The number of people who visited the five South African National Parks (SANParks) at no cost in the Frontier Region (Addo Elephant, Camdeboo, Garden Route, Karoo and Mountain Zebra National Parks) recently increased by 43 percent compared to the same period last year. The 12th annual SA National Parks Week was celebrated from 18 to 22 September, with some parks extending free entry to the weekends, and afforded all South African citizens the opportunity to visit national parks for free on day visits.

For the first time since its inception, these five parks totalled over 20 000 visitors. A total of 20 090 people passed through the parks’ gates during the open week, compared to 14 061 last year.

Addo Elephant National Park just outside Port Elizabeth attracted 7 882 people, well up on its 6 236 from last year – an increase of just over 26 percent. At Camdeboo National Park (surrounding the town of Graaff-Reinet) visitor figures more than doubled! The number increased from 1 067 in 2016 to 2 246, which amounts to a growth of 110 percent.

The number of people who visited the three sections of Garden Route National Park (Tsitsikamma, Knysna and Wilderness) also grew considerably, from 4 750 to 7 449. While cold and rainy weather put a damper on Karoo National Park (outside Beaufort in the Western Cape) last year, this was not the case last month. They welcomed 1 102 guests to the park this year, from 776 last year – 42 percent more. Finally, Mountain Zebra National Park, near Cradock, also tallied a good increase from 1 232 free visits in 2016 to 1 411.

Included in these figures were groups who attended set People and Conservation programmes in the five parks, who were bussed in by the parks to attend the programmes. These facilitated visits were mostly for community groups who would usually not have had the opportunity to visit a national park, such as schools groups, the elderly and less fortunate from the surrounding areas.

Regional General Manager, Dries Engelbrecht, says, “We are elated at the number of people who have taken SANParks up on our offer of free entry this year. It is humbling to know that we have given so many people the opportunity to enjoy a day or more in our parks, for some, if not most of whom, it would have been their first time.”

“Every year we strive to introduce who we are and what we do to more and more people who in the past would not have been exposed to national parks, hence our established theme ‘Know Your National Parks’.”

“We are always grateful to our sponsors, Total South Africa and FNB, without whom this campaign would not have been possible. I would also like to thank our staff members and SANParks Honorary Rangers who assisted them, who worked tirelessly during the period to ensure that our guests enjoyed their experiences,” said Engelbrecht.
A Garden Route Interface meeting held at Pine Lake Marina outside Sedgefield in the Garden Route in September is a platform where Garden Route National Park management meets scientists about various issues in the Park. The aim of the meeting is to connect research and practice to co-learn about and to also promote effective management of socio-ecological systems and people-nature interactions. Scientific Services’ Dr Dirk Roux says the dominant themes included:

- Bridging the science-policy-practice divide
- Learning about people-nature connections
- Mapping ecosystem services and benefit flows
- Establishing long-term social-ecological research and monitoring sites and networks
- Experiences from social-ecological systems research
- Development, resource use and transitions in social-ecological systems

Speaking at the gathering, Manager of the Garden Route National Park, Paddy Gordon, spoke about the need to be proactive in the face of uncertainty and surprise and alluded to his experience at Table Mountain National Park.

South African National Parks (SANParks) saw 77 340 visitors to the parks during South African National Parks Week from 18 September to 22 September 2017. This was a 24 percent increase from last year’s 62 312. This campaign under the established theme ‘Know Your National Parks’ allowed locals with valid identity documents an opportunity to spend a day at a national park of their choice free of charge. Since its inception in 2006, National Parks Week has seen an influx of 364 275 day visitors in all participating parks. You would most likely have read about the Frontier Region’s impressive numbers on the previous page. SANParks thanks all South Africans who took part in this week, especially educators and school groups.

This month, we asked bio-technician, Bheki Maphanga, to tell us more about his job and the importance of the work he does in the Garden Route (pg 3). It’s interesting to read about what he does on a typical day and what then happens to all the data he collects and how it informs future decision making processes.

Finally, it’s nearly time again for the SANParks Kudu Awards, with a final call for entries before the closing date on 23 October. In partnership with First National Bank (FNB) and Total South Africa, this is the ultimate awards ceremony for the recognition of conservation in our country. The Kudu Awards honour and celebrate individuals and groups who go to any great lengths to conserve and protect our natural environment as well as the associated cultural and heritage assets for future generations. Read more about this wonderful opportunity on page 4, and nominate either yourself or a deserving nominee you many know of.

The Wilderness section of the Garden Route National Park could soon have a new tourism product. This is largely dependent on the confirmation by scientists that the suggested 4x4 routes will not tamper with the ecology of the area. The 4x4 “Forest Experience” route through the Wilderness section consisted of three routes: The first one was led from the Seven Passes road with magnificent views and some challenging driving. The second route went from Seven Passes to Karatara, through indigenous forests and the newly rehabilitated fynbos area to Windmeul Nek and through to the Fairleigh Forest Section. The last one went through Jubilee Creek, Die Eiland and the Old Goudveld Mine. The drive took participants through deep indigenous forests and over forest streams, where they got to explore some of the old mines and delve into the forestry and mining history of the area.

Participants were met by a colourful array of exhibitions at the start of the venture at the Common in Wilderness. The exhibitions were also open to members of the public. Honorary Rangers guided the activity during the excursion.

Research collated after the experience indicated most vehicles had CAW registrations, which is indicative of a positive, upward trend of locals visiting the Park.

The Wilderness rest camp was at 100 percent occupancy during the Heritage long weekend, owing to this event and SA National Parks Week.

Well done to the Wilderness Honorary Rangers and the Wilderness team on a successful event.

**Compliment of the month:**

I had a flat tyre at Jack’s Picnic Spot in Addo Elephant National Park. With the help of a very kind Edward, the tyre was changed and I was able to be on the road again in no time. You have a very helpful and dedicated employee in Edward. It is rare to find an employee who will go beyond the call of their job, with a smile on their face, in the way Edward did.

**Message from Dries Engelbrecht, Regional General Manager**

SANParks Honorary Rangers launch 4x4 forest experience

Science-management Interface attended by bigwigs
Women celebrated in the Garden Route

Women from the Garden Route National Park gathered for a fun Women’s Day event in Wilderness recently, organised by Scientific Services.

Most of the women based in the Garden Route’s three sections attended and participated. The day started off with games, with the “Amazing Race”, to be exact. The group was divided into six teams, with the race giving participants the opportunity to explore the Wilderness section and all its offerings. Just like in the original television series, there were questions and clues to help the ladies complete each lap of the race, which included fun activities like running on trails, canoeing, visiting caves and other historical sites and more. The groups were also tasked with preparing a war cry, which was great fun.

Organiser, Nerina Kruger, said the topics touched on and discussed during the day were relevant to encourage women and let them know their hard work does not go unappreciated. She also highlighted the fact that it is important to gather as women and have some fun, so they may also be able to work together better in the workplace.

Speaking at the event, Scientific Services Manager, Stef Freitag, said the role played by women in various roles daily - at work, within families and society in general need to be acknowledged. Special days such as the one held in Wilderness provides a platform to get to know other women in the Park as well as foster relationships among women which is important in the workplace, she said.

Adventures of a bio-technician at Rondevlei in the Garden Route National Park

Have you ever wondered what goes into a “normal” working day of a SANParks Bio-technician? My name is Bheki Maphanga, a bio-technician at SANParks based at the tranquil Rondevlei Scientific Services in the Wilderness section of the Garden Route National Park (GRNP). The Rondevlei office, as the name suggests, is situated on the banks of the Rondevlei Lake, an important Ramsar site, one of the many water bodies in the area and connecting to Langelei, Island Lake and Touw estuary.

A typical day begins with recording daily climatic variables at a weather station based at Rondevlei. The data provides us with a better understanding of the climatic conditions and rainfall patterns in the Southern Cape region. Climate data has been recorded at Rondevlei for the last 20 years. The region is particularly interesting from a climatic standpoint because it falls within the year-round rainfall region of the Southern coast. It is suggested that the region also holds uncovered secrets to understanding how climate has changed over time.

To understand the current ecological state of the lakes and estuaries of Wilderness water bodies in GRNP, I collect water samples quarterly. During field work, parameters such as temperature, oxygen, pH, dissolved oxygen and salinity are recorded to provide us with a better understanding of how the lake systems are changing, as a result of both man-made and natural system variations. This is particularly important because the lakes systems are located downstream of a host of different stakeholders and associated land-uses.

An assessment of recreational and subsistence resource utilisation within the Swartvlei Estuary began in 2008 and is ongoing. This project was undertaken to estimate total fishing and bait collecting effort, total catch and catch-per-unit-effort, total bait usage, spatial distribution of resource use and information on angler demographics and knowledge regarding line fish regulations. The results from this project will assist the Park to manage the estuary effectively. It would also indicate whether anglers are understanding the impact of overfishing and the rules and regulations.

In addition to the resource use challenges in the Park, the Knysna Estuary is experiencing an increase in water craft activities affecting different stakeholders and water users. Responding to this issue, a water craft census was started with the aim of determining the acceptable social carrying capacity of watercraft on the estuary. The project will provide information on the number of watercraft using the system and will assist park management in determining the social carrying capacity of the Knysna Estuary, thereby managing the estuary more effectively.

These projects are a reflection of the socio-ecological processes that characterises the Garden Route National Park. Although very diverse, the projects are also interrelated and require a bio-technician’s dedication, punctuality and accuracy when collecting data. Moreover, I firmly believe that these qualities fit well in the role that bio-technicians play in supporting scientists and managers with evidence-based decision making that the organisation is striving towards. With that said, I guess it is safe to say that there is no ordinary day in the Garden Route.

Appointments in Mountain Zebra National Park

Vuyani Dial has been promoted from Duty Manager to Hospitality Services Manager, effective 1 October.

Bongiwe Ntsili, the new HR/Admin student and Leisure Mokgotho, a Tourism student will be with the Park until the end of March.

Barrel Allens has been appointed as a General worker (fixed term) from October to the end of March.

Zilungile Mapko will be with the Park until 31 March as a Tourism student.
The 2017 Kudu Awards deadline has been extended to 23 October 2017. The event organised by South African National Parks (SANParks) in partnership with First National Bank (FNB) and Total South Africa is the ultimate conservation recognition awards in the country.

SANParks Head of Communications, Janine Raftopoulos, said this year’s Kudu Awards is going to be an exciting event. Key business objectives for SANParks are to ensure improved, representative conservation assets, an effectively managed eco-system, species and cultural heritage assets, optimised contribution to the green and blue economy and enhanced awareness of the work it does. To this end, the Kudu Awards will be honouring and celebrating individuals and institutions who go to any great lengths to conserve and protect our natural environment as well as the associated cultural and heritage assets for future generations.

The Kudu Awards is an initiative by SANParks that aims to recognise external stakeholders for their contributions and efforts in making it the custodian of choice for the national parks system in South Africa. “The Kudu Awards are one of the best conservation awards programmes in the country in which organisations, individuals as well as community groups enter to showcase their work around the environment and conservation of natural resources.”

Raftopoulos said, “All the winners receive financial rewards as well as widespread media exposure which gives them a definite competitive edge to their peers, particularly around their passion for national parks. Everyone wants to be recognised as the best in the conservation of our biodiversity and this is your opportunity to prove yourself as such.”

Natures Valley profiled during SA National Parks Week

Nestled between the sea in Tsitsikamma and overlooking the Tsitsikamma mountains, Natures Valley is a paradise for nature lovers. The Tsitsikamma section of the Garden Route National Park’s camp in Natures Valley is known as De Vassellot. Couples visiting the Park were caught on camera by a Morning Live crew whilst out on a picnic. “We love this area for its beautiful birds, tranquil surrounds and its variety of hiking trails on offer,” they said.

Natures Valley is a stone’s throw away from Tsitsikamma. It also has green flag hiking trails, canoeing and camping sites galore.

Many thanks to Human Capital Manager, Marionette Scholtz, for making this event possible through the SANParks Wellness Programme. Also, the respective park managers – Nick de Goede and Megan Taplin – for all their contributions and assistance.

Mountain Zebra National Park hosted their soccer and netball playing counterparts from Addo Elephant National Park to a second round of matches at the beginning of September. This after MZNP travelled to AENP earlier this year for their first match-ups.

The matches took place at the Luxolweni stadium in Lingelihle in Cradock. It seems as if MZNP has the stronger netball team of the two, as they once again beat Addo, as they had in their first encounter. The final score was 26 – 16. Addo’s soccer team, meanwhile, also repeated their run of form against the locals, beating them 4 – 3, for the second time.

Many thanks to Human Capital Manager, Marionette Scholtz, for making this event possible through the SANParks Wellness Programme. Also, the respective park managers – Nick de Goede and Megan Taplin – for all their contributions and assistance.
SA National Parks Week 2017