

Environmental heroes recognised with WESSA Awards at sustainability-themed event

28 September 2015

The 2015 National WESSA Awards have been presented to recognise and honour the remarkable achievements of five individuals and groups.

Dr John Hanks, Ntokozo Mbuli, Franz Fuls, the Paul Roux Residents' Forum and the ROSE Foundation all received awards at a special ceremony held during the 89th Annual General Meeting of WESSA (the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa) at Goedgedacht Farm near Malmesbury in the Western Cape on Saturday.

Presented annually since 1974, the awards enable WESSA to recognise and honour individuals, corporations, organisations, and community, educational or volunteer groups that have made a significant contribution to environmental conservation or to environmental education in South Africa over a sustained period of time.

In addition to the awards ceremony, the programme at the event was structured around the theme of "Visions of Sustainability" and a number of talks by leading role-players, who are also WESSA members, provided perspectives on the significance and challenges of sustainability in their respective sectors.

Dr Howard Hendricks, SANParks Acting Managing Executive for Conservation Services, provided insights into the diverse funding streams that are currently used by conservation organisations to sustain the ecosystems and built infrastructure in our protected areas. In particular he argued that we need to work wisely with government grants and ensure that these grants are used to leverage additional and more sustainable funding through tourism and other income streams.

Dr Guy Preston, Deputy Director-General of Environment Programmes at the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA), emphasized the importance of addressing inequality and poverty as an integral part of

building sustainability, saying “There can be no ‘sustainability’ without addressing poverty and inequality.” He stressed that as we seek to address the threats to sustainability – such as the spread of alien invasive plants, animals and diseases – we also need to build a more equitable society, to protect and restore our ecosystems and to ensure that our economy contributes to these processes. Over many years the extended public works programmes and other environmental protection programmes that are managed by DEA have sought to find this balance. It was evident from the talk that a lot has been achieved but that a lot also remains to be done.

Tom McLaughlin, Woolworths Foods Good Business Journey Manager, provided a long-term perspective on the moral responsibilities that we all have to protect the environment and to care for humanity. He then went on to locate within this perspective the Good Business Journey that Woolworths is following towards greater sustainability. He described how Woolworths is working with suppliers, business partners, academics, scientists, NGOs and customers to manage their direct and indirect impact on communities and the world around them. Woolworths’ goal is that by 2020 every product they sell should have at least one sustainability attribute, such as being hormone free, organically produced or produced in a socially responsible manner.

Dr Jim Taylor, WESSA’s Director of Environmental Education, described how WESSA has been able to make substantial contributions to sustainability in South Africa and beyond, by leveraging membership involvement, a professional staff and wide-ranging partnerships. He highlighted the point that human capacity development is a major focus of WESSA’s work, noting that “Since human actions are causing the issues the solution must be with humans”. He also spoke about recent innovations, including the development of citizen science tools that can be accessed through smart phones and can be used to assess, monitor and report on water and biodiversity challenges. These tools have placed WESSA at the forefront of sustainability work in South Africa.

Peter Templeton, Director at Goedgedacht Trust, spoke about the organisation’s successful Path Out of Poverty (POP) programme which

involves a long-term 25-year commitment to rural community members involved in the programme, equipping them to survive in their own context as a more realistic approach to focusing on job creation. Finally, four of WESSA Western Cape's Friends Groups and a number of youth members spoke about ongoing local volunteer initiatives, providing a regional interpretation of the "Visions of Sustainability" theme.

The formal AGM proceedings included reports by WESSA CEO Dr Thommie Burger and Chairman Dr Richard Lewis, which provided an overview of the organisation's achievements over the past year. Outgoing WESSA Board members, Dianne Perrett and Dr Jim Taylor, were acknowledged at the event for the valuable contributions that they have made to WESSA over many years.