

Reporting back on the 2019 AGM

Botsoc's 2019 AGM portrayed the society's transition towards a more inclusive future

MORE THAN 250 MEMBERS

attended the Botanical Society's annual general meeting held in the Old Mutual Auditorium at Kirstenbosch on 12 February 2019. The society's AGM is usually held in September but this was not feasible given the special general meeting that was held on 17 August 2018 and the fact that the 2016, 2017 and 2018 annual financial statements had to be completed and signed off by the auditor.

The special general meeting was called to resolve issues causing a rift within the society. Successive previous councils had allowed control of the society and its assets to become increasingly centralised. Many members and branches, however, wished for greater, more empowered participation both in the society's affairs and those of their branches.

At the special general meeting, a new constitution was adopted by more than 91% of members voting and an interim council was elected. The interim council undertook that at the postponed AGM on 12 February 2019 it would:

- Present audited financial statements for the three successive financial years ending 31 March 2018 (see website for full reports);
- Report to members on progress in resolving priorities identified at the special general meeting; and
- Conduct elections for a new BotSoc council.

COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

At the AGM on 12 February 2019, members approved:

- The minutes of the 2017 AGM;
- The annual financial statements for 2016, 2017 and 2018;
- The appointment of councillors to hold office until the next AGM; and
- The reappointment of Ms Annelie Lucas as auditor.

Interim chairman Ms Marinda Nel thanked Dr Bruce McKenzie, a former BotSoc CEO, for his work as BotSoc's caretaker manager. In order for the incoming council and the future general manager to have insight into BotSoc activities and matters needing urgent attention, Dr McKenzie has undertaken to write reports on a number of matters, including: project-restricted and reserve funds; operational costs and recommendations on financial support to branches, including a review of the current levy of R39 per member; recommendations on contractual arrangements with partners, staff and other service providers; and preliminary considerations for a new model for member subscriptions and classes.

Pointing out that, "Achievements are a collaborative effort," Ms Nel noted that the interim council has achieved a great deal. She thanked Prof Eugene Moll, Brian Christie, Dave Henry, Bongani Mnisi, Dr

Sershen Naidoo, Dr Bruce McKenzie and, more recently, Tony Storey for their counsel and support to BotSoc during the preceding intense six months. Key messages from Brian Christie's report as interim treasurer are included in this reportback.

Ms Nel also thanked the BotSoc branch chairmen and their representatives present: Johann van den Berg (Bankenveld), Isabel Johnson (KZN Inland), Suvarna Parbhoo (KZN Coastal), Marietjie Jordaan (Free State), Jo-Anne King (Garden Route), Hedwig Slabig (West Coast), Tim Attwell (Kogelberg) and Keith Kirsten (Kirstenbosch). In addition, she thanked the Kirstenbosch branch for hosting the meeting and assisting with all the arrangements.

Ms Nel's report as interim chair focused on the interim council's progress over the past six months since the special general meeting.

KEY MESSAGES FROM INTERIM CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

At the time of our election, we did not comprehend the scale of the task nor the time it would take to produce the results we aimed for. However, we believe that pressing issues have now been addressed. We also feel confident that any remaining issues have been identified. We believe this progress will assist the new council to prioritise and apply themselves to these tasks.

RESTORING CONFIDENCE IN BOTSOC'S FINANCIAL AFFAIRS

The 2016, 2017 and 2018 financial reports have now been signed by the auditor and were presented for approval by members. These reports are available to members and can be found on the society's website. Mr Brian Christie was thanked for the invaluable role he played in creating confidence in the financial affairs of BotSoc.

CONSOLIDATING THE SANBI RELATIONSHIP

SANBI remains committed to the 2014 Memorandum of Agreement with BotSoc. It also assured BotSoc that it is firmly committed to the founding principles underlying the agreement. A key principle is that the land for our national botanical gardens was granted by the SA government on condition that an appropriate organisation from civil society, identified as BotSoc, was able to assist with this venture. The agreement will be updated where necessary in September 2019.

STRENGTHENING SERVICE TO MEMBERS

Disciplinary proceedings against the former executive director resulted in the immediate termination of her employment on agreed and confidential terms. Recruitment for the position of BotSoc general manager is now underway. Details are on the BotSoc website.

Contracts and job descriptions for all BotSoc staff members are being reviewed in consultation with each individual. We congratulate Ms Simone van Rooyen on her promotion to office manager, effective 1 February 2019, and thank all staff for their diligent and loyal support through this difficult period.

SERVICE PROVIDERS

After review by the interim council, the contracts of several consultants and service providers were terminated. This will bring about a significant saving in consulting fees in the 2019/20 financial year. Remaining contracts are at market-related fees and necessary for BotSoc's operational needs and objectives.

CONSULTING WITH MEMBERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

A successful branch convention was ably hosted in November 2018 by Bankenveld Branch in the Walter Sisulu Garden and attended by council members and all branch chairmen. The unique needs of each branch were recognised. Support from the national council has been offered in various forms, including financial support. Already the Garden Route interest group has established a full branch which has been accredited by BotSoc. The Lowveld Branch will host the 2019 Branch Convention in Mbombela to coincide with the annual SANBI curators week.

Current membership categories need to be addressed urgently. A project is underway to consider and create new membership categories that will offer meaningful benefits in addition to garden access to all members and act as an incentive encouraging all persons to join BotSoc.

(From top) Marinda Nel delivers the interim chairman's report; acting general manager Bruce McKenzie delivers the operational report; and Brian Christie delivers the interim treasurer's report.



JOHANN VAN DEN BERG



ZOE POULSEN



ZOE POULSEN



BotSoc's interim council (from left): Dr Sershen Naidoo, Dr Bruce McKenzie, Prof Eugene Moll, Tony Storey, Bongani Mnisi, Brian Christie, Simoné van Rooyen and Marinda Nel.

PRACTICAL TRANSFORMATION PLAN

A standing committee to progress practical and broad-based transformation is a priority. Supported by the planned new membership categories, this will focus on growing membership across all demographics, enhancing BotSoc's relevance among young botanical enthusiasts and building relationships with other entities with similar or complementary objectives.

COMMUNICATION

The Botanical Society has significant media assets and brand value. A workshop was held to consider a discussion document prepared by Mr Mike Martin, past CEO of Jacana Publishers, that proposed a cohesive strategy for publications and bookshops. BotSoc could play a significant role in creating access to and support for botanical art, scientific and popular publications. This prospect has been greeted enthusiastically.

An integrated communication and promotion strategy that leverages the

interconnectivity of today's electronic age is also urgently needed. The creation of a new website for BotSoc and its members is well underway.

Veld & Flora continues to have a huge role to play in promoting and enlightening people, and creating a sense of wonder about the beautiful world that we are lucky to inhabit. We are grateful to Ms Patricia McCracken who is providing guidance and has agreed to edit the March and June issues of *Veld & Flora* until a more permanent appointment can be made. It is our aim to allow members to choose to receive a hard copy and/or an electronic version.

VISION

BotSoc was established more than a century ago and, in today's world, we have been joined by many conservation agencies and interest groups in responding to risks and threats to our environment. BotSoc aspires to be an umbrella platform for all agencies that support our mission. We are already recognised internationally as the custodian of our exceptionally rich SA botanical

heritage. This platform will be a place where such people or agencies will find authoritative direction – a place where we all find a role to play.

KEY MESSAGES FROM INTERIM TREASURER'S REPORT

ANNUAL FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR 2016, 2017 & 2018

The treasurer began his report by assuring the meeting that the interim council had found no evidence to substantiate any suggestions of fraud or financial misappropriation although it believed there had been unwarranted expenditure on consultancy fees.

INVESTMENTS AND RESERVES

BotSoc's non-current assets and reserves are particularly healthy. It has about R35.3 million in net assets, the bulk of which is held in long-term investments. This seems overly



prudent and it was recommended that the incoming BotSoc council should consider investing some of this nest egg into projects and assets that carry forward BotSoc's objectives.

Dr Bruce McKenzie will revise and simplify the fund structure within the designated reserves.

REVENUE AND COSTS

The dispute of the last two years contributed to revenue from events and fundraising declining sharply in 2017 and 2018. Sales at BotSoc's two Kirstenbosch bookshops also fell. A recovery plan is underway for these important BotSoc assets as well as expanding into branch satellite bookshops.

A small income surplus was estimated for the 2018 financial year after offsetting membership fee income against membership administration costs. However, a number of other operating costs covered by less reliable sources of income such as donations must be carefully controlled and budgeted for.

Donations received by BotSoc totalled just under R4 million in 2018 and donations made by the society were

'BotSoc is already recognised internationally as the custodian of our exceptionally rich SA botanical heritage'

about R2.3 million. Overwhelmingly the main recipient of the donations made by the society has been our partner SANBI. Such donations made include the 10% of membership fee income payable to SANBI in terms of the memorandum of understanding between BotSoc and SANBI under which SANBI provides free access to its gardens for paid-up BotSoc members. A large part of the balance of donations made by the society relates to SANBI's CREW programme, supported by BotSoc under a three-year agreement running from 2017 to 2019. Recent unwarranted expenditure included the rise in consulting and legal fees from some R17 000 in 2016 to R633 000 in the nine months to

December 2018. No impropriety was involved in this increase but the interim council took immediate steps to terminate some consultancy arrangements.

MEETING THE CHALLENGES

BotSoc has a strong balance sheet and a large, stable membership. These two factors set it apart from many other SA NGOs. Now that it is led by a council that represents a range of different disciplines and also different regions across the country. Backed by a modernised constitution, it is well set to face the many challenges of the coming years. 🌿

YOUR BOTSOC COUNCIL 2019/2020

Chairman: Marinda Nel
Treasurer: Tony Storey
Councillors: Dave Henry, Kevin McCann, Bongani Mnisi, Sershen Naidoo, Hedwig Slabig, Johann van den Berg, Toni Xaba