

## President's report 2007-2008



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I have come to the end of my tenure as President of the association. Rather than just reporting back on the past year, I would like to give you a quick overview of my time in council over nearly two decades.

It has been a long haul since I was first nominated for council soon after I joined the association around 1991. Soon after joining the association I realised that Neil Fairall, (the president at the time) who pestered me into joining the association had ulterior motives: He was looking for somebody to “dump” some work on... Needless to say it didn't take long after I was nominated to serve in council that I ended up with the job of editing the annual News Bulletin. Fortunately I successfully “dumped” this job on a young man called Michael Somers after about two years. In the meantime I was given another job: that of treasurer in 1993, even before I could pass on the responsibility of the newsletter to Michael. What I didn't realise at the time is that the treasurer was effectively the secretariat of the association. The only function I didn't fulfil was taking minutes at the council meetings. Luckily Guy Palmer, the actual secretary at the time, took the minutes.

In 1993 we had a very successful conference at the then University of Port Elizabeth (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University - NMMU) organised by Graham Kerley. Soon after taking over as treasurer I realised that both financially and in terms of membership we were in a downward spiral. We struggled to get quorums at our annual general meetings and we were in serious trouble. Both Guy Palmer and I realised at the time that we simply do not have the time to provide the services to the association that we were supposed to. We therefore proposed to the SAWMA council for Elma Marais to fulfil both the role of treasurer and secretary and for our honorariums to be paid to her instead. Thinking back that was most probably a turning point in the association, as now we had someone to properly administer the finances and membership. It took us a few years to get back on our feet but there was a constant improvement since then, despite set backs. During this period government withdrew their support to scientific journals like ours. That single event was a serious setback to us. Our publishing costs suddenly increased by 60% – 100%. Furthermore due to reductions in government support, we lost more and more members.

Then around 2000 Rudi van Aarde became president and through his efforts we secured substantial sponsorships, but unfortunately our membership numbers were still dwindling. By then we started to have our conferences on an annual basis with Elma taking on the responsibility of administrating the conferences as well. I'm of the opinion that this decision saved the association in the medium to long term. We now had a well functioning secretariat but we still had major challenges with the administration of the journal. Authors sometimes waited for long periods before they received feedback on the reviews of their papers and before their papers were published, due to administration blunders. So during Rudi's four years as president we internalised that function as well. Now we had a fully functional secretariat and SAWMA soon started displaying the image of a well run association. Our annual conferences were also improving from struggling to draw 80 delegates at the George conference in 1998 to more than 120 at the Loskop Dam conference during my first year as president and the Mpekwani Conference around 170 this year. In my opinion the SAWMA conference is fast becoming a standard event on the annual calendar of natural resource managers in South Africa and even some members from our neighbouring countries.

About eight years ago we also took a decision to try and improve the impact of the journal. Previously Neil Fairall and Julius Koen tried their best to keep our journal on track and were successful in doing so. At the time though, both of them were in management positions with very little time to put serious effort in the journal. So we found an editor that was actively publishing in the person of Belinda Reyers. She was followed by Michael Cherry and I'm of the opinion that the initiatives and editorial practices implemented by these two people had a major impact on the dramatic improvement of our journal's impact factor which Michael Somers, our current journal editor will report on. Our journal is fully available on the web through our agreement with SABINET and now also through BioOne.

I would like to summarise by assessing the association in terms of some critical success factors. Firstly on a slightly negative note our auditors found that we had a very slight shortfall of R190.00 in 2007, but I am not concerned about that at all. In both 2005 and 2006 we had substantial surpluses. The shortfall in 2007 can largely be attributed to once off expenses such as data transfer and the updating of computer software. Our membership numbers are stable and healthy and attendance of our conferences is on a general upwards trend. Last year our conference had the competition in the form the Society for Conservation Biology's biannual conference, hosted and organised by Graham Kerley at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. Therefore as predicted our numbers of delegates attending the symposium at Didima were lower, but it was nevertheless still a highly successful meeting. This year we attracted a record number of delegates since the 1993 UPE conference. The last indicator of success is the impact of our journal and as mentioned that is healthy as well.

Therefore now I am able to step down as president and hand over to Julius Koen with the knowledge that I am handing over a stable association which is on the up. For this privilege I would firstly like to thank Elma Marais. In my opinion she is the heart of the association but all the council members also make significant contributions to the success of our association. Then the journal editor, his editorial board and reviewers also need a pat on the back for the success of the journal over the last few years and their efforts to maintain a good standard of articles published. I would also like to thank the hosts of our annual conferences that are keeping the spirit of the association alive. Also thank you to our members for their commitment and support.

Lastly I would like to wish Julius Koen all of the best for his term as president.

My best wishes for the future and I will continue playing an active part in the association.

Christo Marais