



THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING (AGM) OF THE BOTANICAL SOCIETY OF SOUTH AFRICA: 3 JULY 2021

CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT

The financial year that ended on 31 March 2021 has been a challenging time for everyone. The Botanical Society's small team of senior national office staff rose strongly to address root problems, including an absence of processes and policies. Yet their determination and that of our council and members witnessed BotSoc progress forward in leaps and bounds.

At national office's behest, professional consultants have been engaged to support financial, marketing, and labour matters. Our general manager Antonia de Barros elaborates on this in her [operational report](#).

Our society remains in a strong financial position despite 2020's great economic adversity due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Our revenue also dropped, although expenses and contribution to conservation did not. So we thank our members for renewing their membership, new members for joining, donors and those who leave a legacy to BotSoc. You are all invaluable in enabling our society to carry out its mission. Henk Beets, our treasurer, elaborates on this in [his report](#).

My own report focuses on our society's progress in addressing the pillars of its broad-based transformation policy.

Global and local

GM Antonia de Barros and conservation manager Rupert Koopman continue to align BotSoc conservation strategy with global developments such as the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation. The United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration was launched this year and introduced in a BotSoc webinar, our Veld & Flora magazine and was recently the theme of our two-day national branch convention.

In terms of BotSoc governance, we congratulate Kogelberg branch on adopting a constitution aligned to that of BotSoc nationally. Meanwhile, Kirstenbosch branch has registered both as a Not for Profit Organisation (NPO) and a Public Benefit Organisation (PBO). Well done!

Support for branches

During this period, key national office staff – GM Antonia de Barros, conservation manager Rupert Koopman and office manager Simone van Rooyen – have ensured support for and regular contact with BotSoc branches.

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To lend impetus to growth, BotSoc council agreed to pay a minimum subsidy of R25 000 a year to underpin conservation activities at every active BotSoc branch which earned less than that in membership levies. These conservation activities include involvements with local communities, cleaning waterways, removing invasive alien vegetation, restoring the veld, encouraging and celebrating indigenous gardens, building relationships with other conservation entities and so on. Such activities are regularly reported in branch newsletters and on our national BotSoc social media, in Veld & Flora and in other local media in their areas.

National branch convention

This past Thursday and Friday [July 1 & 2], we held a national branch convention online. Some 40 members from all branches attended. Both days were opened by keynote addresses on ecological restoration in Africa. The first was delivered by SANBI's Mlu Nsikani and the second by James Blignaut and Nolwazi Mbongwa, who discussed ecological restoration and healing. You will be hearing a great deal more about this. Mark Anderson, CEO of Birdlife SA, also shared with us his perspective on growing a successful conservation organisation.

While our national convention did not take place in the past financial year, its success is the outcome of the groundwork that had gone before and it captured the energy, commitment and momentum now prevailing in our society.

Enhancing member value

The interactive website that was unveiled at the last AGM has been received enthusiastically. The experience is like entering a well-stocked, well-managed library of information and visual delight. Exploring it through the key thematic links – “know, grow, protect and enjoy” – reveals treasure troves of information.

Our society has also developed a dynamic and informative presence on social media such as botsocblog, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. We thank the loveGREEN team and Zoë Poulsen for connecting our society with our members and a wider audience through their deep understanding of BotSoc.

That leads us to Veld & Flora, the voice of BotSoc over many decades. It continues to grow as a magazine that our members look forward to receiving – both the hard copy and the electronic issue which we launched last year. Our gratitude goes to Patricia McCracken, our editor, the team of volunteer advisors that support her, and everyone involved in the production of this quality product for our members.

A challenge faces us, however. The Covid-19 pandemic has put unexpected strain on our service suppliers, making efficient distribution of hardcopies increasingly difficult, expensive and a source of frustration to many members.

The following process has been put into place:

- All members automatically receive an electronic copy of Veld & Flora.
- On renewal or joining, members are now asked to indicate whether they also wish to receive a hard copy. If so, they are required to provide the delivery address and postcode.

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- To speed up receipt of the hard copy, we have also arranged an option for Kirstenbosch branch and Bankenveld branch members to pick up their copy of Veld & Flora at the respective national botanical garden. To arrange this, supply the delivery address and postcode of the Kirstenbosch Bookshop at Gate 2 or the BotSoc office at Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden in Roodepoort on the Webtickets form rather than your home delivery address. We look forward to adding more branches as distribution points.

Diversifying membership

Membership drives were held at Kirstenbosch, Pretoria and Walter Sisulu National Botanical Gardens. This resulted in 31 members joining or renewing on the day. It is particularly pleasing to note the success at the Bankenveld branch and increased interest in the garden. It once again demonstrates the huge value of personal interaction and enthusiastic members on the ground. Thank you to all those involved.

BotSoc and SANBI agreed to award a first-year free membership to students and young people who already contribute to conservation. In the past year, 25 recipients were identified.

Expanding botanical expertise and interest

The 'Conservation Conversation' webinars on the last Thursday of every month, hosted by our conservation manager Rupert Koopman, are proving a great conduit for channelling knowledge to members and the wider public. We thank all the contributors for their generous support.

Enhancing access to botanical gardens

Having your BotSoc membership card, ticket or barcode scanned when entering a SANBI garden makes the process delightfully smooth. Joining our society online, whether as a new or renewing member, is now firmly established. It was a huge learning curve for both Webtickets and BotSoc and we are aware of members experiencing problems. The contract with Bradley Bergh has been extended to March 2022 to remove remaining gremlins and create an accurate membership database for our society as a priority.

Develop strategic collaborations with partners

At the BotSoc national branch convention, Christopher Willis, chief director of SANBI Gardens, presented an overview of activities and challenges experienced in their botanical gardens nationally.

In the past year, the Partnership Fund Committee conducted their first meeting since August 2018. It was an uplifting experience, with all committee members – three representatives from SANBI and three from BotSoc – eager to support the SANBI botanical gardens where the greatest need exists. The relationship between and respective commitments of BotSoc and SANBI stand firm.

SANBI is in the process of establishing two new botanical gardens – one in Kwelera near East London and the other in Thohoyandou in Limpopo province. True to the rationale for BotSoc's existence, establishing branches of our society and support for these gardens are high on BotSoc's list of priorities.

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BotSoc's mission and objectives have stood the test of time and are a proud legacy of those who created it. BotSoc's vision remains to grow as a voluntary association of individuals for similar ends: a platform or umbrella where people who value plants & conservation meet, ably supported by a committed team of the GM and the national office. The national office and branches now actively build relationships with entities concerned with conservation including, for instance, birders to progress BotSoc's vision of offering an umbrella organisation.

In conclusion: We thank all our members – both for their financial contributions and their activities that enable BotSoc to achieve its mission and objectives.

Over the past year or so, we have learned how we value our freedom of movement and association and how precious access to nature is – nature on our doorsteps, in our gardens and on the streets, and in parks and botanical gardens. We have once again come to realise the important role for which BotSoc was originally established, namely to support South Africa's national botanical gardens both financially and with skills.

Personal thanks

These past few years as your national chairperson have been a lifetime journey and learning for me. I'm grateful to have been offered this opportunity and I wish to thank you all for your support, encouragement and friendships. To my husband, Hennie, thank you for your wisdom and always being there for me.

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