

Looking back, looking forward

A hundred years of conserving our flora

by **John Yeld**, environmental journalist, Independent Newspapers



One of BotSoc's key projects was the Agulhas Plain Project that evolved from the nuclear power plant threat – that eventually led to the new Agulhas National Park being established.
Photo: Stephen Voget.

On an early winter's day in May 1913, mining magnate and Member of the Legislative Assembly, Sir Lionel Phillips rose to address the relatively recently constituted South African Parliament on a subject that, by his own admission, he'd known very little about until quite shortly beforehand. But he'd been well tutored for the task at hand, and he later recalled – somewhat immodestly – that he'd managed to seize the imagination and enthusiasm of his colleagues: 'The House became full and attention riveted.'

The subject of Phillips's speech was the need for a National Botanic Garden, and the debate – or rather, endorsement, because there was no disagreement – that ensued marked the germination of the idea that had been planted years previously by the MP's able tutor, the indefatigable botanist Prof. Harold Pearson. Now, finally, after earlier efforts dating back over some 60 years had all ended 'in nothing but desultory and spasmodical speeches', Pearson's seed and the nurturing environment created by Phillips's word skills allowed a metaphorical plant to take root and grow. And it produced two magnificent blooms in the form of the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden and the Botanical Society of South Africa (BotSoc), now the largest membership-based environmental non-government group in the country.

Phillips was almost certainly not alone among his peers as having only a rudimentary knowledge of botany and horticulture. Among the committee of distinguished Cape citizens who met on 8 March 1912 and effectively brought the then-named National Botanical Society into being, only one stood out as a botanical specialist, even though he was actually a pharmacist by training: Dr Rudolf Marloth, eminent author of the monumental six-volume *The Flora of South Africa*.

Yet these committee members were all sufficiently moved by both the passion and warnings of Pearson – '(He) pointed out the way in which the native plant life was being eliminated by exotics and the depredations of ignorant gatherers,' Phillips recalled in

his 1924 book *Some Reminiscences* – and presumably also by their own personal experiences of places like Table Mountain to become involved and to promote the development of Kirstenbosch. Thus too, presumably, were the other early BotSoc members motivated. But for many of them – apart, perhaps, from those dedicated volunteers who worked at Kirstenbosch or those members who served on the Wildflower Protection Section Committee and the Alien Clearance Committee – it was essentially a 'tea garden' hobby. The new botanic garden was, or would in time become, a delightful place to visit for social occasions, but an understanding of the significance of indigenous vegetation and an appreciation of the increasingly urgent need for its study and conservation was largely absent.

This scenario persisted as late as the 1950s, when the founding Kirstenbosch BotSoc membership continued to be dominated by an upper class social set. One of the Society's most illustrious members, Dr John Rourke, recalled that when he'd joined in 1957, BotSoc's main function had been to raise funds for the management of Kirstenbosch: 'It was very much a garden party society, and the big events were visits to members' gardens with fabulous spreads of scones and cakes. There was little talk of indigenous flora.'

That has changed dramatically, and today's 20 000-plus members are a very different species to their early Twentieth Century counterparts. Some of them have undoubtedly signed

up to BotSoc just to gain free access to Kirstenbosch or their local National Botanical Garden, but the vast majority of members have a deep passion for this country's spectacular and wonderfully diverse indigenous flora, and support the nine National Botanical Gardens (now managed by the South African National Biodiversity Institute, or SANBI) where it is showcased with far more than just a free entry ticket in mind.

They willingly volunteer to help – for example, at BotSoc's annual plant sales, or by leading visitors and pupils on environmental educational tours through the various gardens, acting as garden guides, herbarium assistants, plants sales organizers and many more. And they are equally quick and willingly rise to its defence when it is threatened – as they did when they mobilised opposition to the proposed Kirstenbosch freeway of the early 1970s that would have cut a swathe through this beloved landscape, and to the foolish 1994 proposal to construct a nuclear power station on the Agulhas Plain in 1994 that would have put rare and endangered plant communities at risk.

However committed and passionate they may be, most BotSoc members are, like Phillips and his cohort, not trained botanists or ecologists. As a result, they have over the full century of the Society's existence, but particularly since the emergence of a heightened global environmental consciousness during the 1960s and '70s, looked to BotSoc to provide significant leadership in these fields. They have expected – and continue to expect – the Society to formulate appropriate strategies and develop responses to promote the conservation of indigenous flora and to protect it from insensitive developments, invasive alien vegetation, damaging mining, poor farming methods, ill-considered government policies and a host of other threats.

BotSoc has, to a degree, played this leadership role since its inception, but its involvement increased exponentially during the last three decades of the Twentieth Century and the first decade of the Twenty-first Century as conservation demands snowballed. This new level of involvement essentially started with the 1974 decision to merge the semi-independent Wildflower Protection Section Committee and Alien Clearance Committee into the Flora Conservation Committee (FCC) directly under the control of Council. This marked the real start of BotSoc's conservation era, for the FCC was extremely active and the Society became involved in numerous conservation and

education programmes, projects and initiatives, both within the National Botanical Gardens but – particularly – elsewhere in South Africa.

In 1987, BotSoc Council appointed former RAF pilot Wouter van Warmelo as the Society's first Conservation Liaison Officer, initially on a one-day-a-week basis and later full-time. Also not a botanist, Van Warmelo's real skills lay in assessing problems and then finding the appropriate experts to deal with them – particularly after the introduction of the Environment Conservation Act of 1989 with its many statutory requirements – and he was also successful at fundraising. Initially on his own during his four-and-a-half year term, he was later joined by others, including Field Conservation Officer Phillip Ivey, a botanist specializing in dealing with invasive alien vegetation issues who was one of several appointed during the period 1986-1999 to respond to environmental impacts and to drive projects.

"The vast majority of members have a deep passion for this country's spectacular and wonderfully diverse indigenous flora."

The 1990s were a period of intense activity, particularly around issues of environmental impact assessments (EIAs), environmental policy and the initiation of various ad hoc conservation projects, most of them undertaken by university students on a part-time basis. About 30 projects had been completed by the mid-1990s, most in the Cape but including one aimed at enhancing the protection of Swaziland's indigenous forests and another relating to afforestation in the then Eastern Transvaal, now Mpumalanga. The hugely increased conservation activity was reflected in the budgets. As late as 1991, conservation project funds totalled just over R320 000, but by 1996 this figure was R560 000 and in 2004 it had reached R2.5 million.

The real sea change, though, occurred in 1994 as leading BotSoc members sought to come to terms with the democratization



ABOVE: Wouter van Warmelo, the BotSoc's first full time Conservation Liaison Officer.

of South Africa. At a Strategic Planning Conference, delegates asked how BotSoc could add value to the objectives of the new government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) – the overarching national strategy of the new government – while at the same time maintaining the Society's core interest and niche focus. As well as developing a new mission statement for the democratic era, they also came up with a number of projects, five of them key, and the outcomes of which were crucial to determining how BotSoc would operate into the future and that enhanced the Society's growing reputation and status as a serious conservation player.

These five projects were:

- paying unemployed people to clear invasive alien vegetation from Devil's Peak, a very significant forerunner to the highly acclaimed national Working for Water programme that emerged later;
- the Waterwise Gardening campaign;
- an award-winning Educational Poster series and accompanying workbooks about each of the country's biomes;
- the production of a fine-scale conservation plan for the Cape Flats, an initiative that resulted in the objective identification of 38 core flora conservation sites; and
- the Agulhas Plain Project that evolved from the nuclear power plant threat and that led eventually to a new national park being established.

'Crucial to the success of these projects was the realization that collaboration (partnerships), innovation in leading by



ABOVE: 'Fynbos', one of the BotSoc Educational Poster series illustrated by Jeanette Loedolf.

example, and a catalytic approach were essential drivers,' explained Executive Director Dr Bruce McKenzie, who became BotSoc's first Director in 1996 and who was joined by Dr Dave McDonald as Deputy Director four years later. It was a marked change from the conventional conservation model of simply supporting protected areas like nature reserves and protecting wildflowers.

At the turn of the millennium, BotSoc accepted another fundamental change in its conservation strategy – a change that would also significantly influence national conservation strategy and even international conservation practice, through World Bank-sponsored projects. Under the leadership of strategic adviser Prof. Richard Cowling, it was decided to embark on proactive projects that would contribute towards an overall strategic conservation plan and implementation programme.

But because of limited resources, it was not possible to immediately work on a national scale, so the focus was limited to two internationally recognized 'biodiversity hotspots': the Cape Floristic Region and the Succulent Karoo, both largely within the former Cape Province and among the most species-rich areas on the sub-continent containing the highest levels of plant endemism. To achieve this, BotSoc in 2000 appointed a six-person

Cape Conservation Unit, headed by Kristal Maze, that would be 'strategic, catalytic and collaborative' and project- and partner-driven.

The unit's establishment coincided with a profound change in conservation philosophy and practice in South Africa. Historically, most conservation efforts had occurred within state-owned protected areas like national parks and nature reserves, and privately-owned land was largely ignored. Now, however, came the realization that it was through co-operation that people could best protect the country's globally unique biodiversity while at the same time benefitting from the real economic opportunities and sustainable livelihoods that it offered – especially, but not exclusively, in rural areas. The term 'mainstreaming biodiversity' – that is, integrating biodiversity conservation within the major economic sectors like agriculture, tourism and mining – became the keystone of national conservation strategy and the focus of most of BotSoc's conservation efforts.

In the Cape Floristic Region, the C.A.P.E. (Cape Action for People and the Environment) programme that had emerged from the \$12.3 million Global Environment Facility (GEF) grant in late 1997 best reflected this new conservation mindset. A Memorandum of Understanding was developed and signed in September 2001 by 20 major implementing agencies working as partners – and one of them was BotSoc, with Cape Conservation Unit members playing a significant role in developing strategy for this over-arching large-scale, ecosystem-based conservation initiative.

Just a small percent of members' subscriptions went to funding the administration of the Cape Conservation Unit; other funding came largely through the C.A.P.E. programme from the GEF and the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF). One of Maze's major successes was the ambitious Cape Lowlands Conservation Programme, that aimed to secure the *in situ* conservation of threatened and irreplaceable plant habitats on the Cape Flats and in the coastal lowlands. It also raised awareness among key land-use decision-makers, planners, conservation agencies, landowners and international donor agencies about the critical state of many lowland habitats and their biodiversity importance. Completed in January 2004, its many successful outcomes included identifying priority conservation sites as part of a 20-year 'Renosterveld vision' and the re-discovery of several plant species believed extinct.

A parallel project was the Cape Lowlands: Incentives for Private Landowners to

Conserve Rare Habitats, initiated by Maze's colleague Mark Botha. This highly innovative and successful project developed both incentives and disincentives for private landowners – more than 80% of South Africa's surface area is in private hands – to conserve natural areas on their properties in the seriously threatened lowlands and it paved the way for multi-million rand government-led follow-ups. Both of these projects have been hailed as foundational, because major national projects are now operated according to the innovative mechanisms and strategies developed here through experimentation.

When Maze left to join SANBI in October 2003, Botha and Dr Mandy Driver became joint leaders, and the following year the Conservation Unit dropped the 'Cape' from its title to emphasize its now national role.

Driver played a leading role in the National Spatial Biodiversity Assessment that led to the publication of a national-level map indicating the conservation status of the country's various ecosystems, while another significant project successfully completed by the unit was led by Charl de Villiers to align EIAs, and resulting land-use decisions, with conservation of biodiversity priorities in the Western Cape. The Conservation Unit was a major player in the development of the SKEP (Succulent Karoo Ecosystem Programme) and STEP (Subtropical Thicket Ecosystem Programme) bioregional plans through C.A.P.E.

With one of the high points national recognition through the 2005 'Greening Award' from the *Mail & Guardian*, arguably the golden age of BotSoc's conservation successes ended in 2010 when the Conservation Unit was discontinued as external C.A.P.E.-linked funding for its projects ended.

There is no gainsaying BotSoc's formidable conservation track record, and as it engages its Centenary year, it can look back with rightful pride at 100 years of helping to protect the sub-continent's globally unique and fantastically rich plant diversity.

On the future, the current executive director, Zaitoon Rabaney, is understandably upbeat. The Society's current involvements are comprehensive and retain the heavy emphasis on partnerships. For example, it is a key partner with SANBI in CREW (Custodians of Rare and Endangered Wildflowers), a nationally implemented programme that involves volunteers from the public in the monitoring and conservation of threatened plants. Celebrating its tenth anniversary this year, CREW has been hailed as making a major contribution to biodiversity conservation

by collecting data that is invaluable in updating the Red List and surveying many species of conservation concern, among its many achievements as a 'citizen science' programme.

BotSoc supports the key Stewardship programme that has brought a substantial area of privately owned land into conservation management. For example, the Critical Ecosystems Partnership Fund (CEPF) has identified the Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany Centre of Endemism as a critical biodiversity hotspot, and is currently funding conservation projects in this area. BotSoc successfully applied for funding to implement Biodiversity Stewardship in eight botanically significant sites in KwaZulu-Natal from 2012 to 2014, including the proposed Hlomohlo nature reserve that contains a small but viable population of the critically endangered cycads *Encephalartos aemulans*.

BotSoc remains a major partner of the recently reinvigorated C.A.P.E. programme, the 20-year partnership of government and civil society aimed at conserving and restoring the biodiversity of the Cape Floristic Region and the adjacent marine environment, while delivering significant benefits to the people of the region.

The Society continues to make a direct and indirect input into national and international biodiversity conservation initiatives and programmes. For example, in September 2012 Executive Director Zaitoon Rabaney's attendance at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in the Republic of Korea helped ensure that BotSoc is aligning its conservation strategy with the global conservation agenda. This year, it co-hosted with SANBI a key workshop aimed at helping South Africa achieve the conservation goals it committed to as signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity. At this workshop, conservationists and botanists met to discuss the challenges of preserving South Africa's globally significant biodiversity, where one in four plant species is of conservation concern. The workshop was part of the programme to develop the new National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan that is part of South Africa's obligations under the Biodiversity Convention and that will in turn feed into the global Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020. And it wasn't

just biodiversity that was discussed here; the workshop focused particularly on co-ordinating work on indigenous knowledge research, because much work remains to be done on documenting this indigenous knowledge – particularly of the descendants of the original Khoe and San people of southern Africa.

BotSoc is also indirectly involved in the international conservation arena – through the current Centenary Silver Tree Restoration Project that it is partnering with SANParks and that also involves the international Millennium Seed Bank Project.

It's no secret that BotSoc faces some serious challenges as it faces the next 100 years. A major challenge – probably not unanimously conceded – is that its membership still comes nowhere near reflecting the broad sweep of South African society. This is not a problem peculiar to the Society, of course; groups and organizations throughout the country are grappling with just this issue. But to keep BotSoc relevant and buoyant in South Africa's future, a way will have to be found to draw in members and supporters from across the entire social spectrum and to reflect all of their concerns. A rural Pondo woman who feels her agrarian livelihood being threatened by a national toll road project must be as comfortable calling on the Society for assistance as a Johannesburg banker concerned at the potential demise of endangered plant species if a nuclear power station is constructed near his

"Mainstreaming biodiversity ... became the keystone of national conservation strategy and the focus of most of BotSoc's conservation efforts."



ABOVE: Ismail Ebrahim, CREW Project Manager for the Cape. The BotSoc is a major partner in CREW (Custodians of Rare and Endangered Wildflowers).

holiday home in Cape St Francis. A pupil from Kamieskroon fascinated by her region's spring flower displays must be able to get assistance from BotSoc to follow a career in botany.

It's not being party political to agree that South Africa's major challenges are poverty, unemployment and inequality. Salim Fakir, then chairman of SANBI, wrote in 2003 that one of BotSoc's strengths was that it had been able to maintain its niche focus by concentrating on the promotion and conservation of indigenous plants, but added: 'The challenge that lies before the Society and its partners is how to make its work more relevant to broader society and economy.' Fakir rightly acknowledged that BotSoc was indeed already adapting, and this process has continued since then, particularly through the conservation emphasis on mainstreaming biodiversity. But if it's to thrive and grow for another 100 years, and to fulfil its mandate of 'winning the hearts, minds and material support of individuals and organizations, wherever they may be, for the conservation, cultivation, study and wise use of the indigenous flora and vegetation of southern Africa', BotSoc's adaptation will have to be quicker, and more profound. 🌱



www.teniquatreetops.co.za
044 356 2868

Tree house accommodation in pristine indigenous forest, Garden Route