

Times

Edition 2. August 2024
www.wessa.org.za



Young voices for the planet
Emihle Mkhize's green crusade



Dear WESSA Community,

As we step into the second edition of the WESSA Times newsletter, I am both proud and excited to share our recent achievements and ongoing efforts. Our newly redesigned website is a key highlight in our digital advancement. It enhances our online presence and ensures the impact of our work as well as our resources are engaging and accessible, reflecting our transformative work we are so passionate about.

We celebrated Women's Month by acknowledging the incredible women at WESSA, whose dedication and passion motivate and encourage us to do more. Their contributions are invaluable, and we honour their commitment to environmental stewardship and sustainable development.

Our partnership with UNICEF South Africa through the Youth Environmental Reporters and Advocates (YERA) Programme has been particularly impactful. This collaboration has empowered 400 young reporters across 40 schools in SA and is proving catalytic to further projects with this global movement and organisation.

We celebrated a significant achievement within our Eco-Schools Programme where one of our dedicated Eco-Schools teachers was honoured with the prestigious Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) Global Teacher Award. This recognition attests to our educators' hard work and innovative approaches to promoting environmental awareness and education for sustainable development in schools across South Africa. And, we have now taken the Eco-Schools programme to Zimbabwe and in partnership with Children in the Wilderness.

I hope this edition inspires you as much as it inspired us to create it.

Warm regards,

Cindy-Lee Cloete
Acting CEO of WESSA



**Photo Credit – John Wesson*

Contents

- Young voices for the planet Emihle Mkhize’s green crusade
- WESSA uMngeni Valley Education Centre receives accreditation and exhibits from South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement (SAASTA)
- The WESSA South32 Eco-Hub Project has a positive impact on South African youth by transforming lives and communities.
- South African teacher Aziezah Essop’s triumph in global environmental education
- Empowering youth in conservation Zuzile Mpanza’s remarkable rise with WESSA
- Expanding Horizons
WESSA’s Eco-Schools programme takes root in Zimbabwe
- Birds Of The Magaliesberg “A journey of discovery”
- Explore, engage, and connect with our new website



Young voices for the planet

Emihle Mkhize's green crusade



E Mihle Mkhize, a grade 10 pupil and dedicated young reporter at Glenhaven Secondary School in Verulam, KwaZulu-Natal, has taken proactive steps toward environmental advocacy. She is a proud participant in the Youth Environmental Reporters and Advocates (YERA) Programme,

a collaborative initiative by UNICEF South Africa and WESSA (Wildlife and Environmental Society of South Africa). This initiative empowers 400 young reporters, predominantly girls, along with 80 educators across 40 schools in South Africa. The YERA Programme integrates the Young Reporters for the Environment (YRE) approach, encouraging youth to investigate local environmental issues, conduct research and interviews, and create journalistic pieces such as articles, photos, or videos to raise awareness and educate others.

After a two-day induction at uMngeni Valley Nature Reserve, Emihle acquired essential skills, including water quality monitoring using miniSASS, conducting tap water testing, impactful article writing, leadership development, and capturing powerful stories through photography and videography. Equipped with these essential skills to drive climate justice and environmental advocacy, she is motivated and inspired to make a positive impact on her school environment. She has taken on the responsibility of cleaning up litter around the school and actively collaborates with other young reporters to raise awareness about crucial environmental issues in the community. As a member of the Eco Avengers, Emihle plays a pivotal role

in advocating for environmental care and instilling a sense of responsibility among her peers. Her commitment to environmental stewardship extends beyond school. At home, she spends time gardening and recycling waste, particularly plastic bottles. This dedication emphasises the importance of increasing environmental awareness, education, and empowering individuals to amplify the value of their ideas.

Emihle says she draws inspiration from Nelson Mandela’s profound words: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

Striving to embody this wisdom, Emihle’s actions resonate with the power of education in driving change. Emihle’s story is a shining example of how South African youth, equipped with education and passion, can create significant impact. Through the YERA programme and personal commitment, Emihle is making her mark, embodying the belief that education is indeed the most powerful weapon to change the world.



WATCH VIDEO

WESSA uMngeni Valley Education Centre receives accreditation and exhibits from South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement (SAASTA)



In a remarkable achievement for the Howick community, the WESSA uMngeni Valley Education Centre in KwaZulu-Natal has been officially accredited as a Science Centre by the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI), following a thorough evaluation and recommendation process.

This recognises the centre’s commitment to enhancing science communication and education for school learners and

the surrounding local communities. The accreditation ceremony, held at the WESSA uMngeni Valley Education Centre, was attended by distinguished guests including Deputy Mayor of uMngeni local municipality, Sandile Mnikathi, WESSA acting CEO, Cindy-Lee Cloete, and National Research Foundation (NRF) – South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement (SAASTA) Managing Director, Dr. Mamoeketsi Mosia.

In a significant boost to the centre's capabilities, WESSA received nine new Science and Technology exhibits from NRF SAASTA. These include a multimedia aquarium, metal detector, tower of Hanoi, Dr Panic, star drawing, sundial, dizzy viewer with optics, and a Dobsonian telescope. These interactive exhibits will provide learners with hands-on opportunities to explore and understand scientific concepts. The exhibits will enable individual learners to visit the centre and immerse themselves in the science exhibit room, encouraging self-directed learning and experimentation.

"We are very excited to have partnered with WESSA Education Centre," said Dr. Mamoeketsi Mosia, Managing Director of NRF SAASTA. "We recognise that science centres with live exhibits play a crucial role in growing the science community in South Africa. This handover is a success for us as it helps cultivate a love for science among learners and students in and around Howick."

Deputy Mayor of uMngeni local municipality, Sandile Mnikathi highlighted the dual educational and economic benefits WESSA brings to Howick: "We often talk about the educational value WESSA uMngeni Valley adds to our community, but we frequently need to remember the positive economic

value that its ecotourism brings to our small town. Government cannot do it alone, and we look forward to working closely together and supporting organisations such as WESSA."

Cindy-Lee Cloete, acting CEO of WESSA, shared her excitement about the new developments: "The accreditation and the new exhibits mark a significant milestone for WESSA uMngeni Valley Education Centre. We are committed to enhancing our educational programmes and providing engaging, hands-on learning experiences for our learners. These exhibits will greatly enrich our science communication efforts and help us inspire young learners." WESSA extends an open invitation to parents, learners, schools, and community members to visit and experience these new exhibits. Beginning in October, Science Saturday's will be held on the last Saturday of every month offering an enriching experience for a nominal fee of R15. For more information, please contact 033 330 3931.

The goal at WESSA uMngeni Valley Education Centre is to improve learning through interactive science communication activities. The new exhibits will significantly contribute to achieving this goal by meeting necessary performance and operational standards for optimal functioning as a science centre.

The WESSA South32 Eco-Hub Project

A positive impact on South African youth by transforming lives and communities

Case Study: Umkhoma Eco Hub

[Article on the following page >>](#)



Siphokuhle Mdluli and Samkelisiwe Dlanzi are shining examples of how youth empowerment and sustainable agriculture can transform lives and communities. Both participants in the WESSA South32 Eco-Hub Project, joined the programme in 2022, each with unique backgrounds and aspirations.

Siphokuhle, initially disinterested in agriculture, now holds a profound love for the soil and the art of growing food. Reflecting on her journey, she shares, "Sometimes what we thought we wanted arrives in a different package than expected, but when we unwrap it, it is far more beautiful than we ever could have imagined. It is a gift we never asked for, but we never knew we needed. That is what being part of this



project has meant to me. I have gained lifelong skills that will sustain me." Samkelisiwe, who grew up with exposure to subsistence farming, has found the programme to be an avenue for innovation and growth. "The training has equipped me with theoretical knowledge and allowed me to innovate," she says. Today, uMkhoma Eco Hub is not only providing employment opportunities for unemployed youth in the community but has also signed a partnership agreement with Boxer Supermarket Richards Bay to purchase their entire harvest. Another success story from the South32 Eco-Hub Project is the establishment of eight agribusinesses over the past two years. Eighteen young job seekers have now transformed into job creators, significantly impacting their communities through ventures ranging from poultry farming to crop production. These young agripreneurs received comprehensive support, including solid business plans and exit funds, ensuring the sustainability and growth of their enterprises. The WESSA South32 Eco-Hub Project, launched in 2022 in the King Cetshwayo District, has established four Agriculture Eco-Hubs situated in Amangwe, uMkhoma, uMhlathuze and Madlankala communities.

This initiative is a powerful platform for youth engagement, employability, and entrepreneurship in the agriculture sector, ensuring climate-resilient food systems in the communities.

In just two years, the WESSA South32 Eco-Hub Project has created a transformative impact. By preparing youth ambassadors with comprehensive agribusiness development support and equipping them with tools for self-employment, the initiative has fostered sustainable development and ensured a brighter future for these communities.



South African teacher Aziezhah Essop's triumph in global environmental education

Aziezhah Essop of St Andrew's School for Girls in Bedfordview, Johannesburg, has been celebrated with the prestigious Foundation of Environmental Education (FEE) Global Teacher Award. This accolade highlights her exemplary commitment to environmental education and also marks a historic achievement, as Aziezhah stands as the sole South African among 17 global winners and 46 shortlisted teachers from 16 countries.

During her award-winning presentation, Aziezhah shed light on her school's holistic approach to environmental stewardship. She eloquently showcased how St Andrew's School integrates climate consciousness into both its curriculum and everyday practices, encouraging a culture of sustainability and responsibility among students and staff.

Aziezhah's journey with WESSA (Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa) has been a collaborative and fruitful one. Over the years, her relentless passion and innovative methods have made significant strides in driving environmental awareness and sustainable practices within her school community. Her work embodies the core mission of FEE: to promote and integrate Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in schools and communities worldwide.

The Global Teacher Award by FEE aims to honour educators who go above and beyond

in their professional roles, celebrating their outstanding achievements and spreading their inspirational stories across the globe. Aziezhah's recognition serves as a symbol of professional excellence and a powerful reminder of the impact that a dedicated teacher can have on shaping a sustainable future. Congratulations to Aziezhah Essop for this well-deserved recognition. Her story is truly inspiring to educators and environmental advocates everywhere, showing that with passion, innovation, and commitment, real change is not just possible, but inevitable.



Empowering youth in conservation

Zuzile Mpanza's remarkable rise with WESSA

Article on the following page >>

In the heart of every conservation effort lies a story of passion ignited and challenges conquered.

Zuzile Mpanza's, journey with WESSA began in 2018 during her studies for a Diploma in Nature Conservation at UNISA. Little did she know, a module on water pollution would steer her toward a path of environmental leadership and inspiration.

"I vividly remember my first encounter with WESSA," Zuzile recounts with a smile. "It was at a beach cleanup at Beachwood Mangroves Nature Reserve. That day, I connected with WESSA Youth members who shared their roles and invited me to join as a volunteer." From that unexpected moment, Zuzile's involvement with WESSA blossomed. Attending the WESSA Annual General Meeting in 2019 opened doors to further learning and collaboration. Under the guidance of seasoned members like Phoebe Carnegie, Zuzile embarked on training as a nature guide at Umhlanga Lagoon Nature Reserve and Hawaan Forest in KwaZulu-Natal, broadening her practical skills and understanding of conservation management. "WESSA offered me opportunities and equipped me with leadership training and exposure to various environmental projects," Zuzile reflects. "One memorable project, 'Amanzi Ethu Nobuntu', immersed me in bio-monitoring,

water quality testing, and tackling invasive species and litter management."

In 2021, Zuzile's dedication and training led to a prestigious internship at Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, Spioenkop Game Reserve. "It was a challenging yet fulfilling experience," she shares. "Being one of the few women in a male-dominated field pushed me to excel. Thanks to WESSA, I was prepared for the demands and made a meaningful impact."

Despite the distance and commitments of her internship, Zuzile remained connected to WESSA as a volunteer, participating in events and furthering her environmental advocacy work. Her journey took her to Imfolozi Game Reserve, where she delved into anti-poaching efforts and learned firsthand about rhino conservation—a cause close to her heart since her time at Spioenkop.

"My volunteering journey with WESSA has been transformative," Zuzile emphasises. "It's shaped my career, revealed my strengths and weaknesses, and instilled in me a sense of purpose. Today, I proudly serve as a Nature Guide at Umhlanga Lagoon Nature Reserve, continuing to educate and inspire others." Zuzile's story demonstrates the power of youth leadership in conservation, fueled by mentorship, hands-on experience, and passion. As she continues to advocate for environmental education and action, Zuzile embodies the spirit of WESSA's mission—to create a sustainable future through education, advocacy, and community engagement.

At every step of her journey, Zuzile shines as an example of how dedication and empowerment can make a real difference in the conservation, inspiring others to follow in her footsteps.



"I am grateful for WESSA's support and belief in me," Zuzile concludes. "We can certainly achieve great things for our planet."



Expanding Horizons

WESSA's Eco-Schools programme takes root in Zimbabwe

In a landmark collaboration, WESSA and the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) have partnered with Children in the Wilderness (CITW) to extend the reach of the Eco-Schools programme into Zimbabwe. This initiative marks a significant step forward in encouraging environmental stewardship and sustainability across borders, uniting Zimbabwe and South Africa in a shared mission to educate the next generation of eco-conscious leaders. The partnership was forged with a dynamic three-day training session, led by Nomfundo Ndlovu WESSA's senior manager for Schools and Youth programmes. Designed to equip the CITW team with the tools and knowledge needed to successfully implement the Eco-Schools programme, this training laid the foundation for sustainable environmental education in Zimbabwe. In addition, Nomfundo visited schools across Zimbabwe to directly understand the unique challenges they face.

WESSA's expansion into Zimbabwe is inspiring to schools across Southern Africa. By incorporating eco-lessons into the curriculum, these African schools are now poised to tackle the unique environmental challenges they face with a renewed sense of purpose and determination. The vision behind this expansion is clear: to create a ripple effect of environmental awareness that transcends borders, driving a network of young eco-warriors who will carry the torch of sustainability forward. Through ongoing support, regular follow-ups, and tailored guidance, WESSA ensures that the Eco-Schools programme in Zimbabwe not only takes root but flourishes.

As the programme continues to grow, so too does the bond between Zimbabwe and South Africa—a bond forged in a shared belief that environmental education is the key to a sustainable future. This collaboration is a symbol of what's possible when communities come together with a common goal.





Birds of the Magaliesberg

A journey of discovery

By John Wesson

Born from a passion for birds and a dedication to conservation, “The Birds of the Magaliesberg” project has evolved into a cherished publication, captivating both local enthusiasts and global birding communities. Initiated in 2010 by John Wesson of the Rotary Club of Brits Hartbeespoort and WESSA Northern Areas, this endeavour was initially conceived to commemorate Rotary International’s Centenary while highlighting the rich biodiversity of the Magaliesberg region.

From its inception, the project aimed to raise awareness about the diverse birdlife thriving across Magaliesberg’s three biomes and 14 vegetation types. It showcased a tapestry of habitats—from serene dams to lush gardens, sprawling farms to pristine mountainous terrain—each contributing to the area’s ecological wealth. John Wesson, drawing from his experience in compiling similar publications for regions like Tzaneen and Virginia, highlighted the importance of avitourism in promoting sustainable tourism practices.

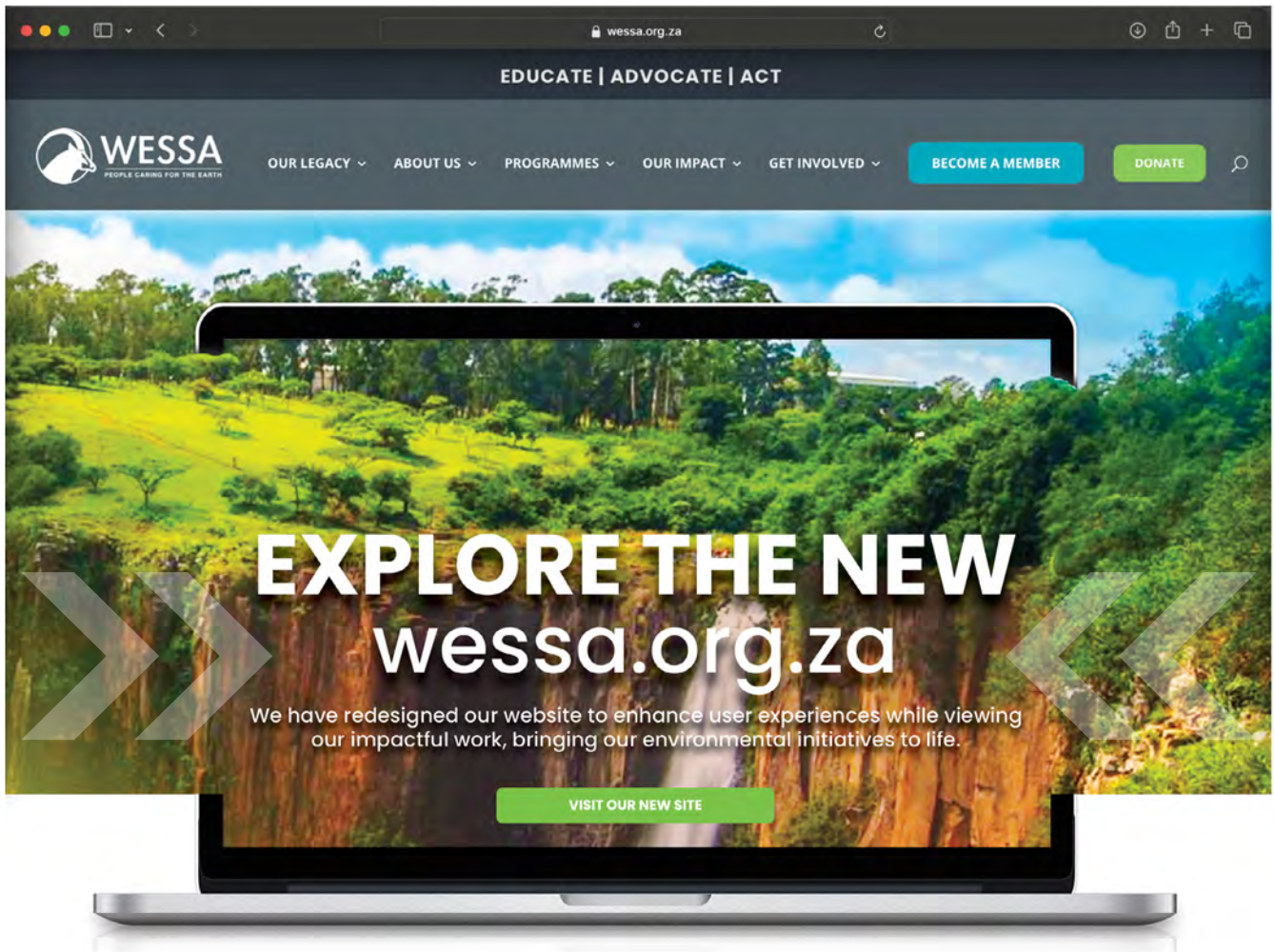
In 2014, the project underwent a significant enhancement with the collaboration of fellow birders Renier and Millene Balt and Jenny Wesson. This update marked a pivotal shift towards utilising the latest SABAP2 data, ensuring accuracy and reliability in documenting the region’s bird species. The revised publication garnered widespread acclaim, resonating with birding enthusiasts nationwide and beyond. Fast forward to 2023, and the project embarked

on an ambitious transformation into a comprehensive e-book. This digital adaptation, covering the Magaliesberg Biosphere and extending to Vaalkop Dam, introduced new features such as specialised bird galleries and updated data lists. Contributions from writers and photographers within WESSA and BirdLife Harties enriched the e-book, spotlighting key birding hotspots and showcasing the region’s avian diversity. The culmination came in 2024, when “The Birds of the Magaliesberg” e-book earned endorsement from BirdLife South Africa and inclusion on the SABAP2 and BirdLife South Africa websites. Continually updated with new sightings and field research findings, the e-book remains a dynamic resource for birders and conservationists alike. Plans are underway for a forthcoming hardcover edition, ensuring that this invaluable resource reaches even more enthusiasts and stakeholders.

As we reflect on this journey, we are grateful for the driving forces behind this project: WESSA Northern Areas, the Rotary Club of Brits Hartbeespoort, and BirdLife Harties. Their support has been instrumental in realising the project’s vision of promoting environmental stewardship and preserving the natural heritage of the Magaliesberg region. “The Birds of the Magaliesberg” inspires us to continue protecting our natural world.

To explore “The Birds of the Magaliesberg” e-book and delve into the avian wonders of this region, visit [here >>](#)





WESSA (Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa) is proud to present our redeveloped website, a significant enhancement in our digital strategy. This redesigned platform elevates our online presence with its inclusive, interactive, and visually engaging features.

The upgraded site effectively highlights the impactful work we are committed to.

Our goal is to offer a streamlined, user-friendly experience, allowing visitors to explore our programmes and projects, access resources, and connect with our community with greater

ease. Each section, from educational resources to volunteer opportunities, is crafted to inspire action and encourage a connection with our environment.

Visitors will now get to explore our rich content through interactive maps, impactful imagery and videos that bring our work to life. The new design emphasises accessibility, ensuring that everyone, can engage with our content effortlessly. We will be constantly updating articles, events, newsletters, announcements, and successes in the News and Publications section.

We invite you to explore our new digital home www.wessa.org.za, and become an integral part of our ever-growing WESSA family. As we look ahead, anticipate exciting and innovative enhancements that will take our digital presence to new heights.

“A fresh, interactive look, easier navigation, more upgrades to come.”



**VISIT OUR
NEW SITE**



PARTNER WITH US IN CONSERVATION

You can become a champion for nature from as little as R150 monthly. The more you give, the more we can achieve together.

Your contribution makes you part of the WESSA team, there with us in spirit as we take further, meaningful action to restore natural areas like the uMngeni Valley Nature Reserve.



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