit to work on the ground.

It remains for me to thank many organizations' and people in the Garden Route and further afield for their support. I will not mention them all by name, but Dr Steve du Toit, Executive Chair of the Gouritz Cluster Biosphere Reserve (GCBR) has been particularly willing to share his advice, enthusiasm and wisdom in perpetuating and strengthening the work of the biosphere. Dr. Currie will elaborate on these partnerships in her report. It does strike me that one's growth and development is tied to the strength and kinds of collaborations and partnerships that one develops. I am really pleased with the way we are collaborating with local communities to achieve shared outcomes such as those that continue to challenge us – those around the question of our cultural heritages is one that particularly appeals to me. They speak to managing and sustaining these wonderful landscapes that are part of the biosphere.

In relation to the actual biosphere staff, I would like to extend my thanks to Dr Bianca Currie and Analisa Sitatu for the running of the secretariat and the management of the various projects that we have undertaken this year. You have been superstars. To the board of the GRBR, I have welcomed and benefited from your advice and wisdom over the year. Thank you for your role in the governance of the GRBR.

Professor Robert Fincham, Chair, GRBR. November 2024