



CEO REPORT

FOR THE 95TH WESSA AGM
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Andrew Baxter



Just as this report was being penned (with a sense of renewed optimism that the world could be returning to some sort of normalcy) news of Omicron thwarted any upbeat disposition. While normalcy as we once knew it may never return, the fact is that organizations the world over are compelled to find new ways to work and new ways to be effective. At WESSA, we are currently navigating our way through these challenges, whilst managing our talent pool, ensuring exemplary governance, and fulfilling the obligations to our many stakeholders.

The past twelve months have been especially challenging but with the support and guidance from the WESSA Board, the ExCo team have admirably steered the WESSA ship and held a steady course. After eleven months of running the organisation as a collective, ExCo welcomed the appointment by the Board of Andrew Baxter as the new CEO on a full-time basis from September 2021.

Despite the impact of COVID-19 on the four Education Centres, WESSA was able to continue to deliver environmental education programmes and holistic action-learning processes - known as e-STEAM education - through the innovative WESSA on Wheels (WOW) programme. All of these education programmes are linked to the South African CAPS and IEB curriculum to help prepare young South Africans for 21st century living.

The WESSA Schools and Youth Programme has continued to invest in young people by working with schools and teachers to support and improve school curricula, by amplifying the Sustainable Development Goals and by equipping children for a more sustainable future. WESSA continues to reach more than a million South African youth annually. The Groen Sebenza Project, funded by the Department of Forestry Fisheries and Environment (DFFE) was upscaled to 150 graduates during the third quarter of the current financial year. WESSA was appointed as the lead implementer, in partnership with 25 environmental and biodiversity stakeholders, in this presidential stimulus project to support youth in the environmental and biodiversity sector. The objectives of the Groen Sebenza project are to create jobs and to ensure that the training capacity needed to grow this sector has been addressed as the demand for work experience and environmental skills increases. To achieve these broad objectives this project has two key and interlinked components. The first aspect builds on WESSA's experience in implementing work integrated learning and meaningful work experience within the natural resource guardianship landscape, and the second builds on WESSA's experience as an accredited training provider in the environmental sector.

The WESSA Blue Flag Programme is in its 21st year of implementation in South Africa in 2021. South Africa was the first country outside of Europe to join the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) on the Blue Flag programme. Since then, many countries outside of Europe have followed South Africa's example and joined Blue Flag, giving the programme its international recognition. Today the Blue Flag programme is active at 4 671 sites in 47 countries. WESSA is committed to working together with local municipalities and tourism operators to grow the Blue Flag programme in South Africa. The programme provides an excellent international standard for municipalities and tour operators to strive toward. Sites flying the Blue Flag are showing their commitment to conserving our fragile marine and coastal environment, raising environmental awareness and increasing sound environmental practices.

Reflecting on my own experience at WESSA over the past few months, the following anecdote seems most appropriate: During a recent trip to the beautiful Babanango Valley which sweeps down off the high-altitude KZN grasslands and plunges towards the majestic White Umfozoli River, I was offered an opportunity to go horse riding through a new community game reserve. Having grown up around horses I consider myself to be a proficient horseman and filled with nostalgic memories of my youth I immediately exclaimed "Yes!". It proved to be a wild and exciting ride and for the first hour my sole focus was to remain alive as I clung tenaciously to the back of the wild-eyed beast. It was only after a few hours that the ride calmed down and became more

predictable, more enjoyable. No longer pre-occupied with self-preservation, I could begin to take in my surroundings and observe the beauty and complexity of the natural world around me. The horse seemed to sense my firm consistency and calm assurance and he too became less skittish and more certain, more confident. This enabled us to develop trust and the journey became more intuitive. Before long we were riding close to large and potentially dangerous animals - an experience I shall not forget. I relay this anecdote because it's been 100 days since I climbed on the back of the WESSA horse, and I would be remiss in not declaring that it's been a wild ride thus far! There is still some distance to go before we achieve the internal consistency and predictability that WESSA requires to put the organisation on a calm and solid footing for the future. That said, I've ridden similar sorts of horses before and already there are positive signs of progress. The good news is that we have a great horse with tremendous potential. I have been enormously encouraged by the positive sentiment towards WESSA – expressed both externally and internally. In the language of marketers Wessa is what is known as a 'love brand' – an older, trusted brand that carries a reverence based on continuity and reliability. This is a good horse to back. With the exceptional support from the dedicated WESSA board of directors, together with the willingness and expertise from highly capable staff, we have a great platform from which to effect the changes that are required to take WESSA forward, first at a trot and then at a canter.

Since taking office at the beginning of September 2021, I have received many calls and approaches from membership and from the public relating to issues of environmental concern and requesting WESSA's intervention and support. It is reassuring to know that the public regard WESSA as an organisation to turn to for advice and guidance. Central to the future ambition and success of WESSA is the strategic review process which is currently mid-stream and which has achieved the first major milestone – a comprehensive strategic review document that will guide WESSA towards new and important focus areas – thus ensuring that our work is relevant and that we tackle critical environmental challenges such as the climate crisis, biodiversity/habitat loss and the scourge of pollution.

In March 2021, WESSA celebrated 95 years of People Caring for the Earth. As a result of the strategic review process, we are currently planning where to direct our energy and ambition for the next five years, leading up to our centenary. With the strength of the five regions and the enduring commitment from our loyal members, supporters and hardworking staff, WESSA is gearing up to take on the environmental challenges that lie ahead. The WESSA Leadership will continue to rally around the purpose of People Caring for the Earth and we commit to focus on our values of integrity, mutual respect, excellence, innovation, and accountability.

Andrew Baxter
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