

# The Arid Zone Ecology Forum

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About 70 researchers, conservation officials, farmers and others interested in the arid regions of southern Africa gathered in Prince Albert in October for the 31st Arid Zone Ecology Forum (AZEF) meeting. AZEF was held in our town previously in 1986 and 1997. This year's meeting celebrated the establishment of the Long-Term Ecological Research centre on Tierberg east of town in 1987, as well as the contributions of Dr Richard Dean (ornithologist) and Dr Sue Milton-Dean (botanist) who managed the research site for many years. Over 100 scientific papers and books based on research at Tierberg have been produced over the years, contributing an understanding of how the Karoo environment functions, especially in response to livestock overgrazing, rainfall, hail, nutrients and drought. Mr Kitshoff, the previous owner of Tierberg, kindly donated the study site to the National Research Foundation to be managed by the South African Environmental Observation Network (SAEON).

The annual meeting is also a training ground for arid zone ecologists, early career researchers and students who share their

research findings through talks and posters, to form new collaborations and plan future studies. Topics presented included *heuweltjie* formation, plant-animal interactions, fire ecology, land conservation programmes in the Succulent Karoo, community conservation and environmental education and the role of NGOs in the public participation phase of large development projects. Looming threats to biodiversity and 'sense of place' as a result of renewable energy, astronomy developments, and proposed uranium mining and fracking were also aired.

New technological tools used for monitoring rangeland vegetation and livestock, e.g. remote sensing through the use of drones, and the value of using historical landscape photographs in identifying changes in the Karoo landscape were also highlights of the meeting.

The need to understand the Karoo environment to inform conservation, farming management and policy, and the effects of climate change on the environment and its

people was further emphasised. There was a strong social science voice at AZEF this year that spurred debates on how ecologists and social scientists can collaborate to address the development and environmental issues faced by society today. The role of farmers in providing perspectives on farming, sustainable development and natural resource use in their communities is a vital aspect of socio-ecological research in the Karoo. This is important in achieving both the conservation of threatened landscapes while managing sustainable natural resource use by the local communities whose livelihoods depend on them.

Those who are passionate about the Karoo environment are encouraged to take part in citizen science projects, namely the Karoo BioGaps (<http://www.sanbi.org/biogaps>) and rePhotoSA (<http://rephotosa.adu.org.za/>) initiatives, to contribute to protecting our environment. For more info on how you can get involved in these exciting projects please visit the websites above. ♦



Prof Timm Hoffman, Prof Sue Milton-Dean, Dr Richard Dean and Clement Cupido with the canvas auctioned in aid of funding for the attendance of one student at the Arid Zone Forum 2017. Highest bid was from Wolwekraal Conservation and Research Organisation that manages Wolwekraal Nature Reserve (the only formally protected example of Prince Albert Succulent Karoo)  
Photo: Barbara Castle



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