

CONVERSATIONS FOR THE EARTH 1:

Loerie Guest House

4 November 2011

Collaborators: See APPENDIX 2

Theme: “Towards a community of practice for earth stewardship in the Garden Route”

1. Who are we?

On 4 November 2011 a small group of people from different backgrounds, yet with a shared passion, met at Loerie Guest House in the Garden Route town of George. We met after a thought-provoking public talk on *‘Earth Stewardship in the Garden Route – with everyone a stakeholder’* by Maarten de Wit and felt encouraged by the enthusiasm and vigour shown during the meeting and the strong views and ideas raised there. There were 15 of us from different walks of life: successful businessmen; a community worker or two; a plant ecologist; a farmer; two or three earth scientists; a handful of conservationists; and a more than a few soles who labled themselves amorphously as *“wanting to bring things together”* and *“wanting to make a difference”*. We started the conversation with a question: *“why are we here?”* and soon saw that the purpose of the meeting was *“the beginnings of a ‘community of practice’ for earth stewardship in the Garden Route¹”*. This, together with Maarten’s earlier talk, gave us a sense of purpose. We had planted the seeds for an emerging ‘common identity’ which will develop and mature as we walk the earth stewardship road. Our shared commitment can be phrased as: *“to develop the capacity for adaptation and management towards a sustainable future in the Garden Route”*. Each of us could contribute to this in our own way while pursuing similar goals and sharing our resources, ideas and practices. We just needed an arena, a common space to generate new possibilities and self-correct while learning.

2. Our current concerns

Our *current concerns* are that development in the Garden Route is unsustainable. The rate of development, human population growth, alien plant spread and wholesale landscape change is exceeding our capacity to learn, adapt, manage and navigate the complexity of it all. If we add two additional factors: increasing poverty and inequality and uncertainties due to climate change and a fragile global economy, then one thing becomes clear: the resilience of the Garden Route is severely being stretched. We realize that the responsibility to do something about it rests on the shoulders of this generation, on us.

3. Our combined commitments

¹ A **Community of Practice** is a group of people informally bound together by shared expertise and a common domain of interest who interact regularly in order to collectively learn to improve in their common endeavour (Lave and Wenger 1991). The currency in these communities is experiential knowledge and membership is based on participation rather than official status. Communities of practice constitute webs of inclusive relationships in which people feel valued when they share their knowledge and are not bound by organizational affiliations. To be successful, communities must generate enough excitement, relevance, and value to attract and engage members. The self-organizing nature of these communities is the key to extracting their full potential.

Our *combined commitments* reflect these concerns: all of us wish to promote, foster, catalyse, support, encourage and develop activities, actions or initiatives which will take us on a different path, the road to a sustainable earth. How could we bring different energies, resources and knowledge together for sustainability? Our ways of doing this might differ: some are interested in job creation through e.g. tourism; others in novel ways of promoting grassroots action, or in research and monitoring of human impacts, or in fostering responsible leadership and citizenship through e.g. education and awareness creation. Some of us do action research in the belief that this will change human behaviour and thus monitor the impacts of humans on the Garden Route, knowing that believable data can raise everyone's awareness and stimulate their curiosity. Others prefer to teach in schools and universities. We are not passive bystanders, and have taken our own steps such as planting the seeds for a Garden Route Biosphere Reserve; a world heritage site to conserve the roots of our modern species; participating in the Garden Route Initiative; starting up training projects with farmers around land reform; repairing ecosystems for carbon storage; monitoring of the environment at the South African Environmental Observation Network SAEON, and of course the Africa Alive Corridors project of the African Earth Observatory Network AEON.

4. A future landscape

We see a *future landscape* where ignorance is countered with knowledge, and where fragmentation and working in separate 'silos' is replaced by listening, exploring possibilities, knowledge sharing and learning. We see the development of an inclusive community of practice, a learning network which will find common ground through dialogue, experiment with solutions, and learn together. We understand that our society is divided and unequal and that our conversations must therefore involve a great deal of listening, sharing and trust building. The community of practice must consist of a cross-section of local cultures.

We see a future '*coalition for earth stewardship*', and in it we see holders of traditional and sacred knowledge, religious communities of all faiths, academics and their students, researchers, school teachers and their learners, the business community, the unemployed, local national and provincial government, parastatals, the youth, the poor, our elders, civil society NGOs, farmers and land owners. We see this inclusive coalition as a possible '*knowledge node*' within AEON's Africa Alive Corridors.

5. What we are not seeing

What we are perhaps *not seeing* is that while many activities which could be classified as 'earth stewardship' are taking place, very few of them have their roots in trustful relationships. True to the culture of mistrust and scepticism so sadly characteristic of present-day South African society, we tend to talk among ourselves and our own kind and avoid 'the other'. Different cultural and interest groups seem to be neither able nor willing to explore the magic of cooperation, synergy and learning. Therefore a 'tipping point' towards functional relationships has to be found. This must be the focus of our next round of conversations.

6. A metaphor: survivors

Imagine ourselves being marooned on a small island with limited resources and many threats. We have just landed and are bewildered strangers to one another and to the complex world around us.

Leaving the island is not really an option – neighbouring islands might have even bigger challenges and surprises. We need to dig deep to uncover resources, insights and skills which up until now were hidden within and among us. How can we use our combined wisdom, resources and energies to create a safe place to not only co-exist, but to be a sustainable community and flourish?

APPENDIX 1. WORKSHOP TRANSCRIPT

1. Participants' contexts and interests

Human well-being

- Aiming for sustainability through job creation
- Developing tourism which plays an important role

Knowledge

- Conducting research to achieve real understanding of the linkages between social and ecological systems
- Transferring knowledge through teaching and learning
- “Action learning”
- Training and capacity development

Management and ‘ways of doing’

- Developing locally appropriate (“grassroots”) solutions for sustainability
- Promoting partnerships for sustainability
- Monitoring of ecosystems to understand human impacts, thus promoting sustainable management of earth’s resources
- Implementing practical projects that promote earth stewardship; “on the ground action”
- Encouraging responsible leaders and citizenship
- Fostering the wise and sustainable management of ecosystems
- Development of a Garden Route Biosphere Reserve
- Supporting responsible farming

2. What can be done: possibilities

- A series of conversations to find common ground, to build relationships, break down barriers and listen to one another’s ‘stories’
- Facilitating dialogue between a cross-section of local cultures
- Create a safe space to talk about a common future, and share knowledge
- Acknowledging that we are dealing with a complex, ‘murky, system with many uncertainties, grey areas

3. Action and the WAY FORWARD

- Finding a balance between reflection and action; slow and fast; small and large
- Use existing planning processes e.g. the Integrated Development Plans as platforms for dialogue, to map out a common future
- Provide leadership in linking groups and individuals
- Provide a platform / arena where people can do things their way, towards a common or similar set of goals
- Potential actions: putting a cost to degradation (but be cautious of the double-edged sword of economic valuation); water management; learning together from the past about earth stewardship;
- Forming a coalition for earth stewardship consisting of:
 - Traditional knowledge holders
 - Religious communities
 - Academia
 - Business
 - Local and provincial authorities
 - Parastatals
 - The youth
 - Elders
 - Civil society and NGOs
 - Farmers and land owners

The 'coalition for earth stewardship in the Garden Route' could be a knowledge node, within the *Homo sapiens* corridor of the Africa Alive Corridors project.

APPENDIX 2. CONVERSATION FOR THE EARTH, 4 NOVEMBER 2011 ATTENDANCE LIST			
NAME	AFFILIATION	TEL	E-MAIL
1. John & Dallas Carter	Port Elizabeth	083 267 4343	molyneuxcarter@telkomsa.net
2. Pierre-Louis Lemergier	Port Elizabeth	076 190 6384	Pierrelouis.Lemergier@gmail.com
3. Barbara van Heerden	Integrate, Cape Town	072 280 5401	integrate@telkomsa.net
4. Raymond Auerbach	NMMU: George Campus	084 567 1250	raymond.auerbach@nmmu.ac.za
5. Dirk Roux	SANParks, Garden Route	044 871 0109	dirkr@sanparks.org
6. Bianca Currie	NMMU: George Campus	072 275 4795	bianca.currie@nmmu.ac.za
7. Josefien Oude Munnink	Consultant to the Dutch government, based in Wilderness	071 583 9116	josefienoudemunnink@gmail.nl
8. Steve du Toit	WESSA, George	044 874 7097	steve@wessa.co.za
9. Maarten de Wit	NMMU: PE		maarten.dewit@nmmu.ac.za
10. John North	University of Pretoria, based in George		john@hypernorth.com
11. Nicky Allsopp	SAEON, Cape Town		allsopp@saeon.ac.za
12. Ryan Allan	PE - NMB Transition Network		ryansnoopyallan@gmail.com
13. Guy Harris	Cape St Blaize Caves, Mossel Bay		guy@grey-beard.co.za
14. Moctar Doucouré	AEON, Cape Town		moctar.aeon@gmail.com
15. Christo (facilitator)	Fabricius NMMU George Campus	044 8015001	Christo.fabricius@nmmu.ac.za