



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

2018 AGM



IN 1926, when WESSA was established as the Wildlife Society, it was eight years after the end of what was then called “The War to End all Wars”. More than 16 million people lost their lives as a direct result of that war. It was unthinkable at the time that, just over twenty years later, another war would embroil most of Earth, this time leading to between 50 and 85 million fatalities. In 1927, as WESSA celebrated its first birthday, the global human population reached 2 billion.

In those early years, the focus of the organization was on nature conservation – more specifically wildlife conservation; and it is well-catalogued that WESSA played an enormously important role in biodiversity conservation in the country, including valuable contributions to the establishment of both the Kruger National Park and Addo Elephant National Park. The ongoing existence of WESSA for about 40 years saw its focus almost exclusively on the main environmental concerns of the day, which were wildlife and conservation-related.

Imagine plucking a founder-member from WESSA and placing him or her into the organization in 2018 (I'll call this member a “him” for the rest of this story). Before even considering how environmental concerns have changed in 90-odd years, he would encounter the completely unfamiliar concepts of cellular telephones, the internet, social media, and broad-based black economic empowerment; which all in their own ways have changed the manner that WESSA, and many other organisations, operate. He might well find it odd that WESSA changed its name to the Wildlife and Environment Society of Southern Africa in the mid 1990s. This reflected a change in focus from almost exclusively ‘green’ issues in the society’s first several decades to increasing focus on other environmental issues, including brown issues – issues that did not register as environmentalists’ concerns until many years after WESSA’s establishment.

In the 1920s, our WESSA member would no doubt have hailed the development of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) as refrigerants and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) for transformer coolant use. I'll assume our hypothetical WESSA member was in his twenties in 1926, so if he wasn't in the military in 1939 he might have noticed and welcomed the potential of the development of the pesticide DDT. If he survived the Second World War, he may have been excited by the first generation of electricity using nuclear power in the 1950s and the development of the plastic bag in the 1960s. And all the while, the main environmental concerns of him and his colleagues would have been primarily wildlife-related.

He would undoubtedly have trouble believing that the world’s population is now approaching 8 billion people. He would probably be shocked to realise today that those wonderful developments he saw introduced back in the early- to mid-20th century have become notable environmental hazards. He would also be stunned if you told him that more than 7 million people die from air pollution-related causes every year, and almost another million from polluted water. In every two years, then, pollution kills almost as many people as were killed in the whole of World War One. He would be horrified by the fact that South Africa’s rivers are full of untreated sewage and that we are ranked eleventh of all countries in relation to mismanagement of plastic waste, much of it joining the approximately eight million metric tons of waste that annually ends up in our oceans.

There are, I think, several messages that we can derive from this story. First, exciting innovations may often turn out to be problematic, which is why the precautionary principle is (or ought to be) such an important element of environmental law. There are obvious examples even today. Are genetically modified organisms the future of world food security or harmful to human health and the environment? What about hydraulic fracturing? Second, about half of WESSA’s history took place before the dawning of the environmental era in the 1970s, prompted by events such as Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* in 1962 and the Torrey Canyon oil tanker disaster in 1967. Many of today’s

environmental concerns, particularly the brown issues, were not on the agenda before 1970. This was also the year in which Earth's Overshoot day – the day on which human consumption exceeds the capacity of nature to regenerate – took place on the 29th December. 2018 saw the earliest ever Earth Overshoot day of 1 August.

The third feature of the story is that if you had asked our WESSA member of 1926 to predict what he would find on our desks – both literally and figuratively - in 2018, it is doubtful that he would begin to scratch the surface of our current realities and imperatives. Just as the future in 1926 was uncertain, we are faced with numerous uncertainties today. A quick scan through the media will highlight issues such as land reform and talk about expropriation without compensation; unhappiness about the fuel price; rampant unemployment and poverty feeding into economic concerns; and worries about the future of tertiary education in South Africa amidst pressures on universities that would be regarded as unthinkable even twenty years ago. I've mentioned issues that are not specifically environmental issues, but one thing that most of us appreciate today is the interrelatedness of aspects that do not appear at first glance to have anything to do with each other. Just as poverty can lead to negative impacts on the physical environment, for example, the converse holds equally true.

Faced with so many uncertainties in our environment – physical, social and economic, among other features – a non-governmental organisation such as WESSA has to be flexible and attuned to opportunities that present themselves in the market within which we operate. If WESSA were still operating along the lines that we followed in 2004, when I joined the WESSA board, it is likely that we would have folded. The reason for this is not that we were doing anything wrong in 2004. Circumstances have changed so significantly in less than 15 years, that we have had to adapt in order to remain environmentally and socially relevant while maintaining an even financial keel.

We have identified that we are unable to sustain operations in aspects that have traditionally been a strength of WESSA such as wildlife conservation and environmental watchdog roles - at least not in the way that WESSA employees are paid to perform these functions. We have recognized that these functions can still be (and are still being) performed by unremunerated members of WESSA. We are very happy, therefore, to see light on the horizon in relation to developing a model that adequately accommodates the efforts of members and friends of WESSA within the professional structure of the organization, something with which we have been grappling for several years. Given our theme of promotion of participation in caring for the Earth, a coherent relationship with our membership is certainly welcome. We look forward to reaping the benefits of this in the future.

Our role as the Board is largely to fulfil the requirements of corporate governance, as WESSA is a registered non-profit company. I am happy to say that the executive management team at WESSA is performing admirably as compared to best practice in areas such as financial security and human resources management. As far as the substantive focus of WESSA is concerned, in 1968, WESSA started one of the first environmental education projects in South Africa. It is thus fitting that 50 years on from then, WESSA still stands at the forefront of environmental education in the country. Whether the education focus is on our Eco Schools project, with close to 900 member schools and potential to grow this number; our education centres; or the highly-successful work skills programme; our educational focus is indeed impressive.

I want to mention one component of our educational operations to highlight how important it is to be able to adapt to changing circumstances. One of our assets that is really a hallmark of WESSA is the Umngeni Valley reserve. In recent years, our education centre and related operations there have been running at a loss, with the result that we even considered the option of selling the land at one stage. With an innovative new plan known as eSteam – Science, technology, engineering, art and maths

within an environmental context – the centre is now running in the black and there are ambitious but not unrealistic plans to improve even more.

Our Bush Pigs centre in Modimolle, technically still not entirely under the WESSA umbrella, will shortly be included within the WESSA fold and is undergoing significant capital improvements in order to build upon the loyal support it has received from numerous schools in the Gauteng region.

WESSA is also heavily involved in various ecotourism initiatives such as the well-known and established international Blue Flag beach programme; a new WESSA initiative Green Coast; and another international label, the Green Key in the hospitality industry.

In keeping with our approach to public participation, WESSA also has projects aimed at youth development, where we have been identified as a quality implementer of large government-funded programmes, including two new Youth Environmental Services Programmes in the Free State and Northern Cape provinces.

We still have some member groups directly involved in wildlife conservation, while our Ecological Infrastructure and Sustainability programme is currently aimed at combating one of the world's biggest threats to biodiversity, alien and invasive species.

I have not mentioned every initiative in which WESSA is involved although I would like to. It is clear that in those areas in which we are working, we are producing professional services and are giving very careful consideration on how to remain relevant and ahead of the game. For the second year now, several members of the Board and I were kindly invited to WESSA's strategic safari, where we were fortunate to witness the WESSA executive and their teams' strategic positioning in relation to both current and possible future projects. Not only was the substantive thinking impressive, but one could not but be impressed by the energy, spirit and committed teamwork of the sixty-odd WESSA employees present at the safari. It left us confident of the direction that WESSA is taking.

From a board perspective, we are tweaking things on an ongoing basis in order to ensure the optimal combination of expertise in relation to both corporate governance and WESSA's substantive focus, as well as demographic representivity. I am convinced that we have a highly competent and committed set of board members and I am proud to be at the head of such a team. I particularly want to thank Dr Howard Hendricks, whose sage support as vice-chair is always appreciated. I also want to single out for special thanks the two regional representatives on the board, Dr Jenny Gon and Dr Paul Bartels, whose efforts particularly in relation to membership and improving its structure in the organization have often gone beyond what could reasonably be expected.

As I indicated earlier, we are facing a future full of uncertainties – economic, social and environmental. In recent years we have made some difficult decisions in relation to how we as an organization and a Board operate. I firmly believe that those decisions have placed us in a position where we can face our uncertain future with confidence and continue to be leaders in promoting participation in caring for the Earth.

Michael Kidd
WESSA Chairman