Welcome to the fifth (first anniversary) edition of Park-thusiasts. We certainly hope you’re enjoying receiving the publication every quarter – and reading about some of the going-ons in our Parks. To those who are new to the publication, we appreciate any and all feedback – but more especially ways in which you think we might be able to bring you a better read, such as if there is any specific type of news you’d like us to cover.

It’s been a busy few months at all our Parks since the last edition. Proof of this can be seen if one looks at Addo’s visitor numbers over December, compared to the same period in 2012 – with a whopping 4 000 more visitors (pg 3). In Graaff-Reinet, the locals benefited from the Nqweba Carp Classic fishing competition held on Camdeboo National Park’s Nqweba Dam, when participants offered their catches to the local mayor for distribution throughout the town (pg 4). Our other two parks, Mountain Zebra and Karoo National Parks got some well-deserved, yet damaging rains over December and January (pg 5 and 6), but were both greener for it afterwards.

The month of March for us here at SANParks means the end of our fiscal year, and with April comes new beginnings. We are looking forward to what the new year brings, and will surely be bringing you some news on that in the next Park-thusiasts.

Until next time, take care.

Fay

Fayroush Ludick
Regional Communications Manager
Regional

SeaKeys Project: New collaboration to unlock marine biodiversity knowledge and benefits for South Africa
Taken from the SANCOR Newsletter – January 2014 Issue #204
By Kerry Sink and Mari-Lise Franken

Researchers, post-graduate students, citizen scientists, marine managers and decision makers will work together in an ambitious new project that will collate, co-ordinate and apply marine biodiversity knowledge. The SeaKeys Project is a new three-year collaboration funded by the National Research Foundation of South Africa through the Foundational Biodiversity Information Programme.

SANParks National Marine Co-ordinator, Dr Ane Oosthuizen, is a part of the 30-person SeaKeys project team. The group includes representatives from more than 17 different organisations including multiple government departments, research institutes, universities and even industry.

The programme aims to support integrated projects that not only generate and disseminate foundational biodiversity information, but ensure uptake of data to improve decision-making, service delivery and create new economic opportunities. Funded projects need to deliver species inventories, records, Encyclopaedia of Life pages, DNA barcodes, new species descriptions and ensure that all this information flows up the biodiversity knowledge chain to make a difference!

The project will be managed through ten working groups that are integrated through a multi-institutional co-ordination group. It provides a great opportunity to demonstrate the value of foundational biodiversity knowledge and welcomes collaboration. The project officially launched in March and team members will be active at the South African Marine Science Symposium in July.

Building on the South African Coelacanth Legacy
Taken from the SANCOR Newsletter – January 2014 – Issue #204
By Penny Haworth (South African Institute for Aquatic Biodiversity)

Seventy-five years after the discovery of the living coelacanth off East London by Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer on 21 December 1938, marine researchers, managers and policy makers from around the country gathered to celebrate the impact of this discovery on marine science in South Africa in Port Elizabeth on 26 November. In his opening address, Dr Thomas Auf der Heyde, Deputy Director General of the Department of Science and Technology, compared the significance of the first discovery to the first human heart transplant and other seminal events in the way that it has shaped the science landscape in its field in South Africa.

The original discovery in 1938 put South Africa on the map in terms of Ichthyology. The re-discovery in South Africa in 2000 off Sodwana Bay then led to the formation of the African Coelacanth Ecosystem Programme (ACEP) which over the past 12 years has taken a multi-disciplinary, multi-institutional approach to ecosystem research and has expanded that legacy to other fields of marine science, encouraging collaboration and sharing of resources, knowledge and experience, proving that a whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

As ACEP grows and extends its reach we were able to use the event to welcome South African National Parks on board with the handover of the search vessel Kadouw. This will certainly strengthen the ACEP platform, provide scope for growth and allow service to more partners form further afield.

ACEP and its partners used the opportunity to showcase the work that they have done and exhibited some of the highlights from the past 12 years including SAEON’s Sentinel Sight, the ACEP Open Call and Phuhlisa programmes, the impact of the ASCLME, SAIAB’s Acoustic Telemetry Array Platform, ACEP and SAEON’s outreach programmes and South African coelacanth research.

Ane doing what she does best.
Ane without the gear.
A bumper December!
Addo Elephant National Park experienced a phenomenal December at the end of last year – with an increase of 18 percent in visitors from December 2012.

Total visitors for December increased from 22,600 in 2012 to 26,680 in 2013 – a whopping 4,080 more people. This means that the Park averaged 860 tourists per day. The increase in visitors also meant an increase in activities – with the Park’s game drives section reporting a 28.8 percent increase in income.

Not to forget the increasingly popular southern section at Colchester, Camp Matyholweni’s figures show an occupancy increase of eight percent.

Park Manager, Norman Johnson, said, “I would like to thank all the staff who worked over the festive season – those in our Tourism, Technical, Conservation and Administration Departments. It is thanks to them that the Park continued to deliver the good quality service upon which SANParks prides itself.”

“A special word of thanks also needs to go to our visitors for choosing Addo as their destination of choice. Barring one or two incidents, most of our guests exhibited sterling behaviour by adhering to the park rules,” concluded Johnson.

One year in... My time as an intern
By Zimkhita Zungula

I am from King Williams’s town and completed my BSc degree in Environmental and Geographical Science and Ecology in 2012 at the University of Cape Town. Thereafter I got a Groen Sebenza internship with the South African National Biodiversity Institute and got placed in Addo Elephant National Park where I started working in the People and Conservation Department in May 2013.

Coming into this internship I was very doubtful, thinking that I would not be able to cope in the working world. It was very different from varsity and I did not think I would adapt to it. At first it was hard work - I could not keep up with my job description but with the help of my mentors, I was able to cope and adapted to the work environment.

Thus far, I have had a number of unforgettable experiences in my position as an Environmental Education Intern. There is so much I have learnt through the projects we embarked on over the past months such as celebrating special calendar days and doing community development projects, as well as the weekly school programmes we’ve had with surrounding schools.

Two of my highlights of the past year have been SA National Parks Week and heritage month celebrations. During this time we brought in elders from the surrounding communities to visit the Park – an opportunity they wouldn’t have otherwise. It was such an honour and experience to be around our wise elders. I learned so much from them and hope that their experience with me was one of a kind too.

Another activity I enjoyed was the beach clean-up I organised in the marine section of the Park. Our Department collaborated with Plastics SA and a local school, Colchester Primary in Colchester – cleaning up the beach at Sundays River Mouth in celebration of International Coastal Clean-up Day. It was the first time I led a project, and even though it felt at certain times that I was going to fail, with the assistance of my mentors and the participating learners, the event was a success.

I’m a year into my training, and have learnt so much already. I’m here until October next year, and I’m sure I can only improve on what I have achieved over the past 12 months, a journey I cannot wait to continue.
A special visitor
By Rosemary Scheepers

Camdeboo National Park’s front office staff got a special visitor at the end of February.

Samantha Josephs found a monitor lizard relaxing under one of the couches in Reception when she wanted to clean the area. Needless to say, it was quite a surprise to all staff in the office – and who knows how long he had been there for?

After all the commotion died down, he was lead outside and is now free to enjoy his natural environment again.

Nqweba Carp Classic entrants donate their catches
By Peter Burdett

A total of 43 anglers, including seven juniors, entered the 2013 Nqweba Carp Classic angling competition which was hosted by SANParks and held on Camdeboo National Park’s Nqweba Dam in December.

Some impressive bags were wrestled out of the murky water following inflows from the Sundays and Pienaar’s Rivers after good rains the week before the competition. Anglers threw down the gauntlet on the Saturday morning at 6AM and continued to decorate their hooks with an array of enticements until the Sunday morning until just before 9AM when the catches were weighed in at the recreation lapa at the park’s office.

Top honours went to Stanley Read who won a kudu for the heaviest bag which weighed in at 49.74kg. The second prize, for the heaviest carp, was won by Jan Bezuidenhout with a fish of 2.325kg while Mr A Kemp’s monster fish of 11.62kg won him third prize, for the biggest barbell, caught in the competition. Runners-up Tinus Vervey and Charles Moore won fourth and fifth prizes respectively for the carp and barbell that they landed.

The Junior Category (under 16 years of age) was won by Erns Mostert with a bag of 33.25kg while the heaviest specimen category prizes of R250 each (sponsored by Swancraft) were won by C Kemp with a carp of 2.685kg and Ivan Harmse with a barbell of 1.98kg. Lucky draws on offer including two “Buff & Polish” prizes also sponsored by Swancraft, valued at R500, as well as other sundry items were awarded to those whose numbers came up.

Anglers were given the opportunity this year to donate their catches to Mayor Hannah Makoba for distribution to the under-privileged. It is estimated that a total of 220kg of fresh fish was shared between Lizzie se Sopkombuis, Vuyani Safe Haven, Eliakim Foster Home and other ward councillors who distributed the spoils among the needy in their communities. Makoba thanked the anglers at the prize giving for their charitable spirit.
Well Done, Evan!
By Esna van Zyl

Evan Kortjé, a Nature Conservation student from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, who’s been busy with his prac at Karoo National Park for the past year, had reason to celebrate recently.

At the university’s prize giving ceremony, he received an award for “Best Conservation Communication Report for Work Integrated Learning 2013”.

Evan has a unique talent when it comes to working with learners, and as such played a pivotal role in the Park’s People and Conservation Department over the past year.

Fish species in Karoo National Park
By Johan de Klerk

Many people want to know if the Karoo has fish species in its streams? The surprising answer is “YES”.

Karoo National Park, although situated in a very arid region, is home to a very small but real fish species. Few people will believe that any fish species can occur in this arid area with mostly non-perennial streams and rivers, but the Chubby head barb (Dikkop-ghieliemientjie) is very much home in the Karoo river systems and adapted very well to the seasonal flow of the river system. Its scientific name is Barbus anoplus.

This species, as presently known, has penetrated into many areas of South Africa from the highveld Limpopo to Natal, Eastern Cape and the upper and middle Orange River basin which includes the arid Karoo. It also has a presence in the Olifants River (Western Cape), Gourits, Gamtoos, Sundays and Great Fish rivers.

Some of these fish were caught in the Leeurivier system inside Karoo National Park recently and released into the fish pond at the Interpretive Centre.

Junior Rangers – Class of 2014
By Esna van Zyl

Meet the new group of Karoo National Park’s Junior Rangers for 2014!

Four of the learners - Elroy, Andriëlla, Milandrè and Ncedisa are from Murraysburg, some 160km from the Park. The extent of their commitment sees them having to leave Murraysburg at 05:30 in the morning to make it on time for the Saturday programme.

We hope to feature them in their new Junior Ranger uniforms shortly.

Meet Karoo’s Park Forum Members
The current chapter of Karoo’s Park Forum has been in existence for the past two years, and will at their next meeting vote on a new committee.

Other members, who were not present at the last meeting, and who don’t appear in the photograph below are representatives from the Department of Agriculture – Western Cape, Badisa, Association for People with Disabilities, Beaufort West Tourism and the South African Agency for Change and Development.

Some of the Park Forum members after their February meeting. Back: Nico van der Walt (Park Manager), Melvin de Klerk (Department of Education and Chairperson), Dean Gous (Agri-Western Cape), Hein Rust (Central Karoo District Municipality), Wynand Vivier (Agri-Western Cape) and Barry Swanepeol (SAPS). Front: Barbara Brown (Department of Environmental Affairs), Esna van Zyl (Senior P&C Officer) and Jan Jacobs (P&C Officer).

Identifying Karoo’s Garden Plants

Park staff started identifying and marking the plants in the garden at the Interpretive Centre late last year. Work will continue in earnest shortly to finish the project.

Karoo Rain
By Johan de Klerk

The New Year kicked off and Karoo National Park could not have asked for a better way to start 2014. Good rain fell in the Park - way above the long-term average for January of 21.83mm. The Park received almost 100mm (measured at the Stolzhoek rain gauge) of rain within the first nine days of the new year.

The good rains, however, came at a price. Several roads had to be closed due to flash floods and some damage to the roads, especially the Nuweveld loop, was experienced. The Afsaal loop was not affected as much and was opened after the road surface dried up again. The rain fell sporadically over the Park with the eastern section receiving almost three times as much rain as the western section. Only 28mm was measured at the Grantham section.

It was, however, reported that hail and a cloud burst occurred in the northwestern corner of the Park, resulting in flash floods in the Leeurivier and the Boesmanskop river.

Some fences and floodgates were also damaged by the rivers in flood and kept rangers occupied for a while to close all the gaps in the fences to prevent any animals from escaping. Thanks to the rain, the Karoo veld showed much improvement after a long and dry early summer.
Mountain Zebra National Park

A wet Christmas

Mountain Zebra National Park experienced an exceptionally wet Christmas last year, having received some 70mm of rain on the afternoon of 23 December.

Park Manager, Megan Taplin, said, “The rain lasted only about 40 minutes. That’s what caused the flood – because it was such a huge quantity of rain concentrated in one area over a very short space of time”.

There was quite a lot of damage done to the Kranskop Loop gravel road and road structures (like gabions and rock packing) and bit of damage to the Rooiplaat Loop and Link Road. A tree fell down in the drift just before the Doornhoek Guest House, blocking passage through the drift and it took us a long time to cut up the tree and drag it out afterwards, she said.

“We also had to close parts of the Ubejane Loop because of flooding. The dam, which is normally dry, filled up and covered the road. When the section ranger drove through this, the water came up to his windscreen. We have a road project which is about to commence to upgrade the Kranskop Loop but have had to now apply for additional funding to cover the damage caused by the flood,” said Megan.

Guests to the Park at the time had quite a memorable trip, as you can imagine. Visitors arrived at the Park and could not get through the big drift before the rest camp, Megan said. Other visitors already resident in the camp had gone on game drives and then couldn’t return to the camp.

“We waited with the visitors to see if the water would subside enough for them to drive across but eventually made a decision as it got later at night that the only solution would be to transport them to the rest camp without their vehicles so that they could at least get to their accommodation. The tractor was the only vehicle that could safely cross the drift so we transported people two by two after asking them to pack what clothes and food they would need for the night,” she explained.

“It was quite an experience for some of the visitors, especially the international visitors and children, to ride on a tractor through the flood. We took them to the camp on the game drive vehicle from the other side of the drift. We opened the restaurant late especially for those who hadn’t had dinner yet so they could eat something and some of the rangers even helped to make food in the kitchen.”

“The next morning we transported visitors back to their cars through the drift which was still high. By the afternoon of 24 December, high clearance vehicles could get through the drift and by Christmas Day, cars could also get through,” she concluded.