Giving our Garden the wings to fly

A brief history of the Bankenveld Branch of BotSoc

Long before the official establishment of a botanical garden on the West Rand, the current site was already a popular leisure spot with its central waterfall as focal point. Just as the gold rush spread to the west of Johannesburg, and the Struben brothers discovered the Confidence Reef near the current Kloofendal Nature Reserve in 1885, day visitors would disembark at the Witpoortjie Railway Station and walk down the valley to enjoy a day of leisure at the falls. It is here that the headwaters of the Crocodile River tumble majestically over a 70 m cliff with beautifully exposed south-dipping quartzite-shale and flows through the ancient greenstone basement. It was perhaps lucky that the main gold conglomerates were found closer to George Harrison Park near Langlaagte in 1886, leaving the current garden site in pristine condition. Nonetheless, the West Rand is where Johannesburg really began and it is here that we also find a rich history of gold mining.

Remaining largely undeveloped until the 1970s (except for a few claim pegs located on the rock face) the ridge, numerous watercourses, and a number of natural sites in the area were selected as possibilities for a garden by the Roodepoort Wildlife Society with Cedric Edwards at the forefront of the initiative. In 1979 the current garden site was eventually chosen based on its existing infrastructure, exceptional natural beauty, and constant water supply. The Roodepoort Wildlife Society had been working with the municipality for some time on the preservation of the ridge and water courses in Roodepoort and discussed with them the plans to establish a caravan park at the falls. It was suggested that better use could be made of the site. Cedric Edwards had grown up near Kirstenbosch (enjoying Miss John’s nature study classes) and had long felt that a similar garden was needed on the Witwatersrand.

The Director of the National Botanic Gardens, Prof. Brian Rycroft, was investigating a number of different sites on the Reef for a botanical garden including Bloubosrand, Geldenhuys Koppies, Blouguat in Krugersdorp, Kloofendal and the Witpoortjie Falls. Once the decision was made to go ahead on the current site, the Wildlife Society withdrew from the project.

The Roodepoort City Council bought the 42-hectare smallholding at the falls from a Mr Vorster in 1979. The property had a house and a few smaller cottages on it, and there was a lawn below the falls where one could sit back and watch the eagles on their nest. With the solid financial support of the Roodepoort Town Council and the solid financial support of the Roodepoort Town Council and the Krugersdorp Municipality, this land was provided on a 99-year lease for development. Prof. Brian Rycroft played a pivotal role in getting the proposal accepted, which eventually happened on 25 May 1981.

Development of the garden began on 12 August 1982, with a development plan in place for further expansion. It was first known as the Transvaal National Botanic Gardens and could only be visited by special arrangement. Mr Peter Chaplin was appointed as the first Curator on 1 July 1982.
Establishing the Bankenveld Branch

According to the Constitution of the Botanical Society in 1982, 25 or more members resident in a defined locality could form a branch. On 17 February 1983, a meeting was held at the Lake Hotel in Florida to discuss the formation of a branch to support the newly proclaimed Transvaal National Botanic Garden. The first official meeting of the Bankenveld Branch of BotSoc took place in the Council Chambers of the Roodepoort Civic Centre on 28 March 1983 but only 11 members were present and another meeting to form the branch had to be held on 7 May 1983.

The first AGM then took place on 12 November 1983. Mel Slater, Bossie Bosman, Cedric Edwards and Sue Long were elected to the Committee. Kobus Nel was elected as Chairman and subsequently served in this position until 1987. He was also the first Branch Representative on the BotSoc Council. The Curator of the Garden, Peter Chaplin, served as ex officio member on the Bankenveld Committee from 1983 until his retirement in 1999, followed by the second Curator, Sharon Wilcock (née Turner), from 2000 until 2005. She was succeeded by the current Curator, Thompson Mutshinyalo, who joined the Committee in 2007. This means that there has always been an ex officio Garden representative on the Committee. The Garden’s second in command, Andrew Hankey, has accompanied all three of these Curators as an ex officio Committee member since 1993 (an amazing 20 years). In May 1984, Phillip du Preez was elected as the first Vice Chairman and the first official Treasurer, Dorothy James was appointed that it had been held outside Cape Town. The overall development plan for the Garden had been held up since 1982 until these land deals had been concluded, but once the development plan was rejuvenated, the Garden was opened to the public on a daily basis in 1987, as the Witwatersrand National Botanical Garden.

Fundraising for the Garden

In the 1980s, government policy on funding dictated that each National Botanical Garden had to be run as a ‘cost centre’ which meant that gardens had to supplement their income in some way. Restriction of finances from the Department of Public Works meant that the Bankenveld Branch was called upon to help fund urgent projects at the Garden. In 1987 the Annual Branch Convention and AGM of the Botanical Society was hosted by the Bankenveld Branch, the first time in 75 years that it had been held outside Cape Town.

In order to raise funds, the Branch started a tea kiosk on 27 October 1988 in an old house (where the present restaurant is). It was run entirely by volunteers on Wednesday mornings and Sundays. Daleen Nel was the dedicated Committee member in charge. Our dynamic Chairman, Clare Robbertze, also insisted that we serve hot milk with the coffee order, once again just adding that little bit of Bankenveld flair! A small interpretive centre was also initiated by the Bankenveld Branch at that time.

In December 1990 the offices moved from the old farmhouse (which was until then used as the Curator’s house).

In 1991 the paving of walkways was undertaken at a total cost of R238 759 with donations and sponsorships co-ordinated by the Branch. This improved the general appearance of the Garden and made it more accessible to visitors. Further refurbishing of the kiosk was facilitated by Bankenveld in 1991 at a cost of R7 632.

In 1991, the Branch contributed R18 000 towards the new thatch-and-timber entrance building (further funded by the City Council of Roodepoort) that forms the main access point to the Garden. Bankenveld also helped to secure a sponsorship from Nestlé towards the Nestlé Environmental Education Centre, the centrepiece of the Environmental Education Programme in the Garden. Visiting school groups are received here and the hall is also used for lectures, slide shows, workshops and training sessions by a number of environmental groups including BotSoc.

Actual monetary amounts are not available for the period until 1991, but the Chairman’s Report 1991/92 states the value to be R600 000 for the Branch projects from 1989 to 1992 (a huge sum for those days).
The pivotal pioneering and financial role played by BotSoc tends to fade into the background in light of large donations and corporate sponsorships, but the impact of these BotSoc initiatives that led to major changes within the Garden, and sometimes also to the procurement of these sponsorships, cannot be underestimated.

The pioneering spirit displayed by the Bankenveld Branch is evident in the establishment of many features within the garden such as the restaurant and the Plant Sales Nursery. These markets (and subsequent developments) had to be developed and proven sustainable before they could be considered for privatization and BotSoc took on this responsibility. Maggie Hompes recalls that the winter Sunday picnic concerts were started by Chairman Anne Adcock in 1994 and were held in the Arboretum with a sound system funded by the Branch. No additional entrance fee was charged, so BotSoc volunteers armed with cloth bags walked through the picnickers during interval asking for donations. You may imagine how much was learnt about the public, when the collection yielded R100 notes down to a few cents. This income had to cover the cost of the performer on the day.

Another Bankenveld Branch initiative was the introduction and collection of gate fees to assist with the funding of projects within the Garden. The annual Carols by Candlelight was also a Bankenveld Branch initiative and was run for many years until it was recently taken over by Old Mutual who is now the major sponsor and organizer.

Bankenveld Branch contributions from 1993 to 2003 included a donation towards paving and the purchase of an office computer for administrative purposes, and in 1984, the donation of the Sundial was facilitated by Bankenveld. (In 1997, R8 673 had to be sponsored to cover repairs to the sundial after it was broken by children climbing on it.) Further funding came from the very profitable bi-annual plant sales, which were held from 1989 until the nursery was privatized in 1998. Bankenveld plant sales, held at the end of September and February, were famous and people came from far and wide and queued from daybreak to be first in. The organization was a mammoth task, but the sales were great money spinners. The September 1997 sale takings, for example were R100 000. Volunteers at the plant sales were treated to cream scones brought up the road by Denise Slater who lived next door.

In this year, Karen Carstens our current Branch secretary took over from Shanka Von Brandis. Later, in April 2009, Karen was employed by BotSoc as Secretary for the entire Northern Region and was allowed to allocate 20% of her time to Bankenveld affairs.

1994
The winter Sunday Picnic Concerts, started by Chairman Anne Adcock, are held in the Arboretum

2000
Chairman Dr Bernard Cole upgrades the old Branch newsletter and the new BotSoc CHAT is born.

2002
The Bankenveld Branch amalgamates with the Johannesburg Branch.

2003
The Useful Plant Garden project receives R80 000 from the Branch. This garden is still one of the showpieces of the Garden.
In 2008 the Geological Garden, a joint project of the Garden and the Geological Society of South Africa, was opened. Planning for this garden had begun several years earlier, but limited funding delayed progress. The garden displays the tremendously rich geological diversity of the region by means of boulders of different rock types which have been brought in. Accompanying informative plaques explain the geological concepts to garden visitors but Bankenveld Branch still arranges and facilitates guided tours by experts to describe the geology, climatology, ecology and palaeontology of this area.

The Branch has also contributed towards the Biodiversity Garden: Birds and Butterfly Garden, the installation of a 50 000 litre rain water harvesting system and sponsorship of the Garden Horticulturist’s attendance to the Succulent Convention in August 2010.

The pivotal pioneering role played by Bankenveld Branch once again tends to fade into the background, but the overall impact of the Branch’s initiatives can never be underestimated nor brought into question.

Melville Koppies and other projects
Bankenveld has organized outings in Melville Koppies since 2005 and donated the proceeds to the Friends of Melville Koppies before they started organizing their own projects. Our close association with the Friends was further strengthened by the provision of R5 000 to hire workers for the eradication of alien vegetation in March 2011.

A number of smaller donations were also made towards Free Me, the animal rehabilitation centre, the Roodekrans Black Eagle Project and the Mandela Day Project.

Keeping in touch
In 2000, Chairman Dr Bernard Cole upgraded the old Branch newsletter and the new BotSoc CHAT was born. As editor, Bernard was succeeded by Brian Koertzen. In April 2005 our current editor of the BotSoc CHAT, Prof. Nick Grobler, took over the task of producing the informative and entertaining newsletter. Thanks to Nick’s dedication and attention to detail, it remains popular with Branch members to this day. Bankenveld was the first BotSoc Branch to create a Facebook page on 3 December 2010.

In September 2010, the annual BotSoc Branch Convention and AGM were hosted once again at the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden. BotSoc Council members, representatives and Branch Chairs from all over the country enjoyed Bankenveld hospitality for only the second time away from Kirstenbosch in 97 years.

Walkers, joggers, birdwatchers and photographers now enjoy the added benefit of early access to the Garden on provision of a valid membership card. This was also a Bankenveld Branch initiative that originated to cater for the needs of our members.

Into the future
At present, Committee members are working on a number of publications devoted to the Garden. Tony Bloomer is busy with two publications on the geology of the Garden, while Nick Grobler, Andrew Hankey and Geoff Lautenbach are busy with a photographic record of the plants of the natural areas of the garden.

In 2000 to hire workers for the eradication of alien vegetation in March 2011. The pivotal pioneering role played by Branch members to this day. Bankenveld was the first BotSoc Branch to create a Facebook page on 3 December 2010.

Branch contributions since December 2011 include a large donation of R1200000 towards the Children’s Garden, our newest project (co-sponsored by Novartis and Rocla).

All BotSoc funded projects over the years have been made possible by many hours of tireless work by volunteers. We take our hats off to Committee members and volunteers who have steered this ship in the past. We will proudly take your legacy into the Bankenveld Branch’s 31st year in 2013 as we also celebrate BotSoc’s Centenary. We look forward to meeting you all at our Centenary celebrations and events… and the next 100 years.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Thank you to all who helped to research this topic by providing background information, anecdotes and interesting snippets including Cedric Edwards, Maggie Hompes, Nick Grobler, Karen Carstens and Andrew Hankey. As this article was considerably shortened, the full document can be requested by emailing info@botanicalsociety.org.za.

Bankenveld Branch Centenary Diary

The Bankenveld Branch covers the western part of Gauteng and the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden. It is centred on Roodepoort and now incorporates the former Johannesburg Branch of BotSoc.

The Branch encourages members to participate in a variety of events from guided tours and behind-the-scenes visits to the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden on popular topics like frogs, spiders and scorpions, clivias, aloes, fungi, birds, trees, edible plants, insects (fear factor) and geology to outings further afield. The Branch promotes the rehabilitation of wildlife and the protection of endangered species. They also support the Walter Sisulu school outreach programme. For more information contact: Karen: 086 6949636, email botsoc@sisulugarden.co.za or fax 086 694 9636.

Bankenveld Branch Centenary Diary

2004
The Garden is renamed the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden, in honour of the late Mr Walter Sisulu.

2005
The Branch funds the first sound system used to get the Concert Programme going. Based on the success of the initiative, SAPPI took over the funding of the concerts.

2010
The annual BotSoc Branch Convention and AGM is hosted by the Bankenveld Branch at the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden, the second time away from Kirstenbosch.

ABOVE: An Aloe Walk through the Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden. Contrast this view of the Succulent Rockery Garden with the one in the photo below left, taken in 2001 from almost the same spot.