



CEO REPORT

For The Financial Year Ended
31 March 2024

*WESSA 98th AGM
5 October 2024*

2023 was a celebration of 98 years of commitment to caring for the Earth and a pivotal year for WESSA as we move closer to our centenary. Standing on the threshold of this monumental milestone, I am filled with pride at how far we have come, and with excitement for the road ahead. Through our programmes in biodiversity conservation and environmental education, we remain on-track in achieving our mission.

WESSA continues to prioritise our core strategy of Educate, Advocate, and Act, which has driven every aspect of our work. Whether it is through our climate action projects, our efforts to protect biodiversity, or our campaigns to reduce pollution, the three pillars of our approach—collaborative education, advocating for change, and taking direct action—are always at the forefront. This triangle of success is not just a philosophy but a way of ensuring that all our programmes are truly impactful. Each of these components is interconnected and together they form the foundation of our success.

Under our *Biodiversity and Habitat Integrity* theme, we have worked tirelessly to restore ecosystems and safeguard species that are vital to the well-being of both people and the planet. Our Green Coast Programme awarded flags to six sites – Kei Mouth, Morgan Bay, Chintsa, Nature's Valley, Gwaing Beach, and Blaauwberg Nature Reserve – that met the 13 criteria for good practice in environmental management and the promotion of sustainable nature-based eco-tourism. Additionally, the WESSA Pangolin Programme was launched in response to the increased threats posed to this scaly mammal. It is an IUCN Red List Species that is considered the most trafficked species on the planet, and victim to escalating human-wildlife conflict scenarios.

WESSA is also proud to continue its leadership in promoting sustainable coastal management through the Blue Flag Programme. For the 2023/2024 season, South Africa's coastline was home to 48 fully accredited Blue Flag beaches, four marinas and six tourism boats that have met the rigorous international standards set by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE). South Africa's ranking of 15th out of 51 countries for the highest number of Blue Flag beaches reflects our significant role in advancing coastal sustainability.

Our efforts to *Reduce Pollution* have seen us launch new educational campaigns and projects aimed at minimising waste and pollution in local communities, encouraging sustainable practices, and holding industries accountable through our partnership with the Extended Producer Responsibility Waste Association of South Africa (eWASA). Our membership Friends Groups, branches, and regions have made significant impacts through numerous clean-ups and rehabilitation projects involving hundreds of members, supporters, and school groups, including engaging the executive team of the Department of Water and Sanitation to address sewerage pollution of Hartbeespoort Dam.

Our *Climate Action* initiatives designed to mitigate the impacts of climate change while empowering communities with knowledge and tools to adapt will be a key focus moving ahead. A significant element of our strategy is our collaboration with UNICEF, which strengthens our capacity to address climate change on a larger scale. The UNICEF Youth Leading Water Resilience Project and the UNICEF Green Rising 'Protect and Restore' Project engage youth, and particularly young women, in climate advocacy and active citizen science leading to improved community resilience.

One of our proudest moments this year was the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the WESSA Eco-Schools programme in South Africa – reaching 4776 schools since 2003. This milestone was commemorated with the hosting of the Environmental Education Association of Southern Africa (EEASA) Conference which brought over 200 international delegates to South Africa and reaffirmed WESSA's leadership role in environmental education, advocacy, and citizen engagement. Our Eco-Schools programme continues to inspire young people to take

care of their environment and become active agents of change. We have expanded our environmental education reach into Namibia and Botswana, with plans to include Zimbabwe and Zambia in the next financial year. This expansion highlights our commitment to environmental education across the region, giving more youth the opportunity to engage with nature and champion better sustainability practices in the future.

WESSA's involvement in the conservation of our biodiversity remains a cornerstone of our work. We actively participated in consultations around the Global Biodiversity Framework and are pleased with the progress made towards the 30x30 implementation plan alongside other NGOs and the Department of Forestry Fisheries and Environment. By participating in sector-wide dialogues, we have ensured that WESSA's voice continues to shape national biodiversity strategies, and this will continue to be a key focus moving forward.

I would also like to highlight our contribution to the Environmental NGO Collaboration, a growing alliance of over 25 environmental NGOs united by the common goal of protecting both people and the planet. This collaboration embodies the values of unity and shared responsibility, and I am proud that WESSA has played a leading role in establishing this partnership under the leadership of our previous CEO, Helena Atkinson.

Our Advocacy Unit, in collaboration with our Environmental Governance Committee (EGC), has been instrumental in ensuring WESSA's voice is heard on key issues affecting South Africa's environment. Our balanced approach was evident, for example, in our comments on the White Paper on the Conservation and Utilisation of Biodiversity, and National Biodiversity Economy Strategy, where we emphasised the interdependence of people and nature, and how our future survival depends on this relationship.

Securing strategic partnerships has been a key area of focus this year and we are pleased to have formalised several partnerships with organisations like SANBI, UNICEF, UNEP, and eWASA that will ensure the sustainability of both WESSA and the environments we seek to protect. These partnerships are more than just funding streams—they are relationships built on a shared vision for a future where people and nature thrive together.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the dedication and passion of our incredible WESSA staff. To each one of you, I want to extend my heartfelt thanks. Your commitment to stabilising and accelerating our focus areas—Climate Action, Biodiversity Integrity, and Pollution Reduction—has been instrumental in everything we have achieved through 2023.

To our funders and partners, we could not have reached these heights without you. Your belief in WESSA's mission and your choice to walk this journey with us are the reasons we can continue making such a significant impact. Together, we are building a future where caring for the earth is central to how people live and how business is done.

I would also like to express my deep gratitude to our WESSA members who work tirelessly to keep local initiatives for the environment alive. Your efforts ensure that every day South Africans can take positive action for their local environments, creating a ripple effect that benefits the broader ecosystem.

To our Board, thank you for your unwavering support over the last year. Your strategic guidance has been invaluable as we navigate the challenges and opportunities that come with steering WESSA towards its centenary and beyond.

Looking ahead, I am filled with optimism as we drive WESSA forward with the goal of ensuring our relevance and impact for the next 100 years. Many of the most respected professionals in the conservation and biodiversity sector began their careers with WESSA, and I am committed to ensuring that our organization continues to nurture the next generation of environmental

leaders. We will remain at the forefront of the movement that seeks to balance the needs of people and the planet, fostering a world where both can thrive.

WESSA's legacy of caring for the earth will continue to grow and shape the ecosystems and lives of many more generations to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cindy-Lee Cloete', with a stylized, flowing script.

CEO
Cindy-Lee Cloete