

THE PANS ARE WET - A RECCE DELIGHT

By Betsie Milne



Kans Se Vloer, a non-perennial pan along the R357 west of Brandvlei was wet after recent rains (left) and Dr Joh Henschel is seen here clicking away at aquatic organisms (right).

Isolated, shallow depressions colloquially known as pans, vloere or kolke are prominent features in arid regions and it is therefore not surprising that the Karoo landscape of the Northern Cape Province are peppered with them. Most are endorheic in nature and due to their natural hydrological functioning they are subjected to complete desiccation during the dry season, which can last for decades. When it rains enough for these features to hold water, dormant aquatic organisms respond and scientists delight in a wetland resurrection!

This is precisely what Drs Joh Henschel and Betsie Milne experienced on a recent reconnaissance through the Bushmanland. Although only prepared for sampling clay crusts and soil, they were able to collect aquatic arthropods, including branchiopods and dipterans. This however had them rushing to the nearest AgriMark for

Propylene Glycol (antifreeze) in order to preserve their discoveries.

The pans in the Northern Cape have received little attention in terms of research and hardly any information exists to relate biodiversity to pan types. Management approaches of pans are uncertain and they are treated as degraded systems. By contrast, they are possibly among the most sensitive ecosystems in the region, potentially supporting many species of conservation significance and possibly acting as key ecosystem features for temporarily dormant or migrant species. It is therefore critical to fill this current knowledge gap. By good fortune, the Bushmanland reconnaissance marks a successful launch to the PDP Postdoc Project awarded to Dr Betsie Milne and hosted by the Arid Lands Node, which aims to characterise the ephemeral pans in the Province.