

Getting to know Erin Crowhurst



I have been frequenting the Kruger National Park since I was quite young, which is where my passion for nature began. I chose to study Botany and Chemistry to avoid dissecting animals, but later changed my field to Botany and Zoology. In 2022, I completed my MSc Zoology at the University of Johannesburg, focusing on the spatial distribution pattern of elephant shrews using mitochondrial and nuclear markers. I applied for various internships within the SANBI Groen Sebenza internship program and was selected to work in Skukuza under Dr Sam Ferreira as a mammal ecologist intern.

Moving from Johannesburg, where I lived my entire life, to living in the bush in Skukuza has been quite an adjustment, but a move well worth it. Since starting in the beginning of 2023, I have been involved in numerous projects on animals, including predator surveys, elephant dung counts, and rhino dehorning. I have learnt a great deal while having fun in the field. I look forward to seeing where this position takes me in expanding my knowledge and skills. I also look forward to more incredible experiences here and with the Scientific Services team.

Full Circle: My path from volunteering, to interning, to becoming a scientist

Daniëlle Seymour

Photos by Melanie de Morney,
Thabo Nhlapo, Alexis Zapata &
Marna Herbst

After four years of studying, I left Cape Town at the beginning of 2018 with two qualifications, a dream, and high hopes of kick starting my journey as an environmentalist. However, with high unemployment rates in South Africa and many graduates looking for work, finding a job after completing an Honours degree in Geography and Environmental Science was a challenge for me. As I grew up in Knysna, I hoped to secure a placement at the SANParks Knysna Regional Office. I was familiar with SANParks, as I had attended some of the People and Conservation (now Social Economic Transformation) environmental education programmes during my high school years. After searching through websites and newspapers, I decided to take a chance and walked down to the SANParks Regional Office with my CV. I spoke to various people and was referred to the Scientific Services Division, which I had no idea existed. I then took a walk back up town to the Royal Hotel office where I was warmly greeted by Jessica Hayes, who suggested I chat with Stef Freitag-Ronaldson, the General Manager. And so, my journey began...

After a brief meet-and-greet with Stef, I was offered an opportunity to job shadow the scientists and biotechnicians at the Scientific Services office in Knysna. This involved going out to the field for data collection and monitoring in the forest and fynbos and assisting with desktop activities, such as data capturing. After spending two months volunteering at the office, I was offered a SANParks internship that led to me attending a Women in Science course in May 2018 at the Skukuza Science Leadership Initiative campus in Kruger National

Park and the All Out Africa Savannah Research Centre in eSwatini. The six-week Women in Science course was an exciting opportunity that allowed me to conduct research on savanna ecosystems, which was something entirely new to me. Upon returning from the Women in Science course in June 2018, I had the opportunity to work closely with different scientists and biotechnicians within Scientific Services, including Melanie de Morney and Dr Wessel Vermeulen, who took me under their wings.



Discovering the wonders of afrotemperate forests: Dr Wessel's lesson on tree characteristics in the Garden Route, 2020.

In the Garden Route National Park, I was involved in terrestrial fauna monitoring and assisted with other biodiversity research, science communication, and outreach initiatives. These initiatives involved presenting lessons to various groups on the unique diversity of our ecosystems and conducting outdoor field trips, where we tried to create spaces for everyone involved to engage and participate while learning about nature. I enjoyed being involved in coordinating and participating in environmental education and outreach initiatives, as witnessing how individuals engage with and develop a deeper appreciation for nature is always rewarding.



A lesson on the value of our precious freshwater systems presented to a group of learners at the Kids in Parks Program, Natures Valley, in 2019.

As my internship continued, my contract was extended for another year, and I had the chance to travel across parks, meet new people, and network. During November 2019, I also had the opportunity to join the Cape Research Centre staff, Ruth-Mary Fisher and Trevor Adams, on their wetland surveys in Agulhas National Park. This event inspired me to pursue further studies. I secured a bursary through the National Research Foundation to study towards a Masters in Geographical Information Systems at Stellenbosch University. I started my thesis under Professor Helen de Klerk at the end of 2019.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many aspects of our lives, including our educational pursuits. Pursuing a Master's degree during the pandemic presented a unique set of challenges for me, but I persevered nonetheless. Although my internship contract ended in April 2020, I remained in touch with the Knysna Scientific Services office and continued to do environmental education and community outreach events with them while working on my master's degree. I eventually completed my masters during 2021 and graduated in April 2022.



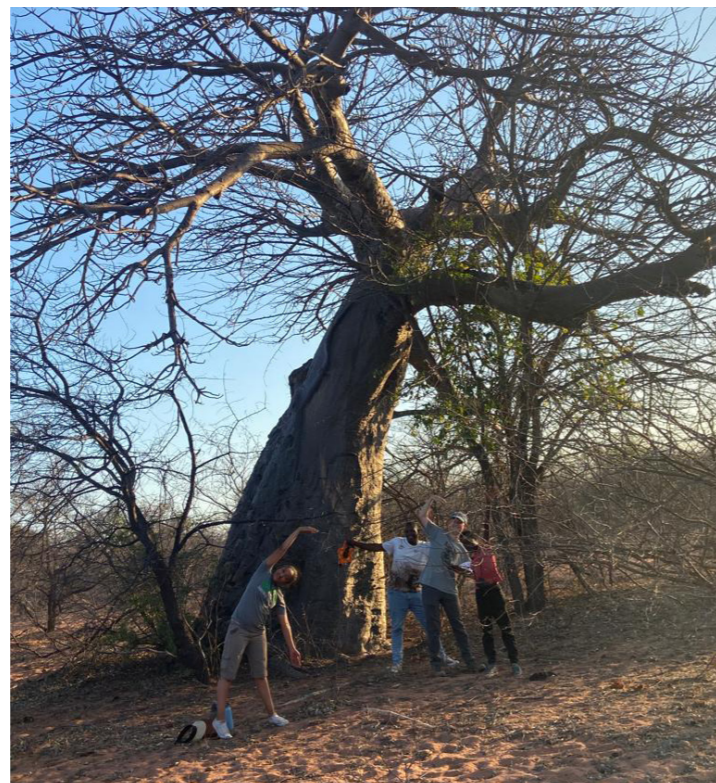


Adapting to the new normal: Dr Wessel and I assisting Melanie de Morney with fieldwork in the Garden Route National Park during the pandemic (2020).

Although I thought a Master's degree would give me an added advantage when seeking employment, job searching and applications were still a daunting task. However, I refused to let this discourage me from pursuing my passion. During this time, I applied to and attended the Organization for Tropical Studies (OTS) course in Kruger National Park with the help of Scott Ronaldson and two sponsors: Humphrey Price and John Metelerkamp. The course lasted for three months between September and November 2022 and focused on African ecology and conservation. We travelled across South Africa, exploring its beauty, and learning about its diverse ecosystems. Kruger National Park is undoubtedly one of the world's most beautiful wildlife destinations. Attending the OTS course not only allowed me to fully embrace my potential as an early-career scientist but also to thoroughly enjoy every moment in the park and surroundings.

To my delight, on 1 November 2022 while in the Cederberg on the last stretch of the OTS course, I received a call from SANParks offering me the position of Visual Data Scientist on the JRS Biodiversity Foundation Data Management project, which I had applied for a few months earlier. I was very excited to learn this, as I had enjoyed my time working for the organisation as an intern, and I was confident that I would be an excellent fit for the job.

I now have a new home at the Cape Research Centre, and I am eager to be working with this dynamic team. My journey from volunteering to becoming an established scientist is a work in progress that requires dedication, passion, and hard work. However, I am grateful to everyone who played a role in shaping my career and helping me find my feet. I look forward to the next 30 years of working as a conservationist and embracing all the opportunities that come with it. I hope my story inspires others to pursue their passions despite the obstacles they may face.



Measuring the iconic African baobab (Adonsonia digitata) during the OTS course around Tshianzwane, Hamakuya, Limpopo, South Africa.



New beginnings: the team at the Cape Research Centre with the then Managing Executive, Dr Luthando Dziba, March 2023.

Celebrations and graduations from the Arid Node

Nkabeng Mzileni

This year we celebrate the achievements and graduation of three colleagues from the Arid and Northern Node of Scientific Services! Dr Mahlomola Ernest Daemane, General Manager of the Node, completed his PhD through University of the Free State in the Faculty of Natural and Agriculture Sciences. His PhD thesis entitled "The spatial distribution of the woodland and grassland communities in the Golden Gate Highlands National Park, Free State Province, South Africa", contributed to knowledge generation in the modelling of the Afrotropical forest in South Africa, providing data on species diversity, and description of the plant communities found in the park.



Dr. Daemane (right) received his PhD at the University of the Free State for a thesis entitled: "The spatial distribution of the woodland and grassland communities in the Golden Gate Highlands National Park, Free State Province, South Africa".

Corera Links has completed her National Diploma, in Agricultural Management, at Vaal University of Technology. Corera, who was Research Assistant with Scientific Services, based in the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park (KGNP), has been appointed as Socio-Economic Transformation (SET) Officer for KGNP. The experience and knowledge of the area that she gained whilst working for Scientific Services has contributed to her career progress. Although Scientific Services will miss her innovative approaches to work, we are thrilled that she will continue to contribute towards SANParks.



Corera Links completed her National Diploma, in Agricultural Management, at Vaal University of Technology.

Lethogonolo Mokopelo, Research Assistant based in KGNP, completed her National Diploma in Nature Conservation at UNISA. Lethogonolo was an Environmental Monitor in the Arid Node of CSD before she became the Research Assistant in the Kalahari.

We congratulate our colleagues on their achievements!



Lethogonolo Mokopelo, Research Assistant based in the Kalahari, completed her National Diploma in Nature Conservation at UNISA.