Title: ‘Working with marginalised communities: Outreach Greening Programmes in South Africa’

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Abstract

The National Botanical Institute (NBI) includes eight National Botanical Gardens in South Africa. The National Botanical Gardens’, horticultural and education staff has always shown a strong sense of commitment to greening initiatives at school and community level, in marginalised communities. For as long as we can remember the NBI has supported, as far as possible, schools and community greening projects through the provision of useful environmental awareness resources, plant donations and planting demonstrations. This type of support sustained the initiation of many projects but left them with little chance of sustainable development.

The need to engage communities in horticultural skill development and localised conservation action has always been a reality and in a changing South Africa, this has become increasingly more important as a catalyst for social, environmental and economic change. In order to address this need the NBI responded by sourcing funding to develop a School Visits Bus Programme at the Kirstenbosch - Gold Fields Environmental Education Centre (GFEEC). This programme proved to be an effective and well-utilised resource to ‘bring communities to botanical gardens’.

The dire need to extend the NBI’s role into communities that experienced the rolling lawns and tall trees of our botanical gardens was ever increasing as they continued to return to communities where the ‘environment’ is far from a priority.

In 1997 seed funding enabled the development of the Kirstenbosch Outreach Preening Programme. Since then a number of funders have come on board to support the development of such programmes at a number of our eight National Botanical Gardens, in South Africa.

Developing low-water use, indigenous gardens and food gardens is a practical way in which to schools and communities can create a greener, healthier environment. The process of garden development does not only develop horticultural skills. It is also a ‘real life’ opportunity to develop better communication, problem solving, entrepreneurial and project management skills.

We see greening initiatives as:
- A long-term process involving long-term relationships between schools, sponsors, the NBI and other partners;
- An integrated process of environmental learning through hands-on action;
- A developmental process in which both people and the gardens grow;
- A sustainable process that considers ecological, economic and social needs;
- A reflective process in which evaluation is an essential part of improving practice.

Implementation of our Outreach Greening Programme is an opportunity to extend our work beyond the boundaries of our botanical gardens to make a real difference in marginalised communities. There are many lessons that we would feel honoured to share with botanical gardens across the globe as we suspect there is much to learn from each other.