

## **Annual Report**

### **Introduction**

The memory of last years' annual general meeting has faded a little and, this years' meeting sadly slipped into the abyss of lockdown cancellations. Now, as the rather distant promise of a return to normality slowly materialises, it is time to review the performance of the conservancy, and more importantly, to plot a course for the year ahead. Much of this report consists of my opinions and serves as a very warm invitation for you to comment and make proposals for the year ahead.

### **Recycling**

The condition of the Recycling Depot has deteriorated, and a significant amount of money is required to get the depot back into a good condition. There is, however, a more serious issue regarding the entire recycling spectrum.

Until 2019, the recycling was taken away by Coastal Waste from Port Shepstone. However, this had some serious shortcomings. Firstly, the pick-up schedule was totally unreliable, and this often caused the depot to overflow with what was ostensibly recyclable material. Secondly, a significant amount of the 'recycling' picked up from the depot ended up in the landfill at Port Shepstone. So, in reality, waste was collected here, in Pennington, transported to Port Shepstone, and then dumped at the landfill there. Instead of making a positive contribution to the management of waste, we were adding to the problem.

Last year the municipality ran out of plastic bags (and the same thing may happen this year) and a decision was taken to allow all types of recycling to be placed in the same bag. This, coupled with allowing people to collect cans and tins from the depot, resulted in bags being ripped open to search for cans. As a result, the depot quickly became a sea of rubbish. The advice I was given at the time by a previous committee member of the Conservancy was, 'Mike, close this place down now.' A video showing the debris strewn mess was added to reinforce the suggestion. And yes, it was a mess but over time the situation did improve. The Green Company was a little more reliable but still missed collection days. The real disappointment was the behaviour of the public towards the depot. There are many people who are committed to responsible, diligent recycling – our sincere gratitude goes to them for delivering recycling that is clean and sorted. But – and it is a very sad and disappointing 'but' – there are people who dump whatever they like at the depot. It costs the Conservancy in the region of R8 000 per month to run the depot.

The companies removing the recycling do so for profit, and they are entitled to that, but the harsh reality is that if we do not provide the recycling in a way that makes it worthwhile for them to pick up they simply won't, leaving us with a depot overflowing with unsorted material. We are a microcosm of a worldwide phenomenon: what used to be acceptable is no longer so, and recycling has become far more sensitive to costs. The USA and Europe have discovered that the traditional dumping grounds of East Asian countries no longer accept unsorted waste. Mountains of baled waste materials lie in warehouses across the USA with no place to go and no intrinsic value. We simply must get smarter at what we do with our waste, and how much waste we produce.

I have no answer to the problem of indiscriminate dumping at the recycling depot. Our staff have the thankless task of dealing with some residents who simply ignore requests and feel that the guidelines do not apply to them.

### **Nkomba, Site of Conservation Significance**

Nkomba is a positive example of what can be achieved through dedication and perseverance. It is a place of great beauty and walking along the trails under a canopy of indigenous trees, is a special privilege and one that should be protected. The stark and unrelenting reality however is that to sustain the area, funds need to be made available and sadly maintenance costs had swelled to unsustainable levels in recent times and created a precarious financial situation for the Conservancy.

Over the past year only essential work has been done at Nkomba and an air of neglect has crept in. However, the financial position of the Conservancy has stabilised and hopefully the projects for the year ahead will result in Nkomba not only receiving a much needed make over but also enjoying greater participation from our members. I am delighted to share with you the outline of the proposed project which will be headed up by Mary McKenzie.

Essentially what is envisaged is a variation of the Garden Club idea. I think it is a great idea and it goes like this. Conservancy members meet on a particular day and Saturday seems to be the chosen day right now but it's dependant on what day suits most people and for two hours or so we clear a trail or remove alien plants or do little projects to enhance the beauty of the area.

At the end of the shift we sit down under the Giant Fig or perhaps along the river and enjoy a table of treats supplied by the Kiosk. Not only will members be contributing in a positive way to the upliftment of the area, but it is also a great way for the Conservancy to regain the qualities of membership participation. The over-riding objective of the project is to share some time with other members in a truly delightful spot. I have a wonderful memory of (and here I am a little ashamed) being part of a traditional hunt in Germany many years ago. The wonderful memory is not of the hunt but of a lunch served in the forest. White tablecloth, lovely warm food ((It was February and more than refreshingly brisk) and we could have been in a fine dining restaurant. I would like to believe we can emulate this at Nkomba, and it will also serve as a great training experience for the kiosk staff and I sincerely hope that the idea will encourage everyone to become part of this project.

### **Finance**

Our Conservancy is quite different from most other conservancies in that we are self-funding. This does change our view on things and by necessity we lean towards running it as a business rather than relying on donations. There is always the conflict of sustainability verses idealism, and sadly reality dictates that sustainability depends upon financial viability. The Impithi Kiosk is the financial foundation of the Conservancy: over the past 12 years it has grown into a wonderful focal point of the Conservancy and a much-appreciated asset to the community.

Sadly, the lease was not renewed in February 2019 and remains unresolved. The tender process was exceptionally difficult to complete, and we await some sort of resolution to the situation.

Fortunately, there is a great deal of optimism that the lease issue will soon be resolved positively. In the interim, we enjoy a very favourable rental agreement with the municipality.

The committee of 2019/2020 had the initial task of dealing with the exceedingly difficult financial situation in which the expenditure had eroded much of the capital. The financial situation in March 2019 was bleak. For the Conservancy to survive we either had to increase our turnover at the kiosk or reduce our expenditure. Without a lease, the chances of increasing turnover were slim. Our only solution was to retrench several members of staff. With some careful monitoring of costs, we have been able to steer the ship back into profitable waters and, happily, end the financial year with a healthy capital amount available to finance future projects. And just when we felt secure we were introduced to the lockdown and suddenly our capital was reduced by around thirty percent as we had to pay all our suppliers and with no revenue anticipated for months to come all our hard work over the year seemed doomed. Fortunately, the promises by government were fulfilled and we have received financial assistance to fund part of the staff salaries. My sincere thanks to Allan, Claude, and Dave for their tremendous assistance in the financial management of the kiosk.

To create some income for Nkomba, I suggested many months ago that we create an indigenous nursery at Nkomba and sell trees and shrubs. The idea was to seek out partnerships with rural farmers who would be provided with small trees in bags. They would tend to them and return them for sale once the trees had reached a saleable size. The idea has taken root but also mutated somewhat into vegetable growing, leading to the Saturday morning organic market in the latter part of last year. It has been a wonderful learning curve for me, and I deeply appreciate the support we have received from residents. I am all too aware that there were times when our produce fell a little short of expectations, but we got better as we went along. More growers joined and the variety and quality improved. Sadly, we were only able to have one larger market before the lockdown, but I am very optimistic that we will be able to develop the concept into a lovely Saturday morning event.

The local rural farmers deserve our support. Their lives are not easy and being able to sell what they produce is often their only source of income.

### **The Impithi Kiosk**

In many ways the Impithi Kiosk was a conundrum. The lease remains elusive despite dedicated attempts to have the municipality explain the reasons for the delay in renewing the lease. It is extremely frustrating and, sadly, merely serves to destroy the little sense of co-operation we would hope to enjoy with the municipality.

The kiosk itself had a difficult year. Turnover has dropped in real terms compared to the previous year. While I had hoped for a substantial increase in turnover, only December showed an increase in sales. The challenge of 2020/2021 has become significantly more onerous as we have lost all the income from the Easter holidays.

The restaurant business is one of tight margins and good progress has been made in getting the margins correct in terms of labour costs. Despite a concerted effort, the cost of sales remains well above the industry standard and we need to develop more efficient methods of stock control. The kiosk enjoys wonderful support from Pennington as a whole, and we are very conscious of the need to keep our prices competitive. The committee has discussed, at length, the introduction of a membership card that would entitle the member to a discount at the kiosk. I would welcome any thoughts and suggestions in this regard. It is not as simple as it seems, and the permutations tend to unravel into a tangle of unintended possibilities.

Suggestions regarding the hours of business for the kiosk are also welcome. A large part of the attraction of the kiosk is the view of the ocean. However, to satisfy the requirement of increasing turnover, we need to either increase the hours of business or the number of tables. Ideally, we should do both. I think we have erred this year in not utilising volunteers sufficiently and by not hosting more dinner evenings.

The general condition of the kiosk is deteriorating as we are reluctant to allocate funds without a lease being signed. This shackles us to the status quo and reduces our ability to make some much-needed improvements to many areas of the kiosk.

The lockdown has brought into focus the areas of the kiosk that require some innovative thinking and the introduction of new and exciting ideas. The possibility of altering the business to that of a take-away was fraught with problems and, fortunately, we did not enter that rather hazardous arena.

Claude le Roy has done excellent work in formalising much of the finances of the kiosk and we now have a much better idea of the viability of individual menu items. Claude identified that breakfasts were our best earner, followed by coffee. While other items were popular, such as Sunday lunch, the venue is the real attraction. We need to raise the level of service and become more innovative with our menu items.

Together with this rather rambling report you will find the organogram of the various functions required for the Conservancy to run efficiently. I was delighted to have offers of support from the initial organogram presentation and it is evident that for many the thought of sitting on a committee is not palatable, but that they would rather be active in fulfilling certain functions.

In this regard I must express my sincere appreciation to Arnoud who has given so much of his time and boundless enthusiasm to getting the website up and running and then, with gritty determination, taking up the task of sorting out the membership. You will have experienced his dedication in receiving your subscription invoices and, hopefully, acknowledgement of receipt of payment.

### **So, what can we hope for in the year ahead?**

Top of the list would be the resolution to the lease of the kiosk. A new lease will allow us to make improvements to all facets of the kiosk. We could increase the number of tables, redesign the kitchen, and substantially improve on both the levels of service and the quality of the menu.

Our finances are on a sound footing and there is a plan for the resuscitation of Nkombu and the Makamati Trail. The recycling depot will undergo the much-needed revamp and our membership has grown. As we cautiously head out into the unknown of a post lockdown world, the opportunities abound for a vibrant Conservancy.

The Annual General Meeting almost coincided with the beginning of the lockdown, and the last few weeks (some would say, a few too many weeks) have provided an opportunity to think a little differently and to question some of the priorities that had their importance eroded as we were all forced to live a little less hurriedly. Hopefully, dear members, it has also provided a fertile ground for some great new ideas for the Conservancy. I am hoping that we will have many new projects proposed and supported in the year ahead.

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Please share with us any ideas, comments, criticisms, and opinions that you have regarding the future of the Conservancy.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to Allan Cooper and the members of the committee who had the rather onerous task of working together with me during the last year. My thanks to Heinz and the staff at Impithi for all the hard work, and to Irene Strydom for her wonderful work in doing so much more than maintaining the gardens around the kiosk. Thanks also to all the volunteers who gave of their time during the year in doing so many of the little things that breathe life into the organisation. And I thank you, dear member, for your support and involvement. We live in a beautiful little village surrounded by much natural beauty. Its preservation depends on your involvement.