

Botanical Education Trust report to BotSoc Coastal Branch AGM 2022

While there were no awards in 2020 because of the Covid pandemic, the Botanical Education Trust is back on track and last year made grants to the value of over R90 000. Four applications, which in the opinion of the Trustees will best serve the conservation of our indigenous flora, were selected.

It is very positive that two of the recipients are promising young botanists. The first, Katharine Khoury of Rhodes University, is studying the Greater Cape Floristic Region and, in particular, how pollinating insects influence the selection of the great floral diversity across the region. As an undergraduate she has already documented the morphological and colour variation in varieties of Painted Lady Gladiolus flowers (*Gladiolus carneus*) and identified their pollinators. Now she has received a grant from the Botanical Education Trust to investigate the evolutionary relationships using genetic samples.

The second young botanist is, in addition, one of the two current awardees who have previously received funds from the Trust and produced excellent results. Jessica Minnaar recently completed her MSc degree at Wits University and has now been granted a further award to study the biology of plants of the genus *Galtonia* in the High Drakensberg for her PhD. Only 5% of the genetically diverse Drakensberg Mountain Centre is conserved and its plants are increasingly threatened due to overgrazing, afforestation, agriculture and invasion by alien plants. Therefore, conservation needs to be prioritised and studies that investigate the processes that have led to such a diverse region provide information essential to its conservation and help minimise further plant loss.

Dr Marianne le Roux, of the South African National Biodiversity Institute in Pretoria, is an established and well-published botanist who has also been successfully supported by the Trust before. With the current grant she will undertake a taxonomic revision of a group of legumes, of the genus *Argyrobium*, which is in need of taxonomic revision. Because taxonomists seldom appear in the limelight of botanical research, they often find it difficult to attract funding. However, this work provides critical basic information that can be applied to many practical aspects such as conservation status, environmental management and environmental education.

Like the first awardee, Dr Ethan Newman is also from Rhodes University. An established researcher, he is investigating the impact of habitat transformation and fragmentation on insect pollinators and hence floral evolution. He aims to understand whether plants can withstand the loss of their most important pollinator by evolving divergent floral traits to attract less effective pollinators.

Dr Sibonelo Mbanjwa is the founder of the Sibonelo Environmental Education Centre, which aims to create environmentally-friendly citizens by encouraging communities to use natural resources sustainably and educating them about the dangers of invasive alien plants. Although his application to the Trust to fund stationery for his Centre was unsuccessful, the Trust's chair was able to donate a quantity of stationery to his organisation.

Since its inception in 2008, the Trust has dispensed over a million Rand to well deserving projects. But it needs further donations to continue this sterling work. And, in accordance with the Trust's registration with SARS, donors may utilise such payments as a tax deduction.

Charles Botha
(Chair Botanical Education Trust)