

Conservation Training on Telperion, Mpumalanga: addressing critical and scarce skills shortages in the environmental sector



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Abstract:

In 2000, the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) created the Conservation Training Project, (CTP) to focus on mentorship and skills development of future conservationists. The project aims to prepare young conservation students with necessary sector skill requirements and experiences to take up positions within the sector. An agreement in 2008 led to the use of the De Beers Nature Reserve, Telperion, being used to conduct conservation mentorship and skills development activities.

Soil conservation, alien plants, fire, natural resource management, law enforcement, vegetation survey techniques, specie identification as well as communication activities, totaling 1399 hours, was made available to 66 students.

Introduction and Problem statement:

One of the EWT's identified strategic imperatives is to explore and develop opportunities for mentorship, career development and capacity building within the conservation sector.

One of the problems identified in the Directorate of Environmental Affairs (DEA) Environmental Sector Skills Plan¹ (ESSP), was the many critical and scarce skills shortages within the environmental sector. This finding was further corroborated by the Human Capital Development Strategy for the Biodiversity sub-sector² (HCDS BS) published by the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI).

CTP activities have now been aligned with the identified ESSP and HCDS BS skills development needs. A collaborative partnership between Telperion, EWT and the University of South Africa (UNISA) has yielded beneficial outcomes. The CTP targets disadvantaged students who are currently studying towards a National Diploma in Nature Conservation through UNISA.

Methodology:

Eight one-week (Monday to Friday) training and skills development camps are planned for each year, taking place on Telperion. Current facilities include student accommodation, future visitor accommodation and a lecture hall. All transportation to and from Johannesburg and Telperion is provided by EWT, along with all meals.



Each camp focuses on an environmental topic such as soil conservation, alien plants, fire, natural resource management, law enforcement, vegetation survey techniques, specie identification as well as environmental education and communication. Additional support is provided in the form of qualified mentors and an appropriate conducive learning environment. Reference materials have also been specifically developed to add learning support to each of the camps.



Results:

Table 1: Indicating the conservation training breakdown with regards no's of camps, students and hours per year, from 2008 to 2011, with an estimated projection for a completed 2011 based on average participation.

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011 (estimated completed)
no. of camps	6	2	7	5 (7)
no. of students	95	30	84	57 (83)
camp hours / year	358	130	429	344 (482)

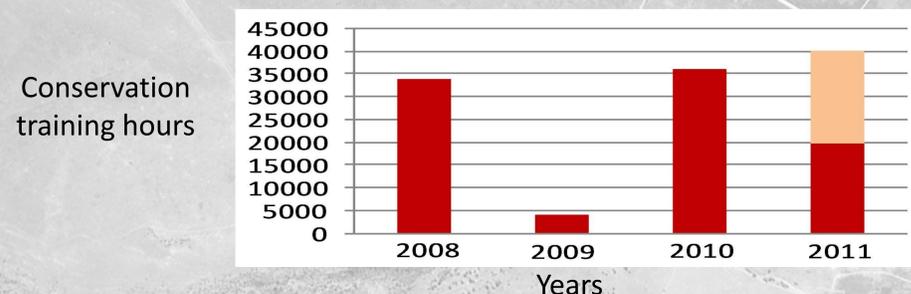


Figure 1: A total of Conservation training hours provided to students, per year, from 2008 to 2011, with an estimated projection for a completed 2011 based on average participation.

The average number of students per camp is 13, ranging from 4 to 18.

Students attend on average 3.5 camps, ranging from 1 to 12. A few students attend only once and subsequently determine that it is not what they require. When these are removed from the data set, average attendance increases to 5.5 camps per student.

Discussion:

There has been a steady growth in camps conducted from 2008 to 2011, barring 2009 as a result of organizational restructuring.

Camp attendance can fluctuate as a result of a topic to be covered, the need for skills within that particular topic, as well as personal and family issues, making it difficult for the student to attend.

The number of camps attended by any one particular student depends on the skill requirement needs of that student as well as time available to attend.

Conclusion:

The collaborative partnership between the EWT, UNISA and the De Beers Diamond Route over the past four years to provide sector specific skills development has proved its potential. The CTP model is simple, robust and adaptable and should be considered as a viable possibility for expansion, adaption and implementation in some of if not all of the other Diamond Route reserves. These reserves are located in areas of low conservation skills recruitment and would stand to contribute to the Government's skills and development strategies.

References:

- ¹ Department of Environmental Affairs, *Environmental Sector Skills Plan for South Africa*, May 2010, RSA
- ² South African National Biodiversity Institute, *Human Capital Development Strategy for the Biodiversity Sector*, July 2010, RSA

