



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

2020 AGM



“People caring for the Earth” is a WESSA slogan for longer than I have been involved in the organisation, and in my opinion could not have been a better fit to describe the organisation’s ethos. There are various ways one can contribute to conservation, some of them tangible and a whole host of them intangible. Those intangibles have been put on a pedestal of huge proportions during the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, when the reference and visibility of the tangibles faded.

Even though no official documented evidence is available to link SARS-CoV-2 to the sickness linked to Covid19, there was a flurry of experts around the globe wanting to “do something”, to get to an answer to a sickness that infected people around the world at an unprecedented rate. Similarly, very few, if any, cases of flu were recorded yet, making it an extraordinary phenomenon, bordering on an enigma. It had the power to overturn the world as we know it. Very stringent measures and rules were enforced to prevent the spread of the virus, and yet, on other days, these rules were relaxed almost to a point as if the virus had a will of its own and decided to only infect on some days and in certain conditions. Yet, the conservationist world was almost breathing a sigh of relief as nature had an opportunity to rest without the flurry of activities and stresses that it is being exposed to when economic activities, i.e. the world of poverty and plenty resumed.

Why is this prevalent in the WESSA Chairman’s report? It will probably illustrate how the call to action on many occasions can elevate a different set of tangible outcomes to be presented in the race “to do something”. Conservation agencies and organisations have carved out their individual differentiators or their reason for existence over time, and WESSA is no different. WESSA has a long history in the conservation arena and over time it was realised that educating the youth on conservation issues is probably one of the best legacies to leave – it is sustainable, scaleable, modular and probably most importantly, can move with the times. Return on effort on these types of strategies is very often intangible and will only bear fruit when the youth start taking over the reins in our continuous efforts in protecting our environment. As the previous Chairman mentioned in his report of last year – there is considerable economic and political uncertainty as we head for the 2020s, and probably more so in the aftermaths of the 2020 pandemic. Our programmes, developed and honed over many years, well managed and presented in structures in the organisation, are running the risk of being decimated if the economy does not pick up soon – soon being in the next few months to get some of the wheels rolling again in the next financial year.

We are proud of the structures that have been put in place to make WESSA a well-managed NPO in line with the latest King Codes of Practice. Managing it along these corporate lines are probably one of the main factors and enablers that allowed us to access corporate funding, both from local and international organisations. These management practices instil the trust that funders look for before donor decisions are taken. As a result, reserves soared (at least in the past 10 years) to heights unheard of before. These successes, now tangible results, remain good references to fall back on, and refer to, as we need to map our path through this quagmire and unknown territory. WESSA had to respond swiftly to the economic landscape in April of this year and was forced to go into drastic cost cutting measures which eventually led to retrenchments in an effort to limit cost outflows with the sudden drop in cash inflows when lockdown was announced towards the end of March.

As WESSA’s people-centric approach to its strategies had always been paramount, as it speaks to the education core that runs through them, efforts were made to retain as many of the core of the

structures that made WESSA so successful over the last 10 years, even though these structures will still need cash inflows to support them. I have been privileged to have been involved and work with the WESSA Board and executive management over a number of years and have always stood in awe at the absolute professionalism and focus that they have in approaching and executing their roles and duties. It is unfortunate that we have seen a flurry of resignations in the wake of recent silly, unnecessary, and untimely comments made by fellow Board members. The timing of these comments (racist, derogatory, defamatory and unfair) were so badly received that I have received resignation letters from both the executive directors and four non-executive directors.

The huge loss of institutional and intellectual capacity to the management echelons of WESSA will be hard to replace. I want to use this opportunity to extend my sincere appreciation for the work that ExCo and the Board have done for WESSA over many years and the legacy they have left behind. In 2016 I was part of a Board that inherited a well-developed strategy (an excellent example of how intangible measurables developed into tangible results) with great underlying principles, that has taken this organization's performance from 2009 to 2019 to results unheard of before. This portfolio-driven Board with portfolios in Marketing and Branding expertise, IT expertise, Legal and Governance expertise, Environmental and Conservation expertise, Environmental Education expertise, Project Management expertise and especially strong financial expertise, has catapulted the organization from one that had been plagued with qualified audits to one that attracted accolades for good governance.

The objectives at the time were to have a transformed Board with a clear commitment to gender and racial representivity that would drive the organization to become a professional environmental project-based organization (YES, Blue Flag, etc.), to take the lead in environmental education and to set up a paralegal office for matters affecting conservation and the environment. It has achieved these objectives, in my opinion, in an exemplary fashion. Now, more than ever, a Board of fine character should ensure its stands unified, using this legacy and strength of diversity, to give assurance to its various stakeholders. It needs predominantly, people who know how to run a sizeable business, ensure legal compliance, environmental law and with skills in positioning, marketing and branding in the modern digital era. The required environmental and conservation knowledge is drawn from the membership, supportive stakeholders and the professional staff.

I will be standing down as Chairman after the AGM in 2020. I trust that the new Board will be taking the legacy forward and have the wisdom to lean on members and past management for reference when the need arises. It has been an enormous privilege to be the Chair and part of the Board for the past few years of an organisation steeped in conservation that is as successful as WESSA. I wish the organisation all the best in meeting its considerable challenges into the future.

Ossie Carstens
WESSA Chairman