



# Stakeholder Engagement Report

***We are listening***

**September 2026**

Dr Bianca Currie  
Chief Executive

## Table of Contents

|                                                                    |           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| September 2026 .....                                               | 3         |
| <b>Executive Summary.....</b>                                      | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>                                        | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>2. Stakeholder Engagement Process .....</b>                     | <b>9</b>  |
| 2.1. Objectives of the stakeholder engagement process .....        | 10        |
| <b>3. METHODS .....</b>                                            | <b>10</b> |
| 3.1. Stakeholder Survey .....                                      | 10        |
| 3.2. Instagram Campaign .....                                      | 11        |
| 3.3. Community Conversations .....                                 | 11        |
| <b>4. KEY FINDINGS.....</b>                                        | <b>12</b> |
| 4.1. Respondent Profile.....                                       | 12        |
| 4.1.1. Municipal Representation.....                               | 13        |
| 4.1.2. Sector Representation.....                                  | 13        |
| 4.2. What Stakeholders Value Most About the GRBR.....              | 15        |
| 4.3. Environmental Priorities .....                                | 18        |
| 4.4. Recommended Conservation Actions .....                        | 21        |
| 4.5. Social and economic priorities .....                          | 25        |
| 4.6. Recommended Actions to Promote Sustainable Development.....   | 29        |
| 4.7. Opportunities for Sustainable Development.....                | 33        |
| 4.8. Actions to Promote Learning, Research and Collaboration ..... | 37        |
| 4.9. Research Priorities and Knowledge Gaps .....                  | 41        |
| 4.10. Information Needs and Preferred Knowledge Resources .....    | 44        |
| 4.11. Additional Stakeholder Groups for Future Engagement .....    | 48        |
| 4.12. Preferred Ways of Engaging with the GRBR.....                | 50        |
| 4.13. Preferred Communication Channels .....                       | 52        |
| 4.14. Involving Young People in the GRBR.....                      | 54        |
| 4.15. Desired Role of the GRBR.....                                | 56        |
| <b>5. INSTAGRAM ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS .....</b>                      | <b>59</b> |
| <b>6. COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS.....</b>                             | <b>60</b> |
| <b>7. CONCLUSION .....</b>                                         | <b>62</b> |
| <b>8. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT PLAN .....</b>     | <b>63</b> |

## Table of Figures

|                                                                                                                                            |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Figure 1. Graphic representation of the various strands of information informing the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve 10-year strategy. .... | 8  |
| Figure 2. Graphic representation of the GRBR survey respondents .....                                                                      | 15 |
| Figure 3. What stakeholders value the most about the Garden Route .....                                                                    | 18 |
| Figure 4. Stakeholder ranking of priority conservation issues in the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve. ....                                  | 20 |
| Figure 5. Recommended conservation actions the GRBR should take to address the conservation challenges.....                                | 25 |
| Figure 6. Graphic representation of the social and economic priorities in the Garden Route identified by stakeholders. ....                | 29 |
| Figure 7. Opportunities for sustainable development identified by stakeholders .....                                                       | 32 |
| Figure 8. Sustainable development opportunities identified by stakeholders. ....                                                           | 37 |
| Figure 9. Education actions stakeholders would like to see in the GRBR Strategic Management Plan. ....                                     | 41 |
| Figure 10. Research gaps identified by the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve stakeholders.....                                                | 44 |
| Figure 11. Information and learning needs identified by the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve stakeholders. ....                              | 48 |
| Figure 12. The ranking of specific stakeholders the people in the GRBR believe the GRBR should be engaging with. ....                      | 50 |
| Figure 13. The various ways in which the GRBR stakeholders wish to engage with the GRBR. ....                                              | 52 |
| Figure 14. The preferred channels of communication by the GRBR stakeholders.....                                                           | 54 |
| Figure 15. The ways in which the GRBR can foster youth involvement in the GRBR. ....                                                       | 56 |
| Figure 16. The ranking of various roles the GRBR stakeholders feel the GRBR should be performing.....                                      | 58 |



## Executive Summary

As part of the development of its new 10-year Strategic Management Plan, the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve (GRBR) undertook a comprehensive stakeholder engagement process to ensure that the Plan is informed by the knowledge, priorities, concerns and aspirations of people and organisations across the Biosphere Reserve. This report presents the findings of three complementary mechanisms: an online stakeholder survey sent to 296 stakeholder contacts (opened 24 July 2026, with responses analysed to 21 August 2026), an Instagram campaign, and two online Community Conversations held on 25 and 28 August 2026. Together, these provided quantitative and qualitative perspectives on the environmental, social and economic priorities facing the region, as well as stakeholder expectations of the future role of the GRBR.

While the survey was not intended to be statistically representative of the entire GRBR stakeholder population, it captured perspectives from a broad range of geographic areas and sectors, particularly civil society organisations, local residents, environmental practitioners, government and farmers and landowners. Participation was, however, weighted towards George and Bitou, while tourism, private business, community leadership structures and young people were comparatively under-represented.

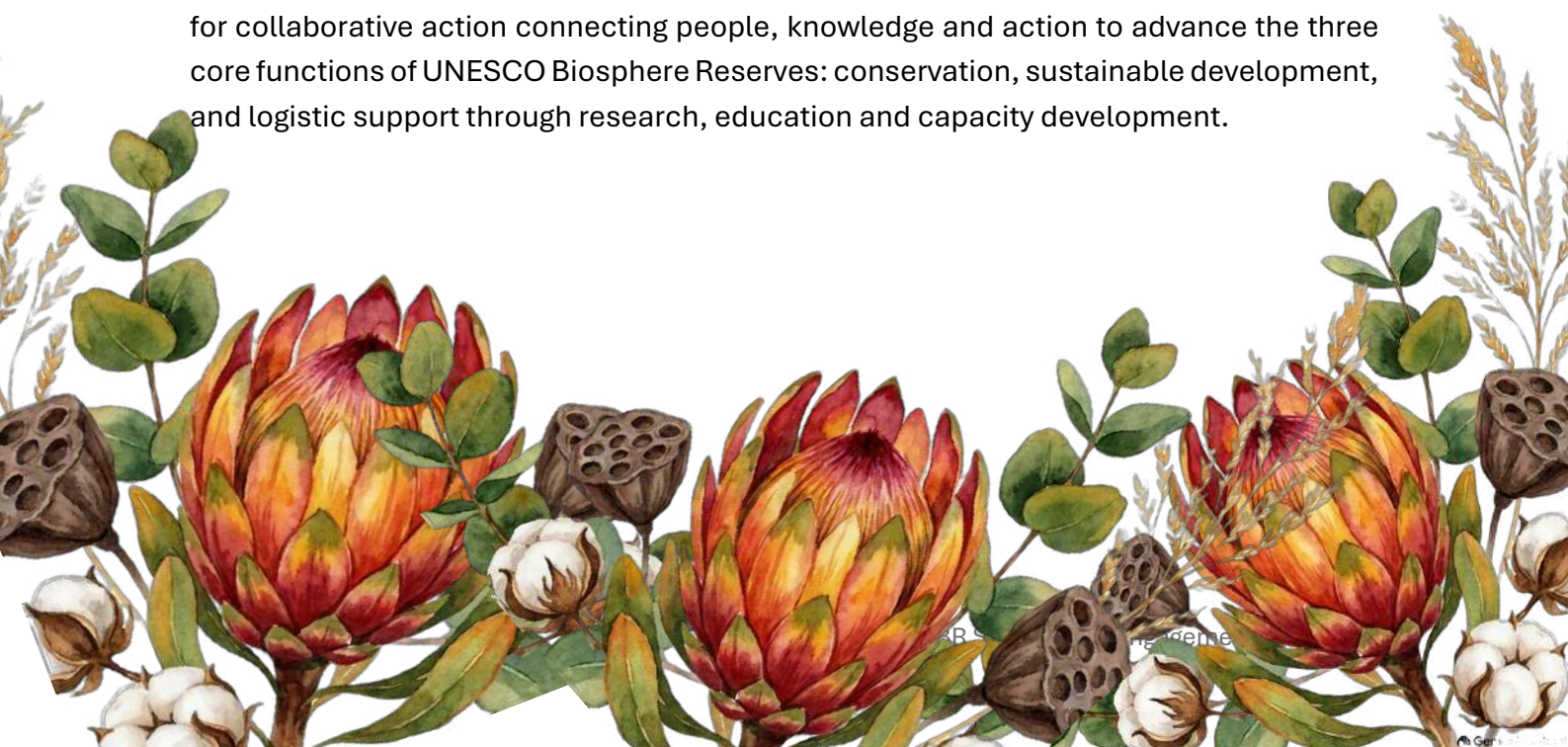
The stakeholder engagement process demonstrated a notable degree of consistency across the different engagement mechanisms. The key findings include:

- **Values:** Stakeholders value the Garden Route chiefly for its natural beauty and biodiversity, and for the peaceful, outdoor lifestyle these support. Many are concerned that development pressure, invasive alien plants and weak compliance are eroding these qualities.
- **Environmental priorities:** Biodiversity conservation, invasive alien plant management and water security, river and wetland health, and coastal and marine conservation were the highest priorities. Climate change, wildfires and habitat fragmentation formed a second tier. Respondents also raised concerns about municipal planning and development unprompted.
- **Conservation actions:** The most frequent recommendations were expanded alien clearing and ecosystem restoration (especially in the Outeniqua Strategic Water Source Area), stronger collaboration, education, community participation, ecological corridors and biodiversity stewardship, and better integration of biodiversity into municipal IDPs and SDFs.
- **Social and economic priorities:** Poverty, unemployment and inequality were the most frequently raised issues, followed by rapid population growth and urban expansion. Stakeholders do not see conservation and development as competing. They see restoration, the green and circular economy, nature-based tourism and youth skills as opportunities to deliver both.

- **Learning, research and information:** Education and awareness were seen as fundamental. Priority research gaps were climate change and disaster risk, sustainable agriculture, biodiversity monitoring and water security. Respondents stressed that the greater gap is translating knowledge into action. The most requested information was simply what the Biosphere Reserve is and does, as many residents and landowners are unaware they live within one.
- **Engagement:** Only 1% of respondents did not wish to be involved. Stakeholders want to receive updates (19%), participate through their organisations (18%), attend workshops (16%), share expertise (16%) and join projects (15%). Social media was the preferred communication channel, but a multi-channel approach is needed. For youth, respondents favoured experiential learning, partnerships with schools and youth organisations, and leadership platforms such as a youth forum.
- **Role of the GRBR:** Convening and facilitating collaboration ranked first, followed by environmental advocacy. Project implementation, knowledge and research coordination, and capacity building followed, with fundraising ranked last. Stakeholders see the GRBR as a trusted convener and knowledge broker rather than an implementing agency.

Collectively, the findings provide a foundation for the new Strategic Management Plan. They indicate that the Plan should prioritise biodiversity conservation and ecosystem restoration; strengthen water security through catchment management and alien clearing; integrate biodiversity more effectively into spatial planning and development; expand environmental education and public awareness, strengthen research, knowledge exchange and evidence-based decision-making; increase meaningful youth and community participation; promote sustainable livelihoods and nature-based economic opportunities; and strengthen partnerships across government, academia, civil society, business, landowners and communities.

Above all, the findings position the GRBR as a regional convener, facilitator and catalyst for collaborative action connecting people, knowledge and action to advance the three core functions of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves: conservation, sustainable development, and logistic support through research, education and capacity development.



# 1. INTRODUCTION

As part of the development of its new 10-year strategy (2026-2036), the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve (GRBR) has undertaken a comprehensive planning process to ensure that the strategy is evidence-based, aligned with international and national policy, and informed by the needs and aspirations of stakeholders across the biosphere reserve.

The development of the strategy is informed by several complementary sources of data and information. These include a desktop study reviewing relevant international, national, provincial and local government policies, strategies and planning documents, including UNESCO Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme strategies and guidelines, Spatial Development Frameworks, national park and nature reserve Management Plans, and other relevant policy and strategic documents. In addition, a situational analysis has been undertaken, together with our own research and introspection over the years to understand how the social, economic and environmental landscape of the GRBR has changed over the past ten years, providing important context for identifying future priorities and strategic interventions. See Figure 1 for a graphic representation of the various strands informing the Garden Route Biosphere Reserves 10-year strategy.

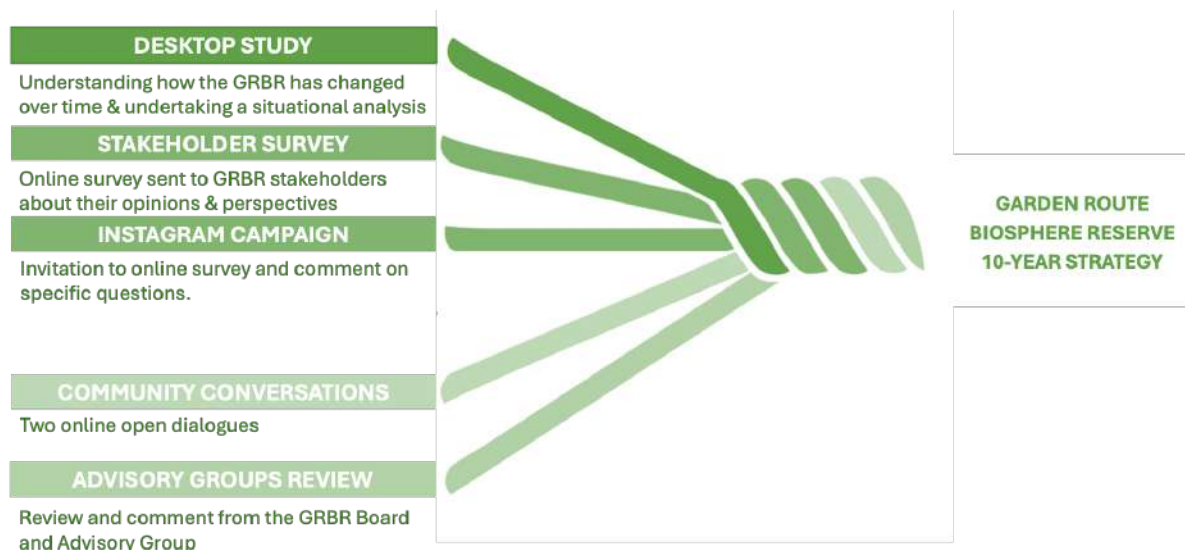


Figure 1. Strands of information and data informing the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve 10-year strategy.

As a UNESCO-designated Biosphere Reserve, the GRBR is required to develop its Strategic Management Plan through an inclusive and participatory process that reflects the perspectives and priorities of the people who live, work and invest within the biosphere reserve. Meaningful stakeholder engagement is a fundamental principle of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme, recognising that effective biosphere reserve management depends on collaborative governance, shared ownership and active participation from stakeholders across all sectors of society.

To meet this requirement, the GRBR implemented a multi-faceted stakeholder engagement process comprising three complementary engagement mechanisms, an

online **stakeholder survey**, a public **Instagram campaign** fed through to the GRBR website and Facebook page, and two online **Community Conversations** that provided an open forum for dialogue, enabling stakeholders to discuss issues, share perspectives and contribute ideas for the future direction of the biosphere reserve.

Together with a situational analysis and our own reflections over the past few years, the information gathered through these engagement processes will inform the priorities, objectives and actions contained within the new Strategic Management Plan. This report documents the outcomes of the stakeholder engagement process and presents the findings from the stakeholder survey, Instagram campaign and Community Conversations. Together, these engagement activities provide valuable insight into the priorities, aspirations, concerns and expectations of the diverse individuals, organisations and communities connected to the GRBR.

Across all three engagement processes, there was a degree of consistency in stakeholder perspectives. Respondents expressed strong support for biodiversity conservation, water security, ecosystem restoration, environmental education, collaborative partnerships and stronger community engagement. Stakeholders also identified an important coordinating role for the GRBR, recognising the organisation as a trusted facilitator, knowledge hub and catalyst for collaborative action across the region.

These findings, together with our own research and introspection, provides a mandate for the new Strategic Management Plan to prioritise resilient landscapes, thriving communities and collaborative governance over the next ten years, while strengthening the GRBR's role as a platform for integrating conservation, sustainable development and learning across the region.

## **2. Stakeholder Engagement Process**

The aim of the stakeholder engagement process was to meaningfully engage the diverse individuals, communities, organisations and institutions connected to the GRBR in order to understand their values, priorities, perspectives and aspirations for the future of the Biosphere Reserve. The process sought to ensure that the new ten year Strategic Management Plan is informed by stakeholder knowledge and experience, reflects the environmental, social and economic challenges and opportunities facing the region, and identifies strategic priorities and actions that are responsive to stakeholder needs. In doing so, the engagement process supports the principles of participatory governance promoted by UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme, strengthens collaborative partnerships, and fosters shared ownership of the future direction and implementation of the GRBR Strategic Management Plan.

## 2.1. Objectives of the stakeholder engagement process

The stakeholder engagement process was designed to:

- Understand what stakeholders value most about the GRBR and its landscapes.
- Identify the environmental, social and economic issues that stakeholders believe should be prioritised over the next ten years.
- Determine where stakeholders believe the GRBR should focus its resources and efforts.
- Identify the actions that stakeholders would like the GRBR to undertake in addressing these challenges.
- Understand stakeholder information, communication and engagement preferences.
- Identify opportunities for strengthening partnerships, collaboration and collective action.
- Explore future research, education and capacity development priorities of our stakeholders.
- Gather ideas and recommendations that can directly inform the strategic priorities, objectives and implementation actions contained within the new Strategic Management Plan.

## 3. METHODS

The stakeholder engagement process commenced with a desktop stakeholder analysis and a comprehensive review of the GRBR stakeholder database. This process involved identifying key stakeholder groups and updating the organisation's mailing list to ensure that the contact information of individuals, organisations and institutions that influence, or are influenced by, the biosphere reserve was current and accurate. Once the stakeholder database had been updated, the GRBR implemented a multi-method stakeholder engagement process consisting of an online stakeholder survey, an Instagram engagement campaign and two online listening events known as *Community Conversations*. Together, these complementary engagement mechanisms provided an important component of the evidence base informing the development of the GRBR's new ten year Strategic Management Plan.

### 3.1. Stakeholder Survey

An online stakeholder survey was developed using Microsoft Forms and distributed electronically to the updated GRBR stakeholder mailing list, which comprised 296 valid stakeholder contacts. The survey opened on 24<sup>th</sup> of July 2026, and although it still remains open, allowing stakeholders ample opportunity to participate, the analysis of the data included in this report includes the responses submitted up to and including the 21<sup>st</sup> of August 2026.

The survey incorporated a combination of ranking questions, multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions, enabling both quantitative and qualitative data to be collected. Survey questions explored stakeholder values associated with the GRBR, priority environmental, social and economic issues, conservation actions, social and economic interventions, education and training needs, communication preferences,

preferred methods of stakeholder engagement, research priorities, youth involvement, and the desired future role of the GRBR.

Responses to the closed-ended questions were analysed using descriptive statistics. Open-ended responses were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, whereby responses were coded into recurring themes that were subsequently quantified using frequency counts to identify the issues raised most frequently by participants.

### **3.2. Instagram Campaign**

Recognising that traditional stakeholder surveys are often more successful at engaging existing stakeholders than the broader public, the GRBR complemented the survey with an Instagram engagement campaign. This approach was intended to broaden participation, particularly among younger audiences who are generally more likely to engage through social media platforms. At the time of the campaign, the GRBR Instagram profile had approximately 454 followers.

A series of interactive posts invited followers to share their views on a range of topics, including what they value most about the Garden Route, the region's key environmental priorities, future opportunities for the Biosphere Reserve, the changes they would like to see within the GRBR, and the role they believe the GRBR should play in the future. Responses and accompanying comments were analysed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques to identify recurring themes and to complement the findings emerging from the stakeholder survey.

### **3.3. Community Conversations**

To provide stakeholders with an opportunity for more in-depth discussion, the GRBR hosted two online listening events entitled *Community Conversations*. These one-hour sessions were conducted on the Microsoft Teams platform, with invitations distributed through both the GRBR stakeholder mailing list and the organisation's Instagram platform, website and Facebook page. Two sessions were offered to maximise participation, with the first held on Tuesday, 25 August 2026 at 10:00 and the second on Friday, 28 August 2026 at 15:00.

Each session commenced with a welcome and introduction followed by a brief presentation introducing the GRBR, its spatial extent, the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme policy framework and a summary of the preliminary findings from the stakeholder survey.

There was no predefined agenda for the Community Conversations, aside from the brief introductory presentations, the majority of each session was dedicated to facilitated open dialogue. Participants were invited to discuss many of the same topics explored in the stakeholder survey, while also being encouraged to raise additional issues, concerns and ideas that they considered important to the future management of the Biosphere

Reserve. These qualitative findings complemented the survey and Instagram data, providing further insight into stakeholder priorities, concerns and aspirations.

## 4. KEY FINDINGS

The stakeholder engagement process generated a body of quantitative and qualitative data that provided valuable insight into how stakeholders perceive the GRBR, the challenges they believe require greatest attention, and the role they expect the GRBR to play over the next ten years. The primary findings presented in this section of the report include the results of the stakeholder survey, followed by the Instagram engagement received and a summary of the Community Conversations.

While each engagement approach reached slightly different audiences and elicited different forms of feedback, collectively, the findings provide one of the evidence base for identifying the GRBR stakeholders' strategic priorities, objectives and actions.

### 4.1. Respondent Profile

To encourage open and honest participation, the stakeholder survey did not collect any personally identifying information. This ensured respondent anonymity and confidentiality, allowing participants to express their views freely without concern that their responses could be attributed to them individually.

Although personal information was not collected, respondents were asked to identify the stakeholder sectors they represented. A multiple-choice list of stakeholder categories was provided, together with an "*Other*" option for respondents whose primary affiliation was not represented in the predefined list. Recognising that many stakeholders fulfil multiple roles within society, respondents were able to select all categories that applied to them. For example, an individual could identify simultaneously as a resident, landowner, researcher and environmental practitioner. Consequently, the percentages reported for stakeholder sectors are not mutually exclusive and collectively exceed 100%.

Similarly, respondents in the survey only were asked to indicate the municipalities in which they live and/or work. Because many stakeholders operate across municipal boundaries, participants were again invited to select all municipalities that applied. Furthermore, an "*Other*" category was included to accommodate organisations and institutions whose offices are located outside the GRBR but whose mandates, programmes or activities, while provincial or national, are directly relevant to the region. This included, for example, provincial government departments based in Cape Town, such as the Western Cape Department of Environmental Affairs and Development Planning, national organisations such as WWF South Africa, and national government departments including the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment headquartered in Pretoria. This approach provided a more accurate representation of the

geographic footprint of stakeholders who contribute to the management and stewardship of the GRBR. Note the respondents in the Instagram campaign and the Community Conversations were not asked to indicate the municipal areas in which they live and or work or which sector they may represent and are therefore not included in this data finding.

The stakeholder survey achieved representation across both the geographic extent of the GRBR and the diverse sectors that make up its stakeholder community. While the results are not intended to be statistically representative of the entire stakeholder population, they demonstrate that the engagement process successfully captured perspectives from a cross-section of municipalities and stakeholder groups represented in the biosphere reserve.

#### 4.1.1. Municipal Representation

Survey respondents were drawn from across the municipalities that fall within the GRBR, although participation was not evenly distributed. Nearly half of all respondents (48%) were based within the **George Municipality**, making it the most strongly represented municipal area in the survey. This is unsurprising given that George serves as the administrative and economic hub of the region and is home to a large concentration of organisations, government departments, businesses and environmental practitioners who engage with the GRBR. The **Bitou Municipality** accounted for the second largest proportion of respondents (32%). Respondents from **Knysna Municipality** represented 16% of participants, while **Kouga Municipality** contributed 6.4% and **Koukamma Municipality** 3.2%. A further 19% chose the “*Other*” category, indicating regional and national representation.

#### 4.1.2. Sector Representation

The survey achieved representation from a diverse range of stakeholder sectors, reflecting the multi-sector nature of Biosphere Reserve governance. The largest group of respondents comprised representatives of **non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations** (42%), highlighting the important role that civil society plays within the Biosphere Reserve. These organisations are key implementation partners in conservation, environmental education, community development and sustainable livelihood initiatives, making their perspectives particularly valuable for informing the Strategic Management Plan.

The second largest stakeholder group consisted of **local residents** (39%), demonstrating community interest in the future of the GRBR. This level of participation suggests that local residents recognise the Biosphere Reserve as an important platform for addressing issues affecting the region.

**Environmental practitioners** represented 23% of respondents, providing important technical and practical perspectives from individuals working directly in conservation, environmental management and natural resource management.

Both the **government sector** and **farmers and landowners** each accounted for 16% of participants. Their representation is particularly significant given their central role in land-use planning, biodiversity conservation, water resource management and sustainable landscape management. Engagement with these sectors is essential for implementing many of the actions that are likely to emerge from the Strategic Management Plan. Respondents from **academia and research institutions** comprised 13% of the sample, contributing scientific expertise and reinforcing the Biosphere Reserve's role as a platform for research, knowledge generation and evidence-based decision-making.

Participation from the **tourism sector** and **students and youth** was comparatively lower, with each representing 6% of respondents. While tourism is a strategically important sector within the Garden Route economy, its lower representation suggests that future engagement efforts may benefit from targeted outreach to tourism businesses and destination management organisations. Similarly, the relatively limited participation by students and young people highlights an opportunity to strengthen youth engagement through schools, tertiary institutions, youth organisations and digital engagement platforms. The smallest stakeholder groups included **business owners** (3%) and **community leaders** (3%). Although their representation was modest, these stakeholders contribute perspectives regarding local economic development, community priorities and place-based leadership.

**KEY MESSAGE:** The stakeholder profile demonstrates that the engagement process captured input from a broad spectrum of sectors and geographic areas, although participation was weighted towards the western and central parts of the landscape, particularly George and Bitou. The representation from civil society organisations, residents, environmental practitioners, government and landowners provides a solid foundation for understanding stakeholder priorities across the Biosphere Reserve.

At the same time, the results identify opportunities for future stakeholder engagement processes to strengthen participation from under-represented groups, particularly the tourism sector, private businesses, community leadership structures and young people. Improving representation from these sectors will further enhance the inclusivity of future planning processes and ensure that the Strategic Management Plan continues to reflect the full diversity of perspectives across the GRBR.

Please see Figure 2 for a graphic representation of the survey respondent demographic.

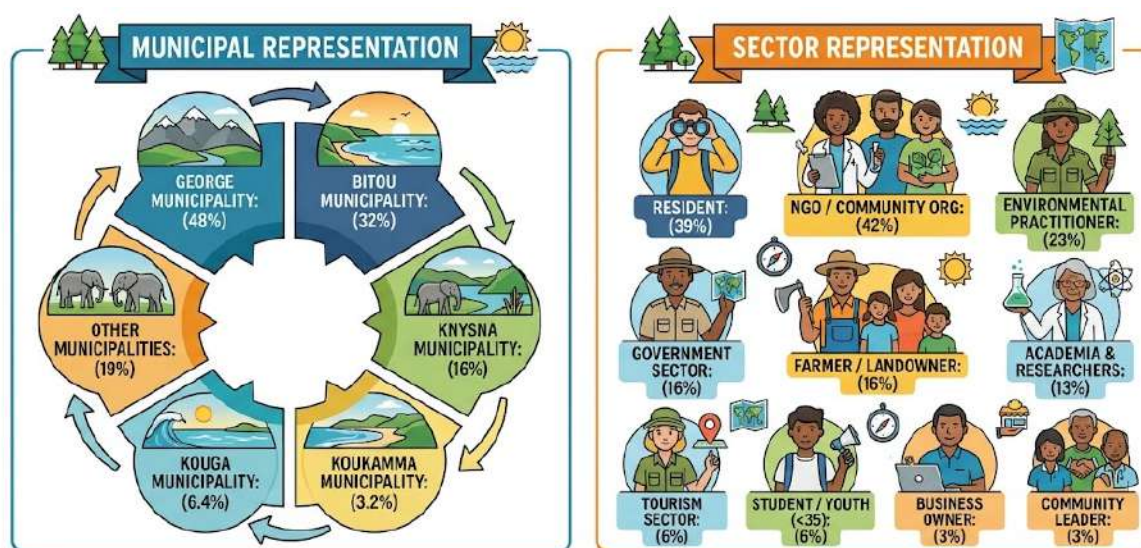


Figure 2. GRBR survey respondents

#### 4.2. What Stakeholders Value Most About the GRBR

One of the opening questions in the stakeholder survey invited respondents to describe, in their own words, what they value most about the GRBR. Rather than providing predefined response options, participants were encouraged to express the qualities they considered most important. A thematic analysis of the responses revealed several recurring themes, with an emphasis on the region's exceptional natural environment and the quality of life that it provides.

The dominant theme emerging from the responses was the **beauty and diversity of the natural environment**. Respondents described the Garden Route as a landscape of exceptional scenic beauty, characterised by its mountains, forests, rivers, wetlands, lakes, beaches and coastline. Respondents emphasised the diversity of ecosystems and habitat types found within the Biosphere Reserve, ranging from indigenous forests and fynbos to coastal ecosystems and the transition towards the Karoo. This diversity was regarded not only as aesthetically valuable but also as one of the defining characteristics that makes the Garden Route nationally and internationally significant.

*"Natural beauty of the mountains, forests, lakes and ocean. Many facilities to enjoy nature, especially the birdlife"*

Associated with the appreciation for the landscape was a recognition of the region's **rich biodiversity**. Respondents valued the abundance of indigenous vegetation, the diversity of plant and animal life, and the presence of iconic wildlife species such as leopards, whales and sharks. Interestingly, a participant noted that even the knowledge that these species continue to exist within the landscape contributes to their appreciation of the region, regardless of whether they encounter them personally, demonstrating that biodiversity is valued not only for its ecological importance but also for its cultural, emotional and symbolic significance.

*"The scenic beauty. The chance to see iconic species such as leopard, whales, sharks. Even if I never see them, just knowing that they are there is special. Also the diverse vegetation."*

Respondents highlighted the **opportunity to live in close proximity to nature**. The accessibility of natural areas, including beaches, forests, mountain trails and protected areas, was cited as one of the Garden Route's greatest strengths. Participants expressed appreciation for being able to interact with nature on a daily basis and for having opportunities for outdoor recreation, including hiking, birdwatching, fishing, sightseeing and other nature-based activities. The combination of accessible natural spaces and recreational opportunities was viewed as making an important contribution to residents' physical wellbeing, mental health and overall quality of life.

A recurring theme throughout the responses was the value placed on the **peacefulness, safety and lifestyle** offered by the Garden Route. Respondents described the region as peaceful, relatively uncrowded and a desirable place in which to live, work and raise a family. Participants contrasted the Garden Route with larger urban centres, appreciating the absence of heavy traffic, the ease of accessing natural areas, and the opportunity to experience a slower pace of life while remaining connected to essential services. These responses suggest that stakeholders perceive environmental quality and human wellbeing as closely interconnected.

Although environmental values dominated the responses, participants also recognised the importance of **collaboration and good governance** within the Biosphere Reserve. One respondent specifically noted that collaboration between businesses, government agencies, non-governmental organisations and other institutions contributes to more inclusive decision-making, indicating an appreciation that the long-term sustainability of

the region depends not only on its natural assets but also on effective partnerships and collaborative governance.

*“Scenic area, with urban development, but collaboration between various entities (Business, NGO, Government, Parastatal entities) allow for more inclusive decision making”*

Notwithstanding the positive sentiments, several respondents expressed concern that the qualities they value are increasingly under pressure. Rapid urban development, the spread of invasive alien vegetation and inadequate compliance with environmental legislation were identified as emerging threats to the landscapes and biodiversity that respondents cherish. These comments highlight an expectation that greater emphasis should be placed on protecting the ecological integrity of the Garden Route while managing development in a sustainable manner.

**KEY MESSAGE:** The responses reveal that stakeholders value the GRBR primarily because of its outstanding natural environment, exceptional biodiversity and the lifestyle opportunities that these landscapes provide. The close relationship respondents drew between healthy ecosystems, recreational opportunities, community wellbeing and quality of life reinforces the fundamental principle underpinning UNESCO Biosphere Reserves: that the conservation of nature and sustainable human development are mutually dependent rather than competing objectives. These findings establish an important foundation for the Strategic Management Plan by demonstrating that stakeholders regard the protection of the Garden Route's natural and cultural assets as central to maintaining the region's identity, resilience and long-term prosperity.

See Figure 3 for a graphic representation of what stakeholders value the most about the Garden Route region.



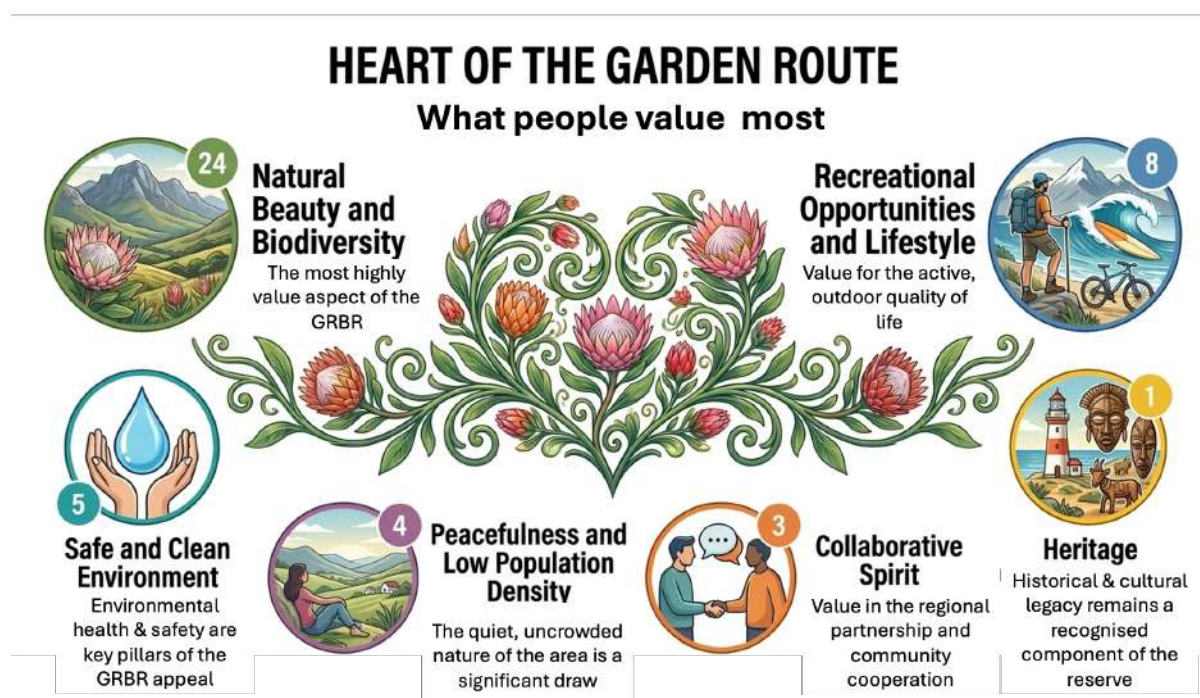


Figure 3. What stakeholders value the most about the Garden Route

### 4.3. Environmental Priorities

Respondents were asked to rank ten environmental issues in order of priority, with **1 representing the highest priority** and **10 representing the lowest priority**. This ranking exercise was designed to identify the environmental issues that stakeholders believe should receive the greatest attention from the GRBR over the next 10 years.

The results reveal a hierarchy of environmental priorities, with, **invasive alien plant management and water security, river and wetland health, and coastal and marine conservation** emerging as the issues of concern. While respondents differed in the precise ordering of these priorities, there was a degree of agreement that the protection and restoration of natural ecosystems should remain at the centre of the GRBR's work over the coming planning period.

Among all the issues considered, **biodiversity conservation** featured as one of the higher-ranked priorities. This finding reflects the importance stakeholders place on protecting the Garden Route's globally significant biodiversity, endemic species and diverse ecosystems. It reinforces earlier findings from the survey in which respondents identified the region's natural environment and biodiversity as the qualities they value most about living and working in the Garden Route. The results suggest that stakeholders expect biodiversity conservation to remain a priority of the Biosphere Reserve's strategic direction.

Ahead of biodiversity conservation was the combined issue of **invasive alien plants and water security**, which ranked as either the highest or second-highest priority. The

emphasis placed on this issue reflects the recognition that invasive alien vegetation represents one of the threats to the ecological integrity and water security of the region. Respondents recognise the close relationship between healthy mountain catchments, river systems and reliable water supplies for communities, agriculture, industry and biodiversity. The prominence of this issue also suggests growing public awareness of the multiple benefits associated with alien vegetation clearing, including improved streamflow, enhanced ecosystem functioning, reduced wildfire risk and increased climate resilience.

**River and wetland health** also emerged as one of the highest environmental priorities. Stakeholders recognised the importance of freshwater ecosystems in maintaining biodiversity, regulating water quality and supporting both human livelihoods and ecological resilience. The high ranking of this issue complements the emphasis placed on water security and demonstrates that respondents view the protection of freshwater ecosystems as fundamental to the long-term sustainability of the region.

Similarly, **coastal and marine conservation** featured prominently among the highest-ranked issues. Given the Garden Route's extensive coastline and the importance of marine ecosystems to tourism, fisheries, recreation and biodiversity conservation, respondents recognise the need to protect coastal habitats and marine resources as part of an integrated landscape approach. The prioritisation of terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystems illustrates that stakeholders view the Biosphere Reserve as a connected social-ecological system rather than a collection of isolated environments.

A second tier of priorities included **climate change, wildfires** and **habitat fragmentation**. While these issues generally ranked below biodiversity and water-related concerns, they nevertheless featured within respondents' upper rankings. This suggests that stakeholders recognise these issues as significant and increasingly interconnected challenges. Climate change is understood to exacerbate biodiversity loss, water scarcity and wildfire risk, while habitat fragmentation continues to threaten ecological connectivity and the movement of species across the landscape. These findings reinforce the need for integrated landscape management approaches that build resilience to multiple interacting pressures.

**Pollution and waste management** generally occupied a middle position within the rankings. Although respondents recognised pollution as an important environmental issue, it was typically considered less urgent than biodiversity conservation, water security and ecosystem restoration. This may reflect the perception that pollution is often a more localised issue or that other environmental challenges pose more immediate risks to the long-term resilience of the Biosphere Reserve.

The two lowest-ranked issues were **cultural heritage conservation** and **sustainable agriculture**. It is important to interpret these findings with caution. Their lower ranking

does not necessarily imply that respondents consider these issues unimportant. Rather, when required to prioritise among ten competing environmental issues, stakeholders generally placed greater emphasis on the immediate conservation of biodiversity and ecosystem health. Furthermore, respondents may have perceived sustainable agriculture as being more closely aligned with economic development than environmental management, despite its significant contribution to biodiversity conservation and sustainable land stewardship.

**KEY MESSAGE:** The ranking exercise demonstrates that stakeholders place the highest priority on maintaining the ecological integrity of the Garden Route through the conservation and restoration of natural ecosystems. Biodiversity conservation, water security, freshwater ecosystem health and coastal conservation form a coherent set of interconnected priorities centred on protecting the natural capital upon which the region's communities, economy and quality of life depend. These findings provide a mandate for the new Strategic Management Plan to adopt an integrated landscape approach that strengthens ecosystem resilience while recognising the fundamental contribution that healthy ecosystems make to sustainable development and human wellbeing.

Please see Figure 4 the stakeholder rankings of priority environmental issues in the Garden Route

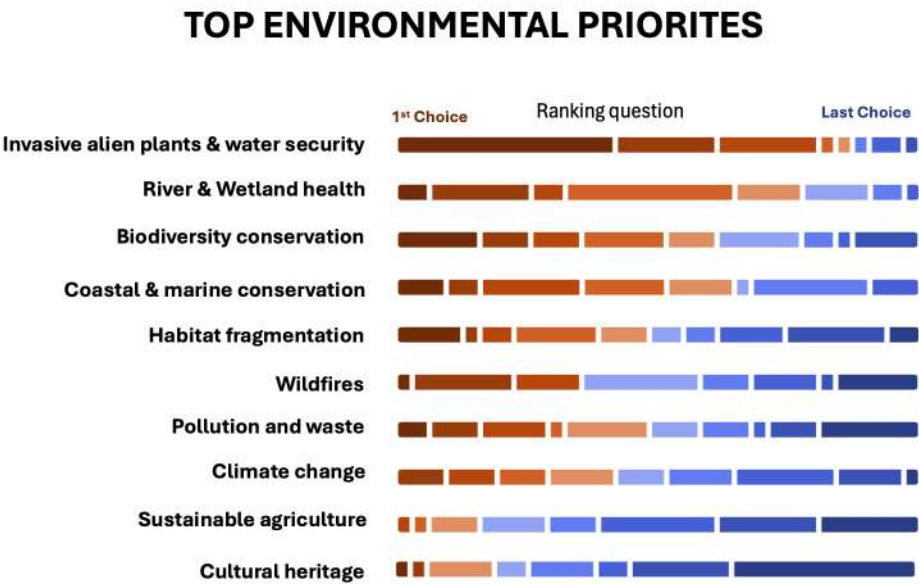


Figure 4. Stakeholder ranking of priority conservation issues in the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve.

An important theme that emerged from the open-ended responses to any other conservation issues not listed in the ranking exercise was concern regarding **municipal planning and development**. Although this issue was not included as one of the ranked environmental priorities, a number of respondents independently raised concerns about the pace, scale and nature of development occurring within the Garden Route. Participants

*“Development pressures (especially in coastal towns and around estuaries) are posing a big threat to coastal biodiversity. The influx of people moving to the Garden Route is also placing tremendous pressure on the environment and infrastructure.”*

expressed the view that increasing urban expansion, inappropriate land-use change and inadequate spatial planning are placing growing pressure on biodiversity, water resources and the scenic landscapes that define the region's character. Respondents highlighted the need for integration between environmental conservation and municipal planning processes, arguing that development decisions should better consider ecological sensitivity, ecosystem services and the long-term sustainability of the landscape. These comments suggest that stakeholders view effective spatial planning and responsible development management as essential components of biodiversity conservation and resilience, reinforcing the importance of strengthening collaboration between the GRBR, municipalities and other planning authorities.

#### **4.4. Recommended Conservation Actions**

Following the ranking of environmental priorities, respondents were invited to provide open-ended recommendations on the actions they believe the GRBR should undertake to address these environmental challenges over the next ten years. Unlike the preceding ranking question, this open-ended format enabled respondents to express their ideas freely, resulting in a diversity of practical recommendations. While a broad range of suggestions was received, several themes emerged, highlighting stakeholders' preference for practical, collaborative and landscape-scale conservation interventions.

The most prominent recommendation centred on **the management of invasive alien plants and ecological restoration**. Respondents identified invasive alien vegetation as one of the greatest threats to the ecological integrity of the Garden Route and supported expanding alien clearing programmes across the Biosphere Reserve. Many participants linked invasive alien plant management directly to improved water security, healthier catchments, biodiversity conservation and reduced wildfire risk. Rather than viewing alien clearing as an isolated intervention, respondents recognised it as a strategic

investment that delivers multiple environmental, social and economic benefits. Respondents specifically recommended increasing funding for alien clearing, mobilising skilled contractors, supporting collaborative clearing initiatives and prioritising strategic catchment areas, including the Outeniqua Strategic Water Source Area. Habitat restoration, ecological rehabilitation of degraded wetlands and plantation exit areas, and the rehabilitation of natural ecosystems following alien clearing were also identified as priority actions.

A second major theme was the need to **strengthen collaboration and partnerships**.. Respondents emphasised that the environmental challenges facing the Garden Route cannot be addressed by individual organisations working in isolation. Instead, they called for the GRBR to play a stronger coordinating role by

*"Coordinate and support partners to resource and mobilise invasive alien clearing projects in priority areas, especially Outeniqua SWSA."*

bringing together municipalities, government departments, conservation agencies, non-governmental organisations, conservancies, community groups and landowners around a shared vision for the region. Participants encouraged the GRBR to facilitate information-sharing platforms, strengthen relationships among stakeholders, reduce fragmentation within civil society and create opportunities for collective planning and action. Some respondents viewed the Biosphere Reserve as uniquely positioned to serve as an impartial convener capable of connecting organisations that often work independently of one another.

Respondents also placed emphasis on **education, awareness raising and communication** as components of effective conservation. Many believed that there is already substantial willingness within communities to contribute to environmental stewardship but that people require clearer guidance regarding how they can become involved. Recommendations included expanding environmental education programmes, conducting regular public workshops, improving communication with landowners, providing practical conservation guidance, sharing best-practice information and developing more interactive communication platforms. One particularly detailed suggestion proposed establishing a local WhatsApp information channels to provide practical advice, environmental updates, citizen engagement opportunities and question-and-answer sessions. These responses indicate that stakeholders view communication not simply as a means of disseminating information but as an important mechanism for building environmental stewardship and encouraging behavioural change.

Another recommendation was the need for **greater public participation and community involvement** in conservation activities. Respondents encouraged the GRBR to involve stakeholders more directly in decision-making processes, create opportunities for volunteer participation and support community-led conservation initiatives. Participants noted that many residents are already taking positive environmental actions, such as recycling, composting, wildlife gardening and alien plant removal, and argued that these efforts could be expanded through better coordination and support. The responses suggest that stakeholders wish to move beyond consultation towards more active participation in the implementation of conservation initiatives across the Biosphere Reserve.

*"Involve all stakeholders & consolidate the fractured nature of civil society. Every concern has an organisation with limited resources & gravitas"*

The importance of **landscape connectivity and biodiversity protection** also emerged from the responses. Participants advocated for the expansion of formally protected areas, biodiversity stewardship programmes on private land, and the conservation of ecological corridors to reduce habitat fragmentation. Respondents highlighted the growing pressure being placed on biodiversity by urban expansion, particularly within coastal towns and around estuaries, and argued that greater emphasis should be placed on securing long-term statutory protection for areas of high conservation value. Respondents also referred to Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs) as an additional mechanism for strengthening landscape-scale conservation. These recommendations demonstrate support for conserving connected ecological networks rather than focusing solely on isolated protected areas.

*"Expand and formalise biodiversity stewardship on private land that ties in with ecological corridor thinking and planning."*

A further theme concerned **municipal planning, governance and environmental compliance**. Respondents expressed concern that development pressures are increasingly threatening biodiversity, ecological connectivity and environmental quality. Respondents called for stronger collaboration between the GRBR and municipalities, including better integration of Biosphere Reserve zoning into Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs). Participants also argued that environmental legislation requires more effective implementation and enforcement and suggested that the GRBR should play an advisory role in reviewing development

applications, monitoring environmental compliance and ensuring that development proceeds in a manner that safeguards ecological integrity. These responses reinforce the earlier finding that stakeholders see sustainable spatial planning as fundamental to achieving long-term conservation outcomes.

Respondents also identified opportunities to strengthen **citizen science and environmental monitoring**. Participants observed that the Garden Route has a large community of environmentally conscious residents, including retired and semi-retired individuals, who possess both the time and interest to contribute meaningfully to conservation. Suggestions

*"I think there is great scope for citizen-science led environmental monitoring and activities. There is a large contingent of retired and semi-retired people who are interested in the environment and have the time to do such efforts."*

included expanding citizen-science initiatives such as bird counts, fish tagging programmes, environmental monitoring and organised alien vegetation clearing. These responses indicate untapped potential to broaden community participation while simultaneously generating valuable environmental data for adaptive management.

Although raised less frequently, respondents also highlighted issues including waste management, equitable access to natural resources, job creation linked to conservation, protection of marine ecosystems, hunting-free zones, strengthening municipal involvement in conservation, and improving environmental awareness across society. Participants stressed that environmental conservation should be pursued in ways that generate local economic opportunities while strengthening social inclusion and community resilience.

**KEY MESSAGE:** The responses demonstrate that stakeholders favour a collaborative and action-oriented approach to conservation. Rather than advocating for isolated projects, respondents called for integrated landscape management that combines ecological restoration, environmental education, community participation, strategic partnerships, sustainable spatial planning and improved governance. The recommendations position the GRBR not simply as an implementing organisation, but as a trusted facilitator capable of mobilising partnerships, coordinating collective action and building the long-term resilience of the Garden Route's social-ecological system.

Please see Figure 5 for the recommended conservation actions the GRBR should be taking to address the conservation priorities



Figure 5. Recommended conservation actions the GRBR should take to address the conservation challenges.

#### 4.5. Social and economic priorities

In addition to identifying priority environmental issues, respondents were invited to identify the most important **social and economic issues** that they believe should receive attention over the next ten years. Unlike the environmental priorities, this question was open-ended, allowing participants to identify the issues they considered most significant without being constrained by predefined response options. The responses reveal that stakeholders recognise the close interrelationship between

environmental sustainability, economic opportunity and social wellbeing, with many emphasising that long-term conservation success will depend upon addressing underlying social and economic challenges.

The dominant theme emerging from the responses was **employment creation and economic opportunity**. High levels of unemployment, particularly among young people, were identified as one of the Garden Route's most pressing challenges. Respondents recognised that the lack of sustainable employment contributes to a range of secondary social and environmental problems, including poverty, illegal harvesting of natural resources, illegal dumping and increasing dependence on social grants. Many participants stressed that creating long-term, meaningful employment opportunities should be regarded as a central component of sustainable development within the Biosphere Reserve.

*"Too many people  
and not enough  
jobs."*

Closely linked to concerns about unemployment was the issue of **poverty and widening socio-economic inequality**. Respondents expressed concern about the growing divide between affluent households and lower-income communities, noting that rapid changes within the region are increasing the cost of living and making housing progressively less affordable for many local residents. Several participants highlighted the contrast between substantial private investment in high-value residential developments and the limited resources available for conservation, municipal services and support for vulnerable communities. These responses suggest that stakeholders perceive increasing inequality as both a social justice issue and a factor that undermines long-term environmental sustainability.

Another prominent theme was the **rapid population growth occurring within the Garden Route**, driven largely by inward migration and semigration. Respondents expressed concern that the increasing influx of people is placing significant pressure on housing, infrastructure, municipal services and the natural environment. Rapid urban expansion, increasing housing developments, informal settlements and the extension of urban edges were identified as challenges that require more proactive planning and management. Participants emphasised that continued population growth must be managed in a way that balances economic development with the protection of the Garden Route's unique environmental assets.

*"The GR is undergoing a rapid population growth  
fuelled by semigration. This is resulting in rapid  
development, expansion of urban edges and general  
erosion of what makes the GR the GR"*

Respondents also raised concerns regarding **urban development and spatial planning**. Many believed that development is occurring too rapidly and, in some cases, without sufficient regard for environmental sustainability or ecological connectivity. Several participants referred specifically to urban expansion around protected areas, increasing densification, environmentally insensitive developments marketed as "eco-estates", and development decisions that appear to prioritise short-term economic interests over long-term sustainability. Respondents argued that future development should embrace a stronger "*living with nature*" philosophy that integrates ecological considerations into municipal planning and land-use decision-making.

The capacity of **municipal government and public infrastructure** also emerged as a concern. Participants referred to perceived shortcomings in municipal governance, planning capacity and service delivery, with some expressing concern regarding corruption, ineffective administration and inadequate long-term planning. Particular emphasis was placed on the growing strain being placed on bulk infrastructure, including potable water supply, wastewater treatment and other essential municipal services as the region continues to grow. Respondents suggested that stronger municipal governance and improved planning will be essential if the Garden Route is to accommodate future population growth while maintaining environmental quality and community wellbeing.

*"Increased informal settlements, water security, municipal management."*

*"Overcrowding that causes unsustainability due to over development close to and within protected areas economical challenges follow when sustainability is compromised."*

Respondents highlighted the importance of **education, skills development and healthy communities**. Education was identified not only as a pathway to improved employment opportunities but also as a means of strengthening environmental awareness and building resilient communities. Participants also referred to

family wellbeing, health, youth development and stable family structures as important foundations for long-term social resilience. Skills development was identified as an important priority for enabling local residents to participate more effectively in the region's economy and emerging green employment opportunities. A further recurring theme was the close relationship between **social and environmental sustainability**.

Respondents linked environmental degradation with underlying socio-economic challenges, recognising that issues such as unemployment, poverty and inequality can drive unsustainable resource use and environmental decline. Conversely, many participants viewed conservation as an opportunity to generate employment, improve livelihoods and support more sustainable forms of economic development. One respondent, for example, proposed expanding alien invasive plant clearing programmes as a mechanism for creating jobs while simultaneously improving ecosystem health and producing marketable products from cleared biomass. Others suggested that conservation activities could be linked more directly with affordable housing, skills development and community upliftment.

Although mentioned less frequently, respondents also identified issues including crime, racism, affordable housing, informal settlements, waste and pollution, energy security, water supply, wildfires, municipal management, overpopulation and the legacy of apartheid spatial planning. While these issues were not as dominant as employment and population growth, they reinforce the complexity of the social and economic challenges facing the Garden Route and the need for integrated responses that address both human wellbeing and environmental sustainability.

**KEY MESSAGE:** The findings demonstrate that stakeholders do not view conservation and socio-economic development as competing priorities. Instead, respondents recognised that resilient communities depend upon healthy ecosystems, while successful conservation depends upon addressing unemployment, inequality, education, governance and sustainable economic development. The responses support the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve model, which seeks to integrate conservation with sustainable development by promoting nature-based solutions that simultaneously strengthen ecological resilience, local livelihoods and community wellbeing.

See Figure 6 for a graphic representation of the social and economic priorities in the GRBR.



## TOP SOCIAL & ECONOMIC PRIORTIES

(n = frequency count from coded data)



Figure 6. Social and economic priorities in the Garden Route identified by stakeholders.

### 4.6. Recommended Actions to Promote Sustainable Development

Respondents were invited to identify the actions they believe the GRBR should prioritise to encourage sustainable development within the landscape. The question was intentionally open-ended, allowing participants to propose actions without being constrained by predefined response categories. The responses demonstrate that stakeholders view sustainable development as requiring an integrated approach that balances environmental conservation, economic development and social wellbeing, while strengthening collaboration between government, communities, businesses and civil society.

*"I think the best way is to support municipal planning departments so that they make rational and environmentally sensitive decisions."*

The most prominent theme emerging from the responses was the need to **strengthen the integration of biodiversity conservation into municipal planning and development decision-making**. Respondents argued that sustainable development can only be achieved if biodiversity considerations are embedded within municipal Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs), Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), land-use planning processes and development approval mechanisms. Participants expressed concern that biodiversity remains insufficiently mainstreamed within planning systems and highlighted the need for the GRBR to play a more active advisory

role by commenting on development applications, supporting municipal planning departments and promoting environmentally sensitive development. Respondents also noted that some municipalities still lack detailed biodiversity spatial plans, limiting their ability to make informed land-use decisions. These findings reinforce the importance stakeholders place on proactive spatial planning as a means of balancing development with long-term environmental sustainability.

*“Promote stronger/better integration of biodiversity conservation imperatives into land use planning and decision-making mechanisms. Biodiversity is not yet fully mainstreamed in land use planning to the degree that it should be”*

A second theme related to **partnerships, collaboration and stakeholder engagement**. Respondents described the GRBR as an organisation that should facilitate dialogue, strengthen communication and bring together diverse stakeholders to work towards common sustainability goals. Participants encouraged the GRBR to increase public participation, host workshops with municipal planning departments, consolidate civil society organisations, establish sustainability action forums and work more closely with local authorities, private conservancies and the agricultural sector. These responses reflect an expectation that the Biosphere Reserve should serve as a trusted facilitator and neutral platform for collaborative governance rather than acting solely as an implementing agency.

Respondents also placed emphasis on **education, awareness raising and capacity development**. Respondents believed that achieving sustainable development requires greater public understanding of environmental issues together with practical opportunities for people to become involved. Suggestions included increasing environmental education, hosting public workshops, improving access to information and resources, supporting environmental awareness campaigns and equipping communities with the knowledge needed to become effective stewards of their local environments. Respondents specifically highlighted the importance of educating both municipal officials and the public about environmentally responsible planning and sustainable development practices.

A further recurring theme was the creation of **green economy opportunities and meaningful employment**. Participants recognised that sustainable development should not focus solely on environmental protection but should also create economic opportunities that improve livelihoods while conserving natural resources. Some respondents advocated for expanding employment in conservation, ecological restoration and land management, while others proposed promoting regenerative agriculture, circular waste economies, sustainable construction and other environmentally responsible industries. There was support for developing a green economy that generates meaningful employment, particularly for vulnerable communities and young people, while simultaneously enhancing ecosystem health. Respondents also stressed the importance of providing youth with access to training, skills development and entrepreneurial opportunities that enable them to secure employment or establish environmentally sustainable businesses.

*"Sustainable economy  
would mean growing jobs  
that encourage working  
with the environment  
sustaining the  
environment by  
protecting it."*

The responses further highlighted the importance of **sustainable urban development and ecological design**. One participant argued that future development should follow a "living with nature" philosophy that integrates biodiversity conservation into the design of settlements and infrastructure. Recommendations included promoting green building practices, encouraging higher-density development to reduce urban sprawl, protecting ecological corridors, reducing habitat fragmentation and ensuring that developments incorporate wildlife-friendly infrastructure to minimise human-wildlife conflict. These responses demonstrate that respondents do not oppose development itself but advocate for development that is planned and implemented in ways that maintain ecological connectivity and minimise environmental impacts.

Another important theme concerned **community stewardship and shared responsibility for conservation**. Respondents encouraged the GRBR to empower landowners, residents and local communities to become active custodians of the landscapes in which they live and work. Suggestions included promoting indigenous gardening, supporting community conservation initiatives, encouraging environmental clean-up campaigns and providing landowners with the tools and resources required to manage their properties sustainably. Participants argued that strengthening local stewardship would not only improve conservation outcomes but would also reduce pressure on government agencies and non-governmental organisations while fostering greater community ownership of sustainability initiatives.

Several respondents also highlighted the need for **stronger environmental governance and regulatory compliance**. Recommendations included ensuring greater compliance with environmental and building regulations, increasing penalties for environmental non-compliance and strengthening municipal capacity to implement environmentally responsible planning decisions. Others suggested that the GRBR should influence strategic planning processes, support municipalities in integrating biodiversity into planning frameworks and showcase examples of successful sustainable development projects that can be replicated elsewhere in the region.

**KEY MESSAGE:** The responses demonstrate that stakeholders view sustainable development as a holistic process that requires environmental sustainability, inclusive economic development and collaborative governance to be pursued simultaneously. Rather than seeing conservation and development as competing objectives, respondents advocated for approaches that integrate biodiversity conservation into planning and economic decision-making, create meaningful green employment opportunities, strengthen community stewardship and improve collaboration across all sectors of society. These findings align closely with the core philosophy of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, which seeks to demonstrate how people and nature can thrive together through integrated, landscape-scale approaches to sustainable development.

## RECOMMENDED STAKEHOLDER SOCIAL & ECONOMIC ACTIONS

(n = frequency count from coded data)



Figure 7. Opportunities for sustainable development identified by stakeholders

#### 4.7. Opportunities for Sustainable Development

Respondents were asked to identify where they see the greatest opportunities for sustainable development within the GRBR, including opportunities related to economic sectors, industries, partnerships and collaborative initiatives. The responses reveal a consensus that the region's greatest development opportunities lie not in conventional economic growth alone, but in approaches that build on the Garden Route's exceptional natural capital while simultaneously creating employment, strengthening local economies and conserving biodiversity. Stakeholders recognised that the future prosperity of the region depends upon integrating environmental sustainability with economic innovation and collaborative governance.

The strongest theme emerging from the responses was the opportunity to **strengthen collaboration between government, conservation organisations, communities and the private sector**. Respondents argued that sustainable development requires closer cooperation between municipalities, provincial government departments, conservation agencies, non-governmental organisations, community organisations and the private sector. Participants identified considerable potential for the GRBR to facilitate partnerships that bring together different sectors to jointly plan, implement and finance sustainability initiatives. Respondents specifically highlighted the importance of working more closely with municipal planning authorities, urban and regional planners, environmental specialists and local communities to ensure that development is guided by sound environmental principles.

*"Closer cooperation between local authorities (municipalities) and conservation organisations (e.g., NGOs) and community-lead conservation initiatives."*

A second dominant theme was the potential of the **green economy and circular economy**. Respondents recognised that the transition towards environmentally sustainable industries presents substantial opportunities for both conservation and economic development. Green initiatives, circular waste economies, sustainable construction, recycling industries and biomass utilisation were identified as areas with potential for future investment. Some respondents highlighted opportunities to convert invasive alien plant biomass into construction materials, eco-bricks and other marketable products, while others advocated for expanding recycling industries and circular waste systems that reduce environmental impacts while generating employment. These responses indicate stakeholder support for nature-based economic development that creates value from environmental restoration activities.

**Nature-based tourism and ecotourism** also emerged as one of the opportunities for sustainable development. Respondents recognised that the Garden Route's internationally renowned natural

*"Tourism based  
on nature"*

landscapes provide a competitive advantage for the tourism sector. However, participants also emphasised that the continued success of tourism depends upon protecting the very environmental assets that attract visitors to the region. Respondents cautioned that environmental degradation and poorly planned development could undermine the long-term sustainability of the tourism industry. Consequently, tourism was viewed not simply as an economic sector but as an incentive for biodiversity conservation and sustainable landscape management.

Respondents identified **ecological restoration and catchment management** as opportunities capable of delivering both environmental and socio-economic benefits. Catchment management, alien invasive plant clearing, ecosystem rehabilitation, biodiversity restoration and the establishment of conservation corridors were all identified as activities that could simultaneously improve ecosystem resilience, enhance water security and create employment opportunities. Respondents also highlighted opportunities to establish contract national parks and contract nature reserves, expand indigenous plant nurseries, and support rewilding projects associated with environmentally responsible developments. These responses reinforce the view that ecosystem restoration should be regarded not simply as a conservation activity but as an important driver of sustainable economic development.

The importance of **sustainable spatial planning and urban development** was another recurring theme. Respondents argued that future development should be guided by integrated planning approaches that protect ecological corridors, retain green urban spaces and minimise habitat fragmentation. Participants advocated for innovative approaches to urban development, including repurposing existing buildings rather than continually expanding into undeveloped landscapes, promoting green building technologies and incorporating sustainable infrastructure into future developments. These responses demonstrate that stakeholders see considerable opportunity to improve the environmental performance of the built environment while accommodating future growth.

*"In service  
training, allowing  
for mentorship of  
youths"*

Respondents also identified opportunities associated with **skills development, youth empowerment and innovation**. Participants proposed expanding in-service training, mentorship programmes and practical learning opportunities to equip young people with the skills required to participate in emerging green industries. Others

highlighted the potential role of universities, research institutions and innovation partnerships in developing new technologies, sustainable business models and evidence-based approaches to landscape management. These responses suggest that respondents view knowledge, innovation and human capital development as essential components of a successful green economy.

A further theme centred on the need to **mobilise investment and new financing mechanisms**. Respondents recognised opportunities to leverage international donor funding, establish public-private partnerships and strengthen collaboration between government and the private sector to support environmental programmes. One participant noted that declining public-sector budgets for environmental programmes require new partnership models that improve both project outcomes and long-term employment security. This reflects a recognition that achieving sustainable development will require diversified funding sources and innovative financing arrangements that extend beyond traditional government programmes.

In addition to identifying opportunities for sustainable development, respondents also reflected on the conditions necessary for these opportunities to be realised. A recurring theme was the need to adopt a **landscape-scale approach to planning and development**. Participants argued that development proposals should not be considered in isolation but rather assessed within the broader social-ecological context of the Garden Route. Several respondents expressed concern that planning decisions frequently focus on individual sites without adequately considering cumulative impacts on biodiversity, ecological connectivity, ecosystem services and the character of the wider landscape. They advocated for development decisions that are informed by strategic landscape planning, recognise the interconnectedness of ecosystems, and balance development needs with the long-term resilience of the Biosphere Reserve.

Respondents also highlighted the importance of **protecting and enhancing green infrastructure**, particularly within rapidly growing urban areas. Several participants called for the retention and expansion of urban green spaces, the protection of remaining areas of natural vegetation and the establishment of

*"... specifically the retention of green urban spaces & Witfontein recreational area to George Peak."*

ecological corridors that connect fragmented habitats. Beyond their ecological importance, these green spaces were recognised for the many benefits they provide to communities, including opportunities for recreation, mental wellbeing, cultural identity and social interaction. One respondent, for example, described how an existing urban park serves as an important community asset that supports recreation, wildlife habitat

and a sense of place, illustrating the wide range of ecosystem services that urban natural areas provide.

While respondents expressed strong support for sustainable development, several also questioned whether current development practices genuinely reflect sustainability principles. There was concern that some developments marketed as "*green*" or "*eco-friendly*" focus primarily on technological features such as renewable energy or water self-sufficiency while overlooking broader considerations such as biodiversity conservation, landscape connectivity and social sustainability. These comments suggest that stakeholders are seeking a more holistic interpretation of sustainable development, one that integrates environmental, social and economic objectives rather than treating sustainability as a branding exercise.

Several respondents further emphasised that achieving sustainable development will require **greater public awareness and stronger environmental stewardship**. They observed that many residents remain unaware that they live within a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve or of the significance of this international designation. Participants recommended that the GRBR increase its visibility through communication campaigns, community workshops and public engagement initiatives that build a shared understanding of the Biosphere Reserve and encourage greater responsibility for protecting its natural and cultural assets.

Finally, a respondent highlighted the value of **demonstration projects** that showcase sustainable development in practice. They suggested that successful examples of ecological restoration, green infrastructure, sustainable construction, regenerative agriculture and community-based conservation could inspire wider adoption of innovative approaches across the region. By demonstrating practical, locally relevant solutions, the GRBR has an opportunity to strengthen its role as a learning platform where new ideas can be tested, shared and replicated, consistent with UNESCO's vision of Biosphere Reserves as living laboratories for sustainable development.

**KEY MESSAGE:** Respondents demonstrated an understanding of sustainable development, viewing it not as a balance between conservation and development, but as an opportunity to integrate the two. Stakeholders identified opportunities that simultaneously protect biodiversity, strengthen ecological resilience, create employment, foster innovation and build stronger partnerships across sectors. These findings reinforce the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve model by highlighting the potential for the Garden Route to become a leading example of providing an holistic perspective of an integrated landscape in which conservation, sustainable development and collaborative governance work together to support both people and nature.

See Figure 8 for the sustainable development opportunities identified by stakeholders in the GRBR survey.



Figure 8. Sustainable development opportunities identified by stakeholders.

#### 4.8. Actions to Promote Learning, Research and Collaboration

Respondents were asked to identify the actions they believe the GRBR should prioritise to strengthen learning, research and collaboration across the region. The responses reveal an expectation that the Biosphere Reserve should serve as a **knowledge broker, facilitator and catalyst for collective learning**, connecting people, organisations and institutions while making scientific knowledge more accessible and relevant to decision-making and community action. Rather than viewing learning and research as activities confined to academic institutions, respondents advocated for approaches that engage communities directly, build partnerships and promote lifelong environmental stewardship.

The strongest theme emerging from the responses was the need to **expand environmental education and public awareness** efforts. Respondents argued that education should underpin all of the GRBR's activities, with several simply stating that the organisation should prioritise "education", while others emphasised the importance of educating, communicating, networking and demonstrating the relevance of the Biosphere Reserve to people's everyday lives. Participants recognised that increasing environmental literacy is fundamental to changing behaviours, building stewardship and creating more resilient communities. However, they also stressed that educational material should be accessible, practical and presented in language that can be easily understood by the general public rather than relying on highly technical or scientific terminology.

The importance of **engaging young people** was also stressed. Respondents argued that environmental education should begin during the early school years, with schools being identified as an important entry points for building a culture of environmental responsibility. Participants recommended strengthening school programmes, supporting school-based conservation projects and working directly with teachers to integrate conservation and sustainability into learning. Respondents observed that fostering positive environmental values from an early age would not only influence future generations but would also encourage children to share sustainable practices within their households and communities.

*"I would say the learning should start at primary school level."*

*"Strengthen education by tackling schools to teach and promote conservation, encourage cross sector collaboration."*

Respondents also placed emphasis on **community participation and citizen science** as mechanisms for promoting both learning and conservation. Participants suggested that the GRBR should encourage and support community-led environmental initiatives, drawing on successful local examples such as alien clearing groups, conservancies and citizen-science programmes. Activities such as biodiversity monitoring, species recording, ecological restoration and community conservation projects were seen as valuable opportunities for people to develop environmental knowledge while making meaningful contributions to conservation. Respondents recognised that active participation strengthens appreciation for the natural environment and creates stronger connections between communities and the landscapes in which they live.

*"Encourage the establishment of community-lead initiatives throughout the Biosphere - similar to KRAQ, FOSTER, the various community alien clearing and hacking groups, citizen science initiatives like CREW and iNaturalist, etc. By getting members of the community involved in such initiatives, you promote learning, collaboration and appreciation for the environment."*

Another theme was the importance of **strengthening collaboration and knowledge exchange**. Respondents encouraged the GRBR to convene workshops, seminars, forums and networking events that bring together government departments, municipalities, conservation organisations, non-governmental organisations, researchers, conservancies and community groups. Participants believed that these platforms should facilitate dialogue, encourage the exchange of experiences and provide opportunities to share both successful initiatives and lessons learned from projects that have been less successful. Respondents also suggested that existing collaborative structures should be strengthened rather than duplicated, allowing the GRBR to build upon established partnerships and avoid unnecessary fragmentation of effort.

The responses further highlighted the need to **bridge the gap between research and practice**. Participants expressed support for increasing collaboration between the GRBR, universities and research institutions, including attracting researchers to work within the Garden Route, creating thematic research priorities, supporting postgraduate research and establishing partnerships with national and international universities.

*“Create research thematic areas and share with university to allow students assist with research.”*

However, respondents also emphasised that research should not remain within academic circles. Some respondents suggested establishing formal mechanisms through which scientific findings can be translated into municipal planning, policy development and practical management actions. One particular recommendation proposed regular meetings between municipal Integrated Development Plan managers and researchers to ensure that scientific knowledge directly informs planning and by-law development. These comments reinforce the growing expectation that the GRBR should function as a knowledge broker, translating research into practical decision-making and implementation.

Respondents also identified opportunities to improve **communication and access to information**. Suggestions included hosting public workshops, developing online learning opportunities, using WhatsApp groups and virtual meetings to disseminate information, promoting citizen-science events and providing opportunities for local experts to engage directly with communities. Participants viewed these communication platforms as important tools for improving access to research findings, encouraging dialogue and enabling members of the public to ask questions and learn from practitioners and researchers. These responses indicate that stakeholders value two-way communication and ongoing engagement rather than one-directional information sharing.

*"Teams meetings organised and advertised on the groups and through email maybe as well. Just to have people, local experts or even just those who are in certain positions and with certain jobs who are knowledgeable explain more about topics and answer queries the public have to teach them."*

Respondents also recognised the importance of **building institutional capacity and cross-sector understanding**. Participants suggested that greater emphasis should be placed on educating municipal officials and practitioners outside the environmental sector about the importance of biodiversity conservation and ecosystem services. They argued that stronger understanding across government departments would improve integrated planning, strengthen collaboration and ensure that environmental considerations are better incorporated into decision-making processes.

Finally, respondents highlighted opportunities to strengthen **international collaboration and learning**. Suggestions included developing twinning partnerships with other UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, promoting international knowledge exchange and establishing partnerships that support postgraduate bursaries and collaborative research programmes. These recommendations reflect an appreciation of the global Biosphere Reserve network as a platform for exchanging ideas, sharing best practice and strengthening local capacity through international collaboration.

**KEY MESSAGE:** The responses demonstrate that stakeholders see learning, research and collaboration as mutually reinforcing components of effective Biosphere Reserve management. Rather than viewing research as an end in itself, respondents consistently advocated for an integrated approach in which scientific knowledge is generated collaboratively, translated into practical action, communicated in accessible ways and shared widely across society. These findings reinforce the GRBR's role as a learning organisation and align closely with UNESCO's vision of Biosphere Reserves as places where research, education, innovation and collaboration work together to support sustainable development and adaptive management.

See Figure 9 for the education actions stakeholders would like to see reflected in the GRBR Strategic Management Plan.

## ACTIONS FOR EDUCATION

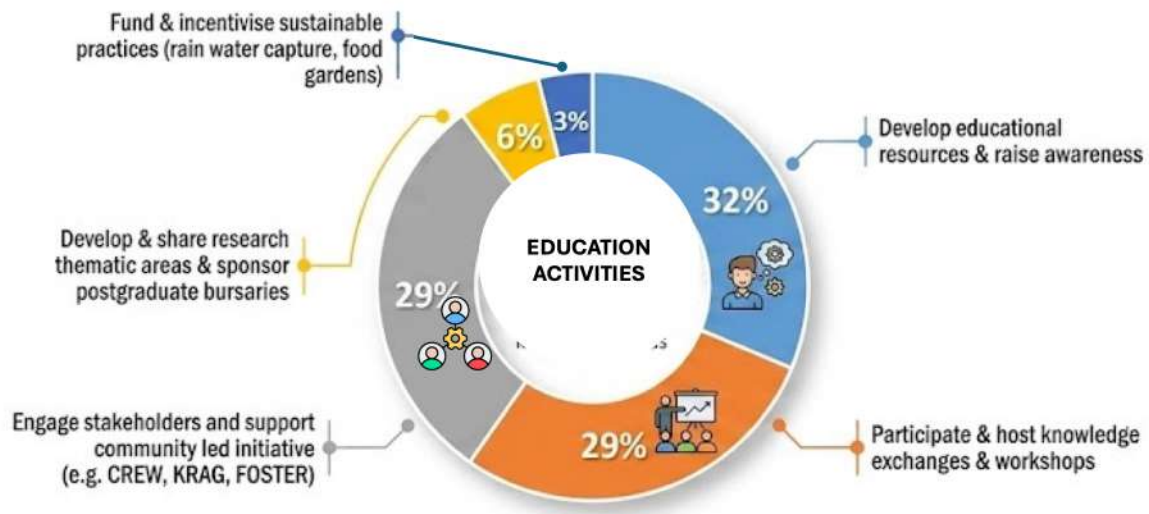


Figure 9. Education actions stakeholders would like to see in the GRBR Strategic Management Plan.

### 4.9. Research Priorities and Knowledge Gaps

Respondents were asked to identify the knowledge gaps that they believe require the greatest attention within the GRBR. The question sought to understand where additional research, monitoring and knowledge generation could strengthen evidence-based decision-making and improve the management of the region's social-ecological system. Participants were invited to comment on several broad themes, including climate change, disaster risk, water security, biodiversity conservation and sustainable agriculture, while also having the opportunity to identify additional research needs. The responses demonstrate that stakeholders place a high value on scientific research and recognise that effective management of the Biosphere Reserve depends upon a strong and continually evolving evidence base.

The dominant theme emerging from the responses was the need for **greater understanding of climate change impacts and adaptation**. Respondents identified climate change as one of the most pressing challenges facing the Garden Route and recognised the need for improved understanding of both current and future impacts on biodiversity, water resources, agriculture, disaster risk and human settlements. However, participants emphasised that research should move beyond documenting climate change impacts to developing practical adaptation strategies that improve the resilience of ecosystems, communities and economic sectors. Respondents also questioned whether existing scientific knowledge is being adequately translated into action, noting that climate adaptation plans and research findings are often available but are not consistently implemented due to funding constraints or institutional limitations.

These responses suggest that stakeholders value research that not only advances scientific understanding but also informs practical decision-making and implementation.

Closely linked to climate change was the issue of **disaster risk reduction**.

Respondents recognised that recent floods, storms, wildfires and other extreme weather events have highlighted the vulnerability of the Garden Route to climate-related

disasters. Participants identified invasive alien plants, wildfire risk and water security as interconnected components of disaster risk that require further investigation. Respondents argued that research should focus on improving disaster preparedness, strengthening community resilience and providing practical guidance to households and communities on reducing disaster risk. Others emphasised the importance of communicating research findings more effectively so that communities understand both the risks they face and the actions they can take to prepare for future events.

*"The most urgent need is probably climate change impacts and disaster risk mitigation."*

*"Water security has also become a concern and is linked to sustainable development as well as agricultural practices and other industries that consumes large quantities of water."*

Another research priority identified by respondents was **water security**.

Participants recognised the growing importance of understanding water availability, catchment health and water use as the region experiences increasing development pressure and changing climatic conditions. Water security was frequently linked to climate change, disaster risk, sustainable agriculture and biodiversity conservation, demonstrating that stakeholders view water as a cross-

cutting issue affecting both environmental sustainability and economic development. Some respondents also highlighted the need for better understanding of water use within the agricultural sector and suggested that research should inform more sustainable land-use and water management practices.

Respondents also placed emphasis on **biodiversity conservation and ecological monitoring**. While biodiversity conservation was widely recognised as a research priority, several participants suggested that one of the greatest knowledge gaps lies not in understanding broad conservation principles but in documenting the status and trends of the region's biodiversity. Respondents noted that there is still insufficient

information regarding the distribution, abundance and conservation status of many terrestrial, freshwater and marine species, particularly less conspicuous taxa. They also highlighted the absence of long-term ecological monitoring programmes capable of detecting changes in biodiversity over time. Participants argued that establishing robust baseline datasets and ongoing monitoring programmes should be a priority, as these are essential for identifying emerging threats, measuring conservation success and informing adaptive management.

**Sustainable agriculture** emerged as another research priority. Respondents recognised agriculture as a critical component of the Garden Route landscape but suggested that there is a need for greater understanding of farming practices that support both food production and environmental sustainability. Participants identified water-efficient agriculture, climate-resilient farming systems and the environmental impacts of different crop types as areas requiring further investigation. Respondents also observed that public understanding of sustainable agriculture remains limited, highlighting the need for both research and knowledge-sharing to support the transition towards more regenerative and environmentally responsible farming practices.

Beyond these predefined themes, respondents identified several additional knowledge gaps that warrant further attention. One recurring theme was the need to better understand the **value of ecological infrastructure and social capital**, including the role that stakeholder networks, collaborative governance and ecosystem services play in building resilience. Others identified opportunities for research into the **biodiversity economy**, the cumulative impacts of habitat loss associated with development, and the effectiveness of different approaches to environmental education and public awareness. One respondent also advocated for more **transdisciplinary research**, recognising that many of the complex challenges facing the Garden Route cannot be addressed through single disciplines alone but require collaboration across the natural sciences, social sciences, economics and governance.

*"There is a need for more transdisciplinary research across a broad range of topics."*

A particularly noteworthy finding was that several respondents did not necessarily identify a lack of scientific knowledge as the principal challenge. Instead, they argued that the greater gap lies in the **translation of knowledge into action**. Participants expressed concern that valuable research, disaster Strategic Management Plans and technical reports are often produced but are not adequately implemented, communicated or incorporated into policy and practice. This suggests that stakeholders see the GRBR not only as a facilitator of research but also as an important knowledge

broker, helping to translate scientific evidence into practical actions, informed decision-making and behavioural change.

**KEY MESSAGE:** The findings demonstrate that stakeholders strongly support evidence-based management and recognise research as one of the fundamental functions of the GRBR. However, respondents also emphasised that research should be solution-oriented, collaborative and accessible, generating knowledge that directly informs policy, management and community action. Collectively, the responses reinforce the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve concept of a "*learning place for sustainable development*", where research, monitoring, education and adaptive management work together to strengthen the resilience of both ecosystems and communities.

See Figure 10 for research gaps identified by the GRBR stakeholders.



Figure 10. Research gaps identified by the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve stakeholders.

#### 4.10. Information Needs and Preferred Knowledge Resources

Respondents were asked what information or knowledge they would like the GRBR to provide or make more accessible, and how they would prefer to receive this information. While respondents identified a broad range of information needs, the results demonstrate a clear preference for practical, locally relevant information that supports informed decision-making and encourages environmental stewardship.

The topic most frequently identified by respondents was a desire for **more information about UNESCO Biosphere Reserves and the role of the GRBR itself**. Participants indicated that

*"The value and role of the BR."*

many people remain unfamiliar with the purpose of a biosphere reserve, its objectives and the role that the GRBR plays within the region. Respondents requested information explaining the value of the Biosphere Reserve, the ecosystem services it protects, the projects currently being implemented and opportunities for residents and organisations to become involved. One respondent simply asked, *"Who are you and what do you do?"*, while another observed that many landowners are unaware that they live within a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. These responses suggest that increasing awareness of the Biosphere Reserve's mandate and demonstrating its relevance should be regarded as a communication priority.

*"The biosphere long term plan and projects they are busy with and how we can get involved"*

Another theme was the demand for **practical guidance that enables individuals and organisations to adopt more sustainable practices**. Respondents expressed interest in practical information relating to sustainable agriculture, urban and indigenous gardening, alien invasive plant management, climate resilience, green building practices and actions that landowners can take to improve the ecological health of their properties. Rather than requesting purely scientific information, participants sought guidance that could be translated into practical action. This reflects a strong preference for applied knowledge that supports behavioural change and empowers stakeholders to contribute directly to conservation and sustainable development.

Respondents also demonstrated interest in learning more about the **Garden Route's biodiversity and ecological systems**. Requests included accessible information describing the region's vegetation types, threatened species, local flora and fauna, ecological infrastructure, marine and estuarine ecosystems and the relationship between people and nature. Participants expressed a desire to better understand how their own activities influence environmental health and what actions they can take to improve human–nature interactions. These responses reinforce the importance stakeholders place on environmental education as a foundation for strengthening stewardship and fostering greater appreciation of the region's unique biodiversity.

Climate change, **water security and environmental resilience** also emerged as important information needs. Participants requested practical guidance on improving property resilience to climate change, understanding water security challenges and accessing information relating to water quality, water monitoring and vegetation biomass. Respondents identified a need for near real-time environmental information,

including biomass and alien vegetation tracking, while others called for greater public access to water quality monitoring data. These responses indicate a growing expectation that environmental information should be readily available and capable of informing both personal decision-making and broader landscape management.

An important theme that emerged from the qualitative responses was the need to **bridge the gap between scientific research and practical decision-making**. Respondents argued that the challenge is not necessarily the availability of information but rather ensuring that scientific knowledge is communicated in ways that are accessible, relevant and useful to practitioners, municipalities, landowners and community members. Participants emphasised the importance of translating complex scientific concepts into plain language, providing practical examples and demonstrating how research findings can inform everyday decisions. This reinforces earlier findings that stakeholders view the GRBR as an important knowledge broker capable of connecting research with policy, planning and implementation.

*"It's not only about what information but rather I think the GRBR should ensure that it prioritises the dissemination and accessibility of information in a practical manner that bridges the gap between complex science and practical municipal or private decision making."*

Respondents also provided valuable insights into **how they would like to receive information**. Traditional communication channels, such as electronic newsletters, websites, printed information sheets and practical guidebooks, were all identified as useful. However, many respondents also advocated for more interactive forms of engagement, including public workshops, community meetings, talks, demonstration projects and environmental education events. Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok were identified as important communication tools for reaching broader audiences, while several participants suggested establishing WhatsApp groups to facilitate ongoing communication, share educational resources and promote local conservation events. Respondents also highlighted the value of tourism information centres and conservation hubs as places where residents and visitors could access information and participate in educational activities. These responses demonstrate a preference for a diverse, multi-platform communication strategy that combines digital engagement with face-to-face learning opportunities.

*"Produce and disseminate flyers for landowners across the biosphere reserve .. focusing on actions that landowners can take to protect and conserve at least some of their land since they are living in a BIOSPHERE RESERVE; many do not even know about the GRBR."*

Finally, several respondents emphasised that information alone is insufficient unless it is accompanied by **opportunities for participation and action**. Some participants expressed concern that communication from the GRBR has historically been limited to annual general meeting notices and argued that stakeholders should be engaged more regularly through workshops, collaborative forums and opportunities to contribute to projects. Others highlighted the importance of demonstrating successful projects and regularly communicating progress on the Biosphere Reserve's long-term strategy and current initiatives. These comments indicate that stakeholders value ongoing dialogue and practical involvement as much as the dissemination of information itself.

**KEY MESSAGE:** The findings demonstrate that stakeholders expect the GRBR to play a much stronger role in generating, translating and sharing knowledge. Respondents called for practical, accessible and locally relevant information that enables individuals, communities and organisations to make more informed decisions and actively contribute to the stewardship of the region's natural and cultural assets. The results reinforce the GRBR's role as a learning organisation that not only generates knowledge but also ensures that it is effectively communicated, widely accessible and translated into meaningful action across the Biosphere Reserve.

See Figure 11 for the information and learning needs identified by the GRBR stakeholders.



## INFORMATION & LEARNING NEEDS



Figure 11. Information and learning needs identified by the Garden Route Biosphere Reserve stakeholders.

### 4.11. Additional Stakeholder Groups for Future Engagement

Respondents were given the opportunity to identify any additional stakeholder groups that they believe the GRBR should prioritise engaging with in the future. Although relatively few respondents provided additional suggestions, the responses offer insight into stakeholder perceptions of where the GRBR could further strengthen its partnerships and expand its collaborative network.

A raised theme was the importance of strengthening engagement with **government institutions and conservation authorities**. Respondents identified organisations such as CapeNature, SANParks, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE), the Western Cape Department of Environmental Affairs and Development Planning (DEA&DP), municipal environmental departments and municipal leadership as key stakeholders whose continued involvement is essential for effective landscape-scale governance. These suggestions reinforce earlier findings that stakeholders view the GRBR as a coordinating platform that can facilitate collaboration between different spheres of government and environmental agencies.

Respondents also highlighted the importance of engaging more closely with **local community organisations**, particularly conservancies, residents' and ratepayers' associations, and private conservancy owners. Participants recognised these organisations as important custodians of biodiversity and natural resources, often possessing detailed local knowledge, established community networks and the capacity to support conservation initiatives on the ground. References to the Eden to Addo

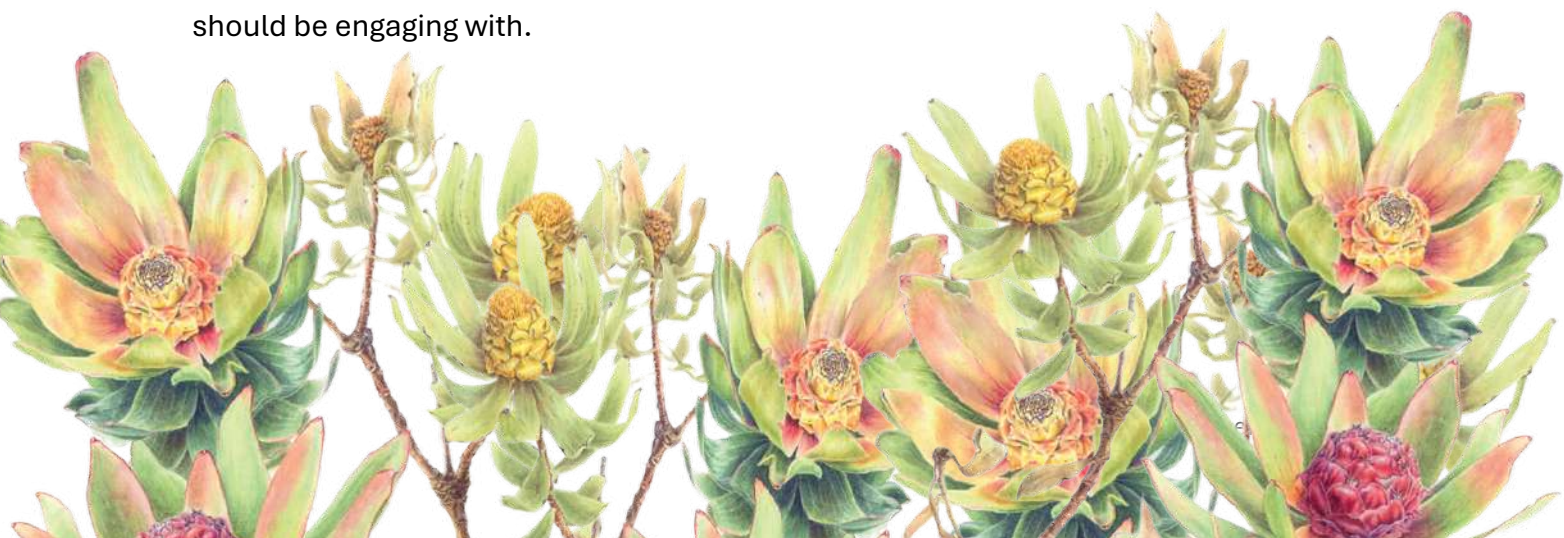
Corridor Initiative, the Robberg Corridor and registered conservancies further illustrate stakeholder recognition of the important role that locally organised conservation groups play in maintaining ecological connectivity across the landscape.

The responses also identified opportunities to strengthen partnerships with the **tourism sector**. Tourism bodies were specifically mentioned as priority stakeholders, reflecting the view throughout the engagement process that tourism is both economically important and closely dependent on the long-term protection of the Garden Route's natural assets. Strengthening relationships with tourism organisations was seen as an opportunity to promote sustainable tourism while increasing awareness of the Biosphere Reserve among visitors and tourism businesses.

Respondents also suggested broadening engagement to include groups that are sometimes overlooked in environmental initiatives. These included **small-scale fishers, commercial forestry companies, law enforcement agencies** and **faith-based organisations**. One respondent noted that churches and religious organisations could play a valuable role in promoting environmental stewardship because many faith traditions encourage responsible care for nature and have established networks capable of reaching large sections of society. This response highlights the potential for the GRBR to engage more broadly across society by recognising that conservation is not solely the responsibility of environmental organisations but a shared responsibility across many sectors and communities.

**KEY MESSAGE:** The responses suggest that stakeholders believe the GRBR already engages with many of the key sectors necessary to fulfil its mandate, with only one respondent indicating that no additional stakeholder groups were required. Nevertheless, the suggestions reinforce the value of continually broadening and strengthening partnerships across government, conservation organisations, community groups, the private sector and civil society. Collectively, these findings support the role of the GRBR as a collaborative platform that brings together diverse stakeholders to promote integrated landscape management, shared learning and sustainable development.

See Figure 12 for the suggested stakeholders the GRBR stakeholders feel the GRBR should be engaging with.



## WHO SHOULD THE GRBR BE ENGAGING WITH?

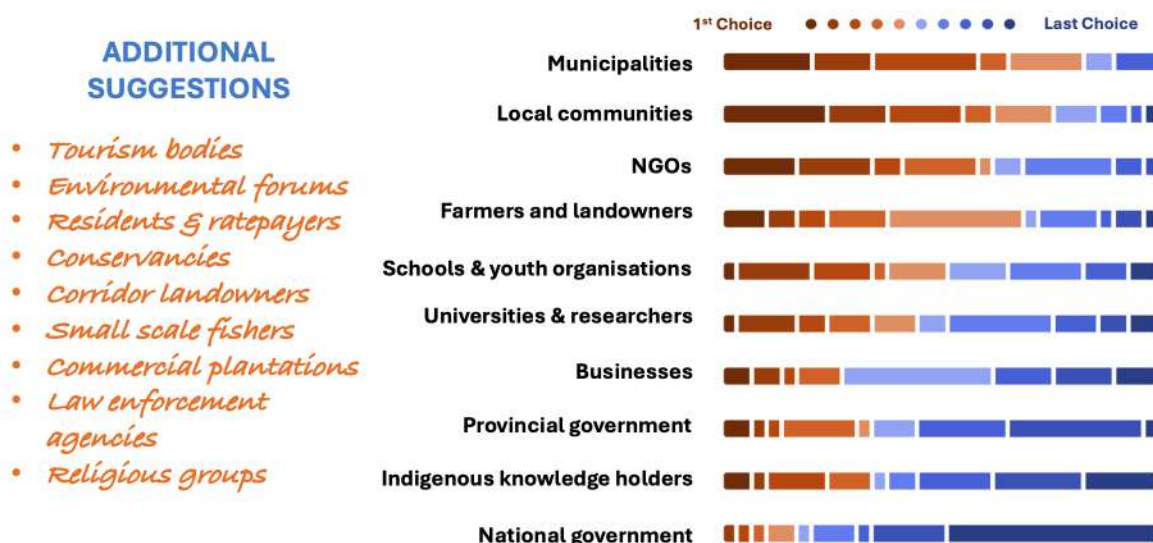


Figure 12. The ranking of specific stakeholders the people in the GRBR believe the GRBR should be engaging with.

### 4.12. Preferred Ways of Engaging with the GRBR

Respondents were asked how they would like to engage with the GRBR, with the option to select multiple forms of participation. The results indicate that stakeholders are interested in engaging with the GRBR in a variety of ways, reflecting a desire for ongoing communication, collaboration and active participation rather than passive involvement. The relatively even distribution of responses across several engagement options suggests that stakeholders value a diverse range of opportunities to contribute to the Biosphere Reserve's work.

The most frequently selected option was **receiving information and updates** (19%), indicating that regular communication remains the foundation of stakeholder engagement. Respondents value being kept informed about the GRBR's activities, projects, events and opportunities, reinforcing earlier findings that stakeholders expect the organisation to serve as a trusted source of environmental information and knowledge.

Almost as many respondents (18%) indicated that they would prefer to **participate through their organisations**. This finding reflects the collaborative nature of the Biosphere Reserve model, where much of the work is undertaken through partnerships with government departments, municipalities, non-governmental organisations, educational institutions, conservancies, businesses and community groups. Rather than engaging solely as individuals, many stakeholders appear to see their organisations as important vehicles for contributing expertise, resources and coordinated action.

Respondents also expressed interest in **attending workshops** (16%) and **sharing their knowledge and expertise** (16%). These findings suggest that stakeholders do not wish to be passive recipients of information but are keen to participate in dialogue, exchange ideas and contribute their own experience and specialist knowledge. This reinforces the concept of the Biosphere Reserve as a platform for collaborative learning, knowledge co-production and multi-stakeholder problem-solving.

A further 15% of responses indicated a desire to **participate directly in projects**, demonstrating that some stakeholders are willing to move beyond consultation and become actively involved in implementing conservation and sustainable development initiatives. This willingness to contribute to practical action represents an important opportunity for the GRBR to strengthen collaborative implementation through partnerships and community-based programmes.

Participation in **research activities** was selected by 11% of respondents, highlighting an interest in contributing to the Biosphere Reserve's learning and knowledge-generation functions. Given the strong representation of conservation practitioners, government officials and researchers among the stakeholder group, this finding reflects the opportunity to expand collaborative research, citizen science initiatives and monitoring programmes that support evidence-based management.

Although **volunteering** accounted for a smaller proportion of responses (4%), it nevertheless indicates that a core group of stakeholders are willing to contribute their time and skills directly to the work of the Biosphere Reserve. Volunteer programmes could therefore provide a valuable mechanism for increasing community participation and strengthening stewardship, particularly when linked to activities such as ecological restoration, citizen science and environmental education.

Importantly, only **1% of respondents indicated that they did not wish to be involved** with the GRBR. This result demonstrates the opposite, that there is a fairly high level of stakeholder willingness to engage with the organisation in one form or another.

**KEY MESSAGE:** Collectively, the findings suggest that stakeholders view the GRBR as a collaborative organisation and are eager to participate through multiple channels, whether by staying informed, sharing expertise, contributing through their organisations, participating in projects and research, or attending workshops. These results provide a mandate for the GRBR to continue investing in diverse, accessible and participatory engagement mechanisms that strengthen collaboration and shared ownership across the Biosphere Reserve.

See Figure 13 for the various ways in which the GRBR stakeholders would like to engage with the GRBR.

## HOW OUR STAKEHOLDERS WANT TO ENGAGE WITH US



Figure 13. The various ways in which the GRBR stakeholders wish to engage with the GRBR.

### 4.13. Preferred Communication Channels

Respondents were asked to indicate their preferred means of communication with the GRBR. Although the number of responses to this question was relatively small, the findings provide useful insight into how some stakeholders would like to receive information and engage with the organisation. The results indicate a preference for digital communication platforms, while also demonstrating that a diversity of communication channels will be required to effectively reach the broad range of stakeholders associated with the Biosphere Reserve.

The most preferred communication channel by a substantial margin was **online social media platforms**, particularly **Instagram and TikTok**, which accounted for **43%** of all responses. This finding reflects the increasing importance of digital media as a mechanism for sharing information, promoting projects, engaging communities and reaching younger audiences. It also reinforces findings from other sections of the stakeholder engagement process, where respondents emphasised the importance of modern, accessible and interactive communication methods, particularly for engaging youth and encouraging wider community participation.

More traditional communication methods were also regarded as important. **Printed media**, including brochures and flyers, represented **15%** of responses, while **electronic newsletters** accounted for **14%**. These findings suggest that stakeholders continue to value structured sources of information that provide more detailed updates on the activities of the Biosphere Reserve. Electronic newsletters remain particularly valuable for engaging established stakeholder networks and professional partners, while printed

materials may be more effective for community outreach, public events and awareness campaigns.

Several other communication channels each accounted for **7%** of responses, including **WhatsApp groups, extension services, radio broadcasts** and **workshops**. Although individually less frequently selected, these communication mechanisms represent important opportunities to engage specific stakeholder groups. WhatsApp groups provide a platform for rapid communication, event notifications and project coordination, while extension services offer opportunities to reach landowners, farmers and rural communities through trusted intermediaries. Radio can assist in reaching broader community audiences, particularly in areas where digital connectivity may be limited. Workshops, provide opportunities for face-to-face engagement, dialogue and collaborative learning, supporting the participatory approach that underpins the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve model.

**KEY MESSAGE:** The findings suggest that stakeholders favour a **multi-channel communication strategy** rather than reliance on a single communication platform. While social media should play a central role in future communication and public engagement, it should be complemented by electronic newsletters, printed information, community workshops and targeted communication channels that reach specific stakeholder groups. Adopting a diversified communication approach will enable the GRBR to engage effectively with the wide variety of audiences that make up the Biosphere Reserve, ensuring that information is accessible, inclusive and tailored to different stakeholder preferences.

See Figure 14 for a graphic depiction of the preferred channels of communication the GRBR stakeholders would like to use.



## PREFERRED COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

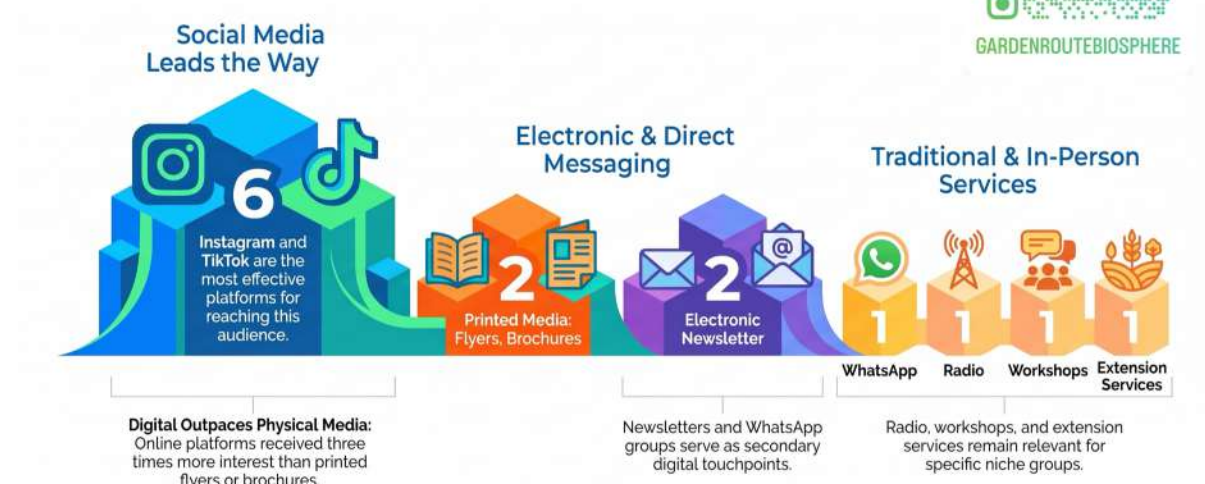


Figure 14. The preferred channels of communication by the GRBR stakeholders.

### 4.14. Involving Young People in the GRBR

Respondents were invited to share their ideas on how the GRBR could better involve young people in shaping the future of the region. The responses reveal that youth engagement should extend beyond traditional environmental education and instead provide meaningful opportunities for young people to participate, develop leadership skills and contribute directly to conservation and sustainable development. Participants recognised young people as both future custodians of the landscape and important contributors to addressing current environmental and social challenges.

The dominant theme emerging from the responses was the importance of **experiential environmental education**. Many respondents argued that young people learn most effectively through direct engagement with nature rather than through classroom-based teaching alone. Suggestions included educational field trips, outdoor learning programmes, guided nature walks, summer camps and practical conservation activities that allow learners to experience biodiversity and ecosystem processes firsthand. Citizen science initiatives, particularly platforms such as iNaturalist, were frequently identified as valuable tools for engaging young people while simultaneously contributing to biodiversity monitoring. Participants suggested that biodiversity challenges and field-based projects could foster curiosity, strengthen environmental stewardship and create a lasting connection between young people and the natural environment.

Schools, colleges and universities were identified as important platforms through which the GRBR could engage young people. Respondents recommended developing partnerships with educational institutions to deliver environmental education

programmes, establish school projects, organise competitions, support environmental clubs and provide field-based learning opportunities. Several participants emphasised that engagement should begin during the primary school years to foster environmental values from an early age, while others highlighted the importance of continuing engagement through high schools, tertiary institutions and youth-focused community programmes.

A second theme was the need to create **meaningful opportunities for participation and leadership**. Rather than limiting young people to awareness campaigns, respondents advocated providing opportunities for them to become actively involved in projects, decision-making and conservation initiatives. Suggestions included establishing internships within the GRBR, creating dedicated youth leadership programmes, supporting young environmental champions and forming a Youth Forum or Youth Advisory Board that would provide young people with a voice in Biosphere Reserve governance. Participants believed these initiatives would not only build leadership capacity but also ensure that younger generations contribute directly to shaping the future direction of the Biosphere Reserve.

Respondents also highlighted the importance of **effective communication using platforms that resonate with younger audiences**. Several participants observed that many young people no longer rely on traditional communication channels such as newspapers, radio or Facebook, and instead recommended using social media, digital storytelling and creative communication approaches. Suggestions included developing "eco-media" programmes that enable young people to produce podcasts, short documentaries and social media campaigns highlighting local environmental issues and conservation success stories. Others recommended promoting projects, events and training opportunities through schools, universities and community spaces where young people naturally gather.

Respondents also emphasised the importance of **working through existing youth organisations and community partners**. Rather than creating entirely new structures, participants suggested partnering with non-governmental organisations, schools and youth groups that already have established relationships with young people. Supporting existing initiatives and identifying young leaders who are already active within their communities were seen as practical ways of expanding the reach and effectiveness of the GRBR's youth engagement efforts.

Interestingly, a small number of respondents challenged the exclusive focus on youth, suggesting that **intergenerational learning** should also be encouraged. One participant argued that older generations possess valuable knowledge and experience that should be shared with younger people, while another questioned how the GRBR could better engage people of all ages. These comments highlight the potential value of programmes that bring together different generations to exchange knowledge, skills and perspectives,

thereby strengthening community cohesion while supporting environmental stewardship.

**KEY MESSAGE:** The responses demonstrate that stakeholders envision youth engagement as an active and empowering process rather than a passive educational exercise. Respondents advocated for practical, hands-on learning experiences, meaningful participation in conservation projects, leadership development, strong partnerships with educational institutions and communication approaches tailored to younger audiences. Collectively, these findings suggest that the GRBR has an important opportunity to cultivate a new generation of environmental leaders by creating pathways for young people to learn, contribute and help shape the future of the GRBR.

See Figure 15 for the ways in which the GRBR can foster youth involvement in the GRBR.

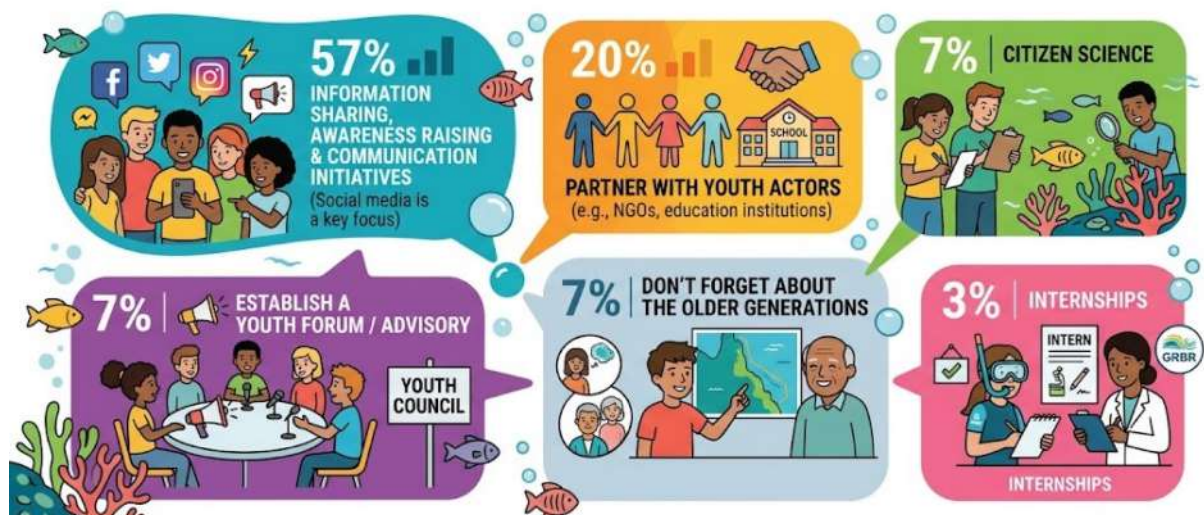


Figure 15. The ways in which the GRBR can foster youth involvement in the GRBR.

#### 4.15. Desired Role of the GRBR

Respondents were asked to rank the roles that they believe the GRBR should prioritise over the next ten years. The results reveal a clear preference for the GRBR to function primarily as a **facilitator, coordinator and enabler**, rather than as an organisation that directly implements projects. Stakeholders recognise that the Biosphere Reserve's greatest value lies in its ability to connect organisations, mobilise knowledge and build partnerships that enable collective action across the landscape.

The highest-ranked role was **convening and facilitating collaboration**. This role was the most frequently selected first choice, indicating that respondents see the GRBR's greatest strength as bringing together government agencies, municipalities, conservation organisations, researchers, businesses, landowners and communities to work towards shared sustainability goals. Rather than operating independently, stakeholders expect the GRBR to create opportunities for dialogue, strengthen partnerships and coordinate collective responses to complex environmental and social challenges. This finding is highly consistent with the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve model, which positions biosphere reserves as platforms for collaborative governance and multi-stakeholder engagement.

The second-highest priority was for the GRBR to act as an **environmental advocate** by raising awareness of environmental issues and promoting the conservation and sustainable use of the region's natural resources. Respondents value the organisation's role in increasing public understanding of biodiversity, climate change, water security and other sustainability issues, while encouraging environmental stewardship across all sectors of society.

Although respondents recognised the importance of practical conservation work, **project implementation** ranked below collaboration and advocacy. This suggests that stakeholders do not necessarily expect the GRBR to become a large implementing agency undertaking extensive on-the-ground projects itself. Instead, they appear to view implementation as something that should occur through partnerships, with the GRBR providing coordination, support and strategic direction while enabling other organisations and communities to deliver projects.

Similarly, respondents placed value on the GRBR's role as a **knowledge and research hub**. Stakeholders expect the organisation to coordinate research, facilitate the sharing of information, monitor environmental trends and translate scientific knowledge into practical guidance that informs planning and decision-making. This finding aligns closely with earlier sections of the survey, where respondents repeatedly identified the need for accessible information, collaborative research and improved communication between scientists, practitioners and decision-makers.

Respondents also regarded the GRBR as an important **capacity builder and educator**. While ranked slightly lower than collaboration, advocacy and knowledge coordination, there was nevertheless support for the organisation to provide training, environmental education and capacity development that empowers communities, organisations and future environmental leaders. This reinforces the recurring theme throughout the engagement process that education should be practical, participatory and closely linked to conservation action.

The lowest-ranked role was **fundraising and resource mobilisation**. Although stakeholders recognised that securing funding and connecting partners with resources is an important function, relatively few considered it to be the GRBR's primary role. This does not imply that fundraising is unimportant; rather, it suggests that respondents place greater value on the organisation's ability to build partnerships, generate knowledge and facilitate collaboration, with resource mobilisation serving as a supporting function that enables these broader objectives.

**KEY MESSAGE:** The rankings present a picture of stakeholder expectations. Respondents envision the GRBR as a **trusted convener, knowledge broker, environmental advocate and catalyst for collaborative action**, rather than a traditional project implementation agency. These findings are consistent with the broader results of the stakeholder engagement process, which repeatedly emphasised the importance of partnership development, collaborative governance, shared learning and stakeholder participation. They also closely reflect UNESCO's vision of Biosphere Reserves as neutral platforms that bring together diverse sectors and knowledge systems to achieve conservation, sustainable development and learning through collective action.

See Figure 16 for the ranking of the various roles the GRBR stakeholders feel the GRBR should be performing.



Figure 16. The ranking of various roles the GRBR stakeholders feel the GRBR should be performing.

## 5. INSTAGRAM ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS

The Instagram engagement campaign largely reinforced the findings emerging from the stakeholder survey, demonstrating a degree of consistency between the views of the GRBR's established stakeholder network and the broader public engaging through social media. Despite reaching a different audience, the responses reflected many of the same values, concerns and aspirations for the future of the GRBR.

Participants expressed an appreciation for the Garden Route's exceptional natural beauty and biodiversity, identifying the region's mountains, forests, rivers, coastline and diverse ecosystems as defining features that make it a unique place to live, work and visit. This appreciation was accompanied by growing concern about the pressures facing these natural assets, particularly biodiversity loss, declining water security and the increasing impacts of climate change. Respondents recognised that these challenges are closely interconnected and highlighted the importance of protecting the ecological processes that underpin the region's environmental health and long-term resilience.

The Instagram participants identified **mountain catchment protection, habitat restoration** and the **clearing of invasive alien plants** as priority actions for safeguarding the Garden Route's natural resources. These

*"Our mountain catchment areas are not being managed to generate water"*

responses demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between healthy ecosystems, biodiversity conservation and reliable water supplies, while reinforcing the importance of ecological restoration as a practical strategy for building climate resilience.

*"More protection of mountains catchment areas"*

The Instagram respondents also highlighted interest in opportunities that integrate environmental conservation with sustainable economic development. Respondents expressed support for green business opportunities, sustainable forestry and environmentally responsible tourism, indicating that they see potential for economic activities that enhance rather than degrade the region's natural capital. This reflects broad public support for the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve model, which seeks to demonstrate that conservation and sustainable development are mutually reinforcing objectives.

Education and environmental awareness emerged as another recurring theme. Instagram participants emphasised the need to improve public understanding of

environmental issues and expressed particular interest in practical actions that individuals can take to contribute to sustainability, including indigenous gardening and other nature-positive practices that enhance biodiversity within urban and residential areas.

Furthermore, the Instagram respondents reinforced the perception of the GRBR as a **facilitator of collaboration rather than simply an implementing organisation**. Participants

*"Bring people and nature together to support each other."*

expressed support for the GRBR acting as a trusted

connector that brings together communities, organisations, researchers, businesses and government agencies to address shared environmental and social challenges. Respondents also indicated a willingness to volunteer, participate in citizen-science initiatives or collaborate with the GRBR on future projects. This willingness to become actively involved suggests that there is considerable social capital within the region that can be mobilised to support collective action and strengthen the implementation of the 10-year Strategic Management Plan.

The Instagram campaign confirmed and strengthened the findings of the stakeholder survey. It demonstrated widespread public support for biodiversity conservation, ecological restoration, climate resilience, environmental education and collaborative governance, while highlighting a strong desire among community members to play a more active role in shaping the future of the GRBR.

## 6. COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

The discussion in the first Community Conversation highlighted a **need to improve awareness and understanding of the GRBR** among communities and stakeholders across the region. Participants noted that many people remain unfamiliar with what a biosphere reserve is, what its designation means for them, and how they can become involved. Greater and more consistent communication was therefore identified as a priority, including use of existing networks and newsletters.

**Conservancies** were recognised as important partners that could help communicate the GRBR's role at a local level and strengthen connections between the Reserve and communities. More broadly, participants saw an opportunity for the GRBR to help connect and scale up the work already being undertaken by conservancies and stewardship initiatives, including through engagement with Conservation at Work.

Participants however expressed concern about declining attendance at environmental events, low levels of volunteering and a broader sense of **community and funding fatigue**, with people increasingly feeling overwhelmed by the number of initiatives and requests for participation.

A part of the conversation focused on the need to revisit **hunting practices and bagging limits** in the region. There was a request for exploring hunting-free zones and approaches that could reduce unsustainable or inappropriate hunting pressure. A participant suggested that the GRBR could play a constructive role in facilitating dialogue between stakeholders and supporting an evidence-based strategy for hunting and fishing. The importance of understanding the scientific basis for current hunting quotas was also noted, including engagement with CapeNature on how bagging limits are determined.

**Funding and practical environmental action** emerged as another theme. Participants identified opportunities for the GRBR to use its regional profile and name to leverage funding and encourage collaboration between organisations. Alien invasive plant clearing was highlighted as a particularly important area for investment because of its wider links to water security, ecosystem health, employment and local enterprise development. The discussion also highlighted a promising restoration initiative in Clarkson, located within the GRBR buffer zone, which has already cleared approximately 4.3 km of alien vegetation, is undertaking indigenous reforestation and has created eight jobs. The project is seeking to develop GIS and remote-sensing capacity for restoration monitoring and is also exploring ways of using cleared alien biomass as a resource. Participants highlighted the potential for the GRBR to support and promote such initiatives, including through institutional endorsement and by helping to place Clarkson and similar community-based restoration initiatives more firmly on the regional map.

Finally, participants reflected on the challenges facing **environmental education and community participation**. The continued underutilisation of the environmental education centre at the Garden Route Botanical Garden was raised as an example of the difficulties created by limited funding and capacity.

The conversation emphasised that the GRBR has an important role as a **convener, connector and facilitator**, helping existing initiatives to work together, strengthening communication, leveraging resources and translating local successes into wider regional action.

The second Community Conversation focused on **biodiversity conservation, environmental education and community participation**. Habitat fragmentation, biodiversity loss and invasive alien species were identified as key environmental concerns. However, education emerged as the dominant theme, with participants emphasising the need to move beyond conventional environmental education towards approaches that actively involve communities and create opportunities for people, particularly young people, to engage meaningfully with their environment.

A range of potential approaches to community-based environmental education were discussed. These included community gardens involving youth in Pacaltsdorp and Thembaletu, environmental field trips, art-based activities, the Junior Guides programme, Earthlings, citizen science initiatives and SANParks youth programmes. Practical activities such as water testing, MiniSASS and the WaterCAN programme were identified as ways of making environmental learning tangible and participatory. Participants also highlighted opportunities associated with iNaturalist bioblitzes. The importance of lifelong learning was emphasised, with these activities seen not only as

mechanisms for developing environmental knowledge but also as ways of creating a sense of belonging, strengthening community connections, restoring dignity and potentially contributing to improved mental wellbeing.

As in the first Community Conversation, participants raised concerns about the **limited public awareness and understanding of the GRBR**. There is a need for the GRBR to communicate more effectively about what a biosphere reserve is, what its designation means for local communities and how people can participate in its activities. This was seen as particularly important if the GRBR is to build stronger community ownership and participation in its work.

The **Doughnut Economics framework** was also proposed as a potentially useful framework for the GRBR. It was suggested that the framework could help guide the way in which sustainability is understood and monitored by considering both social foundations and ecological limits. Its emphasis on working within defined thresholds and avoiding the exceeding of environmental limits could provide a useful basis for developing indicators and monitoring approaches that integrate **human wellbeing with ecological health**. The conversation reinforced the potential role of the GRBR as a platform for connecting environmental education, community development, youth engagement and biodiversity conservation.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The stakeholder engagement process demonstrates a degree of alignment across respondents despite the diversity of stakeholder groups.

Several consistent messages emerged:

- Nature conservation remains the highest priority.
- Water security is a growing concern.
- Habitat restoration and invasive species management are strongly supported.
- Communities want practical action alongside conservation.
- Education and awareness are viewed as essential.
- Collaboration is considered fundamental to success.
- Stakeholders see the GRBR as a trusted facilitator rather than an implementing agency.
- There is willingness among stakeholders to work alongside the GRBR.

The findings suggest that the next strategic Management Plan should place collaboration, resilience and knowledge sharing at its centre while continuing to integrate conservation with sustainable development and community wellbeing.

## 8. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT PLAN

The stakeholder engagement process provides a clear mandate for the new Strategic Management Plan to:

- Prioritise biodiversity conservation and ecosystem restoration.
- Strengthen water security through catchment management and invasive alien plant clearing.
- Expand environmental education and public awareness initiatives.
- Increase opportunities for stakeholder collaboration and co-design.
- Strengthen partnerships across government, academia, civil society, business and local communities.
- Build a stronger regional knowledge-sharing network.
- Increase youth participation in conservation and sustainability initiatives.
- Promote sustainable livelihoods linked to nature-based solutions.
- Position the GRBR as a regional convener, facilitator and catalyst for collaborative action.

Collectively, these priorities align closely with the three core functions of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, namely conservation, sustainable development and logistic support (research, education and capacity development), and provide a strong foundation for the GRBR's strategic direction over the next ten years.

