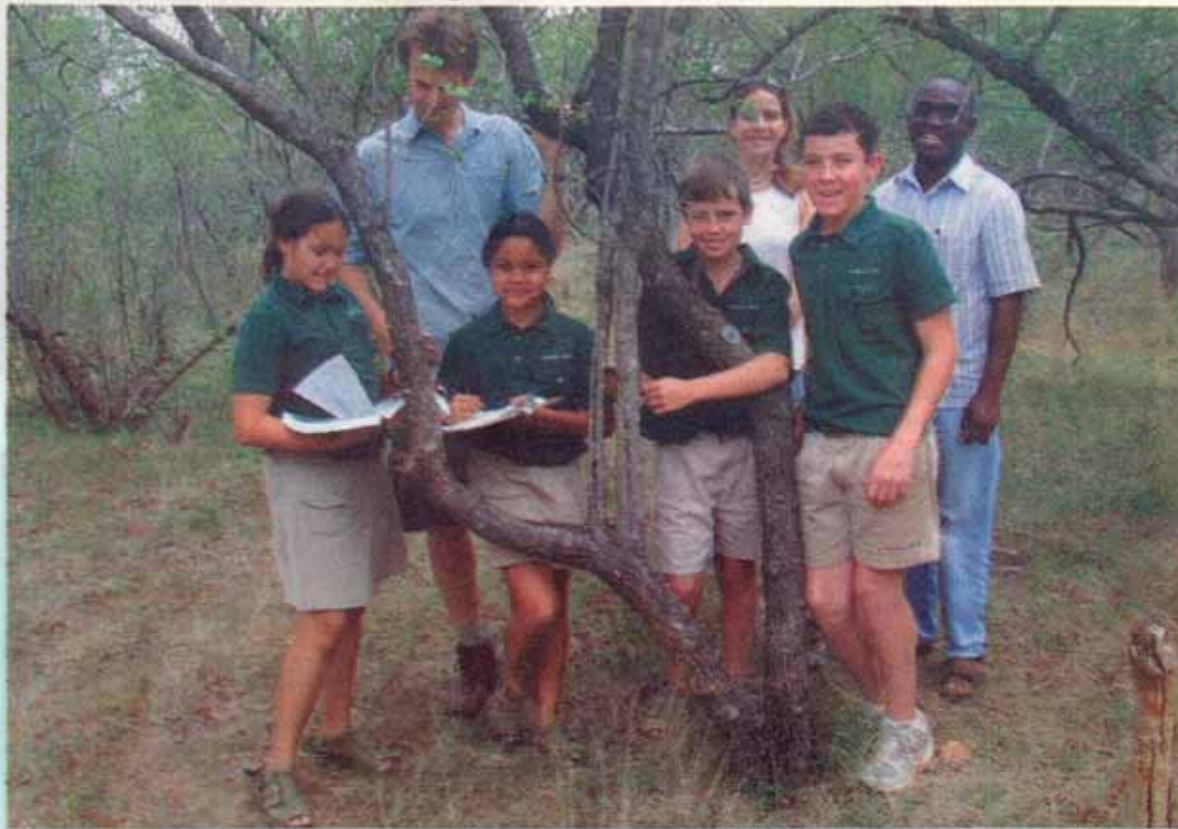


School kids get involved in long-term tree monitoring



For the next 20 years at least, teachers and learners at Southern Cross Schools will be keeping an eye on the trees around their school in Hoedspruit – all 432 of those that have been clearly marked.

On Wednesday, October 31, 2007, Dr Tony Swemmer of the South African Environmental Observation Network (SAEON) Ndlovu Node, and the rest of a team comprising volunteers, teachers and learners tagged the last of the marked trees on nine plots measuring about 20 by 20 metres each.

"Each class will adopt a plot that will remain with them for the time that they are in the school," says Les Blandy, one of the teachers.

"The children are really excited that the project is part of a national programme," she adds.

The children will record the growth of each tree by estimating numbers of leaves, noting when flowers and seeds appear, and measuring stem

diameters and tree heights. Similar tree monitoring, though on a much larger scale, is being undertaken in the Kruger National Park and other private game reserves. Nikki Stevens, SAEON data manager, is looking forward to seeing the comparative results over time.

In contrast to Kruger, at Southern Cross Schools there are no elephants or fire to damage the trees, and the monitoring project provides a rare opportunity to determine the effects of rainfall and drought (also monitored by the learners) on bushveld trees.

According to Les, there is a strong possibility that the school may soon add a grass monitoring component to the tree monitoring programme.

Joe Sibuyi of SAEON added that the programme will be extended to two schools, Majeje High School in Lulekani and Lepato High School in Makushane in the Phalaborwa region early in 2008.

The SAEON team, Dr Tony Swemmer, Nikki Stevens and Joe Sibuyi with Southern Cross Schools learners Sabeeya Razak, Jezza-Rae Larsen, Wayne Parker and Nicholas Kotze.