

Mossel Bay Environmental Partnership wins conservation awards

The Mossel Bay Environmental Partnership (MEP) and the Oyster Bay Reserve were recognised for their contributions to the community and the environment when the Gouritz Cluster Biosphere Reserve held its annual awards ceremony recently.

"These are significant awards for us because we were unaware that we were in line for them, but, perhaps more importantly, because they were given to us by our peers," said MEP chairperson, Beverly Boer. Boer is a professional environmental consultant who serves voluntarily and in her private capacity on the boards of both projects.

The Gouritz Cluster Biosphere Reserve is recognised by UNESCO, and is the first designated cluster biosphere reserve in Africa. Cluster biosphere reserves are internationally recognised for accommodating the growth and development of human communities, while at the same time strengthening agriculture and the conservation of natural resources in sustainable ways.

Importance of successful communities

MEP was named the Non-profit Organisation of the Year, while the Oyster Bay Reserve received a special recognition award for its work in biodiversity. "We were judged on all the work we did in the Mossel Bay area during 2011 and 2012," said Boer. "We didn't even know we were being scrutinised - so you can imagine how happy we were on the night."

"You can't have successful conservation without successful communities, which is why our motto is 'Learn - Protect - Conserve'. We achieve learning by providing internships to students, and by regular outreach into the community; protection through initiatives like the Mossel Bay Fire Protection Agency, the St. Blaize Conservancy, and the St. Blaize Biodiversity Forum, and conservation through projects like our estuary restoration and firebreak initiatives," she said.

The 330ha Oyster Bay Reserve - on a stretch of land that's wedged between the upmarket Pinnacle Point Beach and Golf Estate and the disadvantaged suburb of KwaNonqaba in Mossel Bay - is a community reserve that involve itself in a variety of research, conservation, education, and eco-tourism projects. It works actively with a number of other environmental groups who share its goals of preserving the natural environment, educating young people, and providing support for local communities.

Take the lead with actions

Its long term plan is to become Mossel Bay's environmental education facility, and for this a number of tourism-related projects have already been put in place. These include hiking trails and a hide for bird watchers.

"Its designed to demonstrate to the people of KwaNongaba, Asla and all other communities in Mossel Bay that it is possible to create jobs and opportunities for oneself through the preservation of our indigenous fauna and flora," said Boer.

"Environmental protection depends on people who take a lead through their decisions, actions and passions, and who thus leave a legacy for future generations."

Mossel Bay Tourism's Marcia Holm said that this has been an outstanding year of achievements for the MEP, and that what has been achieved is very significant for the town's tourism economy - which relies heavily on the environment.

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