



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

2019 AGM



Almost every day, one comes across a news item that makes one fear for the future of life on Earth as we know it. Since WESSA's last AGM, the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has reported that we have approximately 12 years to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has warned that 'the simple act of breathing' is killing 7 million people per year and harming billions more. The WWF (World Wildlife Fund) reports that losses in vertebrate species averaged 60% between 1970 and 2014. Europe has had record temperatures and there has been a 'precipitous' loss in Antarctic sea ice. Closer to home, it has been reported that the Vaal River is more 'sewage pit than a river'; charismatic species such as rhinoceros and elephant are suffering continued poaching; and there are increasing numbers of disputes between communities and mining companies over use of people's land. I need hardly mention that, in addition to the environmental crises, there is considerable economic and political uncertainty as we head for the 2020s.

Looking at these facts – and these are the tip of the iceberg – it is perhaps tempting to think that anyone in an environmental NGO is wasting their time. We in WESSA, however, are probably in an advantaged position compared with many other environmental activists due to our focus on people, and particularly young people. One of the stories of the last year has been the rise to prominence

of Greta Thunberg, the 15-year old climate activist, and initiatives such as school strikes for climate. Despite knowledge of the dire consequences facing humankind and the other beings with whom we share the planet if we (humans) do not change our behaviour, people of our age have continued to behave as we always have. There is not much historical evidence for hope that governments and states will turn around our impact on the planet, but young people bring us hope.

That is why there is a huge feel-good factor in WESSA's environmental education initiatives, which continue to have much success and impact. While our Eco Schools and related projects maintain solid progress, there are exciting developments with our educational centres. Our existing Education Centres are being upgraded and new programmes focusing on eSTEAM – science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics, within an environmental context – are being implemented. We have a new Education Centre in Sishen in the Northern Cape and some others potentially in the pipeline.

The youth is also heavily involved in our coastal projects – Blue Flag and Green Coast, as well as the Department of Environmental Affairs Youth Environmental Service (DEA YES), for which WESSA is the implementing agent in two provinces, and also in the African-German Youth Initiative. Our workskills training continues to attract the highest praise. WESSA's involvement in these projects

speaks to (at least) two attributes: our focus on involving people in caring for the Earth and our reputation as reliable, trustworthy and effective project implementers.

WESSA currently employs 702 people and has an annual budget of more than R50 million. This entails astute and vigilant governance and, in my opinion, the current Board and executive management of WESSA are more than meeting those responsibilities. While I am justifiably singing the praises of the management echelons of WESSA, I have been exceptionally privileged to have met and seen in action many of the WESSA staff working at levels below executive management, and I have been extremely impressed with their professionalism coupled with enthusiasm. I have not mentioned all of our projects in this short report, but any that have been omitted have not been left out because they are not activities of which we can be proud.

But, of course, WESSA is not just a professional organization. Our members are the historical pillar of the organization and will continue to be a source of great strength to WESSA in the future, often in areas that are not well-covered at the level of the so-called 'professional WESSA', such as conservation, once the main focus of the organization. If we think about it, members are often doing and certainly can do exactly what their forebears in the organization used to do before the burgeoning of the permanent structures over the past few decades.

Members' legitimate disgruntlement at certain developments in recent years have led to some tensions that, we hope, have largely been assuaged through recent dialogue. It is hoped that the new Membership Director will play a role in ensuring that there is a collaborative approach to taking WESSA into the coming years and undoubted environmental and other challenges that we are facing.

I will be standing down as Chairman after the AGM in 2019. I am very pleased to announce that my replacement is Mr Ossie Carstens, who is an astute businessman whose business interests are focused on sustainable futures. I am confident that he will be an excellent chairman of a board that is well-capacitated and considerably more demographically representative than the one which I joined in 2004. I have been fortunate to have been supported in the past few years by a CEO, Thommie Burger, who has been a great asset to this organisation.

It has been an immense privilege to be the Chair of an institution that is as well-respected and successful as WESSA. While there has been a lot of tough decision-making in the last 15 years, it has certainly been a lot of fun and it is the WESSA people – staff, members and supporters – who have made it so. The organisation is in very good hands and I wish it all the best in meeting its considerable challenges into the future.

Michael Kidd

WESSA Chairman