

You were wrong Prof!

Protecting the unique biodiversity of the Southern Overberg

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Back in 1984 Prof. Jackson at a University of Cape Town Summer School lecture passed the comment that 'The flora of the Bredasdorp District is botanically uninteresting'. Muriel van Breda was present. This was enough to convince her that we must go ahead with our, up till then, vague plan to form some sort of natural history organization which could help protect the environment, educate people in our area about its rich natural heritage, and also bring experts in different fields here to speak and to lead outings.

All aspects of natural history

Muriel, Zabeth Human and I contacted the Wildlife Society (now WESSA), the Bird Club and the Botanical Society of South Africa (BotSoc) to ask what their requirements were for a branch, and what process we should follow. The Botanical Society responded immediately and enthusiastically. They said we needed 25 members in our area. At that point there were already 17! Wow! Kay Bergh, then BotSoc President, was most supportive, and so we began by holding an exploratory meeting to recruit more members. By the end of that night we had 35 and a committee to go ahead.

From the beginning we made it clear that although we were called the Bredasdorp/Napier Branch of the Botanical Society, we would include all other aspects of natural history where possible. Over the years we have had talks and outings on geology, archaeology, marine biology, butterflies, bees, termites, weather predictions and birds, as well as talks on a huge variety of plant subjects by many experts. At least once a year we have had a bird talk and outing, even if some of those attending the outing were looking down at plants instead of up at birds! In our experience people interested in plants are also interested in the rest of nature, and it can be beneficial not to focus too narrowly when your target market is a fairly small community.

We were lucky to have many prominent and enthusiastic people actively involved from the beginning:

- Herklaas Wessels: passionate about conservation, especially milkwoods.
- Eps Joubert: a Bredasdorp High School teacher who took the pupils onto the Heuningberg and created hiking trails, and later became volunteer curator of the Heuningberg Nature Reserve.

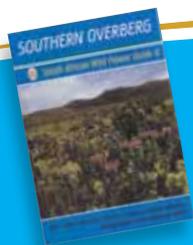


ABOVE: Members of the Southern Overberg Branch Committee, 2011 with Ted Oliver, President of the BotSoc, and Zaitoon Rabaney, Executive Director of the BotSoc. Standing, l-r: Idris Jones, Louise Hislop, Dorothy Buggs and Sharon Brink. Seated, l-r: Ted Oliver, Stephen Smuts (Chairperson), Zaitoon Rabaney and Sarah Foyle.

- Diana Durrant of Springfield farm, which is now part of the Agulhas National Park.
- Sharon Brink who was roped into helping with Flora 88 and became a stalwart of the committee who, amongst other achievements over many years, began the Eco Expo to expose more children to conservation and sustainable living practices. Under her chairmanship the branch name was changed to Southern Overberg to reflect the demographics better.
- Muriel van Breda, Bredasdorp born and bred, who lived on the historic farm Zoetendals Vallei.
- Janice Albertyn, brought up and educated in KwaZulu-Natal, who married John and therefore was lucky enough to have Jewel Albertyn as her mother-in-law, a passionate amateur botanist who had developed a wonderful knowledge of the veld around her, which she was happy to share with her new daughter who had learnt her botany in a totally different biome! Jewel also created a mini-herbarium which Janice continued, and which has been of benefit to botanists and at many flower shows.
- Landowners, farmers, teachers, businessmen, busy mothers: all have played their part in building up the Botanical Society locally. This has not only created more awareness of the wonderful and unique ecology of the area amongst the local community, and we have proved Prof. Jackson wrong. Contrary to what he said, this area has been found to be very rich botanically, a fact that has been confirmed by the many experts who have left here excited about plants they found that they did not expect to see!

From Flower Club to Eco-expo

Before the founding of our Branch, Bredasdorp had for many years had a 'Blomskool' (Flower Club) which organized flower shows, but the emphasis was always on beauty rather than science, and there were no sections on identified species. Once we formed our Branch, we gladly joined them and provided a more educational



1980

We started out as the Blomskool, a flower club.

1984

Professor Jackson declares 'The flora of the Bredasdorp District is botanically uninteresting', and Muriel van Breda plans to form an organization to educate people about its rich natural heritage.

1985

The Bredasdorp Branch of BotSoc is established. (Later to change its name to the Southern Overberg Branch.)

1988-1993

We are involved in the Flora 88 and Flora 93 expos at the Good Hope Centre in Cape Town.

aspect. Unfortunately these flower shows have come to an end because of the expense involved in producing them. We also collaborated on the large flower shows in Cape Town, Flora 88 and Flora 93, where we tried to portray the unique character of our area.

Education has always been an important goal, and from the beginning the Branch focused on schools. For many years we organized outings for small disadvantaged rural schools to De Hoop Reserve where the children got exposure to sea, freshwater and land ecosystems. They had to write essays about what they had learned, with some interesting results! For example, one child wrote “n Eland weeg soos ‘n bakkie en kan 2 km hoog spring’. (An eland weighs as much as a bakkie and can jump 2 km high!) Marking these was reward enough for us as organizers! This has altered to become, in 2008, the Eco Expo which reaches more schoolchildren.

Our very own wildflower guide

Because information on the Overberg flora was hard to access, we wanted a local wildflower guide and from the beginning we attempted to bring this about. The Botanical Society was always willing to cover the printing costs, but funding the rest was a huge challenge. On two occasions it almost got going, but fell through. We are therefore very grateful to Prof. Richard Cowling who eventually stepped in and accessed funding. He also arranged for Colin Patterson-Jones to take photographs and for Dr Penny Mustart, who had previously done research in our area, to write the text. At last the Southern Overberg guide was available for all to consult. We were in print, even if it covered only a fraction of the approximately 2 500 species that grow here in the Southern Overberg!

Where we are today

Environmental Impact Assessment participation and conservation problems seem to take up more and more of the Branch Committee’s time today. This is difficult to sustain for a small branch with only about 60 members, particularly as its membership area is very wide and we do



ABOVE: *Felicia nordenstamii* is known from about 15 locations from a restricted range, having lost a substantial part of its habitat in the past 10 years to urban expansion in the Struisbaai area. Its habitat is being degraded by invasive alien acacias. Photo: Sharon Brink.

BELOW: *Rhigiophyllum squarrosus*, an unusual member of the Campanulaceae that occurs in the Southern Overberg. Photo: Sharon Brink.

so without professional botanists in our midst. However, it remains an important part of our task, particularly as more and more of the area is being identified for its development potential. We therefore need the eyes and ears of the public to monitor our precious and beautiful area so we can keep it this way for generations to come.

A recent success was where our Branch joined other conservation bodies in opposing an extensive wind farm development proposal to be sited prominently on top of a mountain in pristine fynbos. Not only would the wind farm have done irreversible damage to the fynbos but it held serious threats to wildlife such as buck, birds, bats and bees. This collaboration led to the abandonment of the proposal.

Making things more difficult for our Branch is that we are without a local botanical garden. As our members can



1997

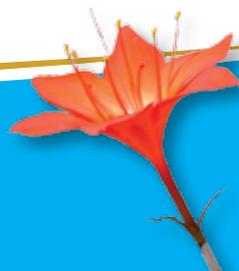
We publish our own wildflower guide, *Southern Overberg*.

2000

We institute an annual clean-up on World Environment Day, starting at Heuningberg Nature Reserve.

2005–2013

We become involved in EIAs and stop the creation of a wind farm in sensitive Renosterveld. We also get involved with CREW and erect a fence around some highly threatened plants to keep out cattle.





ABOVE: Our Branch participates in CREW surveys of our flora.
BELOW: The Southern Overberg Branch is involved in several environmental education initiatives at local schools.



seldom make use of their free entry into the National Botanical Gardens that many other branches enjoy as a perk of belonging to the BotSoc, we can only draw members from those who are really committed to conservation. Consequently the workload on the committee is high as it is normally just these enthusiasts who end up taking the conservation message to the schools and community, arranging outings and talks and taking initiatives such as the annual clean-up at the Heuningberg Nature Reserve. This is sponsored by local business and involves volunteers from the Airforce Base Overberg coming in by a busload or two for an afternoon of clearing rubbish and doing alien clearing. This is their contribution to World Environment Day, held in early June each year.

The Branch also has a small but dedicated CREW group who have such stalwarts as Cameron and Rhoda McMaster and Odette Curtis, who is finalizing her PhD on the highly threatened renosterveld vegetation-type. A highlight arising from this renosterveld research is the raising of substantial funds to fence off some pristine

renosterveld outside Napier to keep out livestock. Although only a few hectares in extent, ten different species of gladiolus have already been recorded in one small area which also contains many other highly threatened species.

Our CREW group has also found new species or helped re-discover long lost species such as *Erica recurvata*, a truly stunning erica. We have also participated in our first bioblitz and hope our branch can continue making a contribution to this exciting new initiative.

Educating and entertaining into the future

The arranging of talks and outings still remains a keen focus of Committee meetings although these are not always as well supported as the effort to arrange them deserves.

With the Branch approaching 30 years old, we are grateful that the Branch has been guided into the Twenty-first Century by an energetic Chairman and Committee such as Sharon Brink and her team, and today by Stephen Smuts and a Committee who have the responsibility of taking the branch into the future. The goal is still of educating and entertaining members of the greater community and playing a part in conserving the rich natural heritage of this very special area. This is an area which is increasingly feeling the pressure of development and population growth which is putting a strain on resources plus there is rampant alien plant invasion throughout the area. The Branch must respond to these concerns by constantly reminding our leaders and community of these threats to the environment and to encourage them to take action.

Although not a botanical activity, our Branch has proved a great opportunity for residents, particularly those new to the area, to meet new people. Often lasting friendships are forged at outings, at talks and on the Committee. This social and usually fun aspect has actually proved to be the glue that has held the Branch together so successfully over the years. The social role the Branch plays should therefore not be diminished. If we can maintain the fun side, have a few laughs but still play a meaningful role in conservation of the area, the Branch will be around for many years to come. The concern however is that most current members are from a privileged, mature generation. We therefore also need to attract members from outside this demographic without alienating our current membership base. A worthy challenge indeed and something the Branch is working on!

Southern Overberg Branch Centenary Diary

The Southern Overberg Branch encompasses the southern tip of Africa, De Hoop and the Agulhas National Park, and the greater Bredasdorp, Swellendam and Gansbaai area. Though small in membership numbers, our Branch is dedicated to preserving our rich floral heritage and the members take great pride in their environment. We host regular events including talks and outings to areas of unique biodiversity and members receive our quarterly newsletter as well as the normal perks of belonging to the BotSoc. We play a vital role in monitoring possibly inappropriate development in the area, participate in CREW surveys and use opportunities to get the conservation message out to schools and the broader community.

As part of the Centenary celebrations we are planning some legacy projects such as the creation of a small garden at the entrance to Napier to beautify a rather shabby part of the village.

For more information on our Centenary year activities, find us on Facebook at Southern Overberg Branch or on the BotSoc website.