

Aquatic Scientists meet for science and fellowship



The SASAqS 2001 Conference delegates gathered at Aventura Eco Eiland, Northern Province.

The Southern African Society of Aquatic Scientists (SASAqS) recently had their biennial conference at Aventura Eco Eiland virtually on the Letaba river in the Northern Province lowveld. The week long conference and workshops were attended by some 135 delegates. Some of the delegates came from as far afield as Australia, Belgium and Switzerland. Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique were also represented.

The regional organising committee put in much effort in organising the SASAqS 2001 conference and sponsorships from various organisations. The sponsorships made it possible for 19 students from the Northern Province universities and Zimbabwe to attend this gathering of aquatic scientists.

Dr Steve Mitchell, research manager at the Water Research Commission, gave the opening address. He reflected upon the issue of sustainable resource management, the complexity thereof, and the need for interdisciplinary teamwork.



From left to right: Wynand Vlok (University of the North), Mick Angliss (Northern Province Environmental Affairs), Ben van der Waal (University of Venda), Freek Venter (Krugers National Park), Paul Fouche (University of Venda) and Stan Rodgers (Northern Province Environmental Affairs).

He lauded the members of the society for their contributions to ensure that the aquatic ecosystem was recognised as an integral part of the resource in the new National Water Act. "Through a sequence of fortuitous events South Africa is the first country to have written the requirement for an ecological reserve into law."

"For this we are grateful, but this is no time to sit back. Rolling out the Act into implementation is complex and our ongoing efforts are needed to help ensure that this is successful. ...All this

has to be based on good science," said Dr Mitchell.

GOOD SCIENCE

"As scientists, we owe it not only to ourselves, but to those who invest in the work we do and also to society at large to produce good science. There is no justification for not doing so." He said the SASAqS conference presented a forum "where we are able to gauge the quality of our science".

He also emphasized the importance and

significance of fundamental research and new thinking.

He mention some of the new technologies and methodologies pioneered and developed by South African scientists in the water field

Dr Chris Dickens followed with his presidential address entitled Science: Fact and fantasy. He looked at some threats to science, such as: rejection of reasoning and sham-reasoning, rejection of facts and knowledge, political, racial and sexist motivated scholarships, as well as advocacy research and pseudo-inquiry amongst others. Then he discussed some of the requirements for good science, such as: holding the truth as the highest goal, having an incisive mind, a mind free to reason without prejudice, and an eye for principle. He concluded that a love of truth and a mind strengthened by a sound education need to be cultivated as the basis for good science.

Professor Christopher Cook from Zurich

University, Switzerland, was the guest speaker. He is a world renowned aquatic botanist. He fascinated his audience with an excellent slide show on aquatic plants in his presentation entitled: "Numbers and kinds of aquatic plants".

PRESENT ATIONS

Six plenary sessions were held and some 66 papers were presented in the parallel sessions. The plenary session presentations included subjects such as: "The diversity and conservation of fishes in the Limpopo River system", "Science, politics people and ecosystems", "Should we rethink our approach to the environmental reserve?", and "Aquatic invertebrates and biomonitoring in the Zambezi basin". The main themes of the parallel sessions were: catchment management, management philosophy, geomorphology, aquatic plants, ecotoxicology, algae and phytoplankton, biomonitoring, conservation, and wetland rehabilitation.

International delegates subsequently

remarked that presentation standards were exceptionally high and that the interdisciplinary nature of the SASAqS conference is rarely seen elsewhere in the world.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

The conference programme also included some workshops, for example on ecotoxicology and on research project proposal writing. The work sessions were well received and attended.

The mid-week excursion to the Kruger National Park and the Phalaborwa Mining Company was a welcome break from the formal proceedings. It afforded delegates the opportunity to view some of the river modifications in the Letaba river, caused by the floods of February 2000. Seeing some big game added to the delight of the field trip.

The next SASAqS conference is scheduled for July 2002 and will be held in Bloemfontein in the Free State.