



**RHODES UNIVERSITY**  
Where leaders learn

# The Spekboom



## Farewell Sheona



This month marks the end of Sheona Shackleton's formal career at Rhodes University. Sheona has been associated with the Department of Environmental Science since 2000, taking up a permanent position in the Department in June 2008. During this time she progressed from lecturer to full Professor, which she obtained in 2013. She has been head of department for the last four years. Rhodes University is also Sheona's alma mater. Due to these long-term connections, and because she is still supervising postgrads in the Department, she has been granted an associate position by the University (of Honorary Professor). Sheona fully intends to continue working with staff and students from the Department, and to link them with colleagues and projects in her new position. The opportunities for further work in the Eastern Cape are huge, and Sheona is keen to build on the local research she has done while at Rhodes. So expect to see her around.

So, where is she going? Sheona will be moving to Cape Town in January 2018 to become the Deputy Director of

the African Climate and Development Initiative at UCT for a period of five years (<http://acdi.uct.ac.za/>). The ACDI is a university-wide initiative which supports transdisciplinary, collaborative research and training in climate change and development. The position offers an exciting opportunity to undertake more focussed work in the area of climate change adaptation, to interact and learn from a large group of colleagues working on a range of innovative projects across the region, and to play a role in guiding the strategic direction of the ACDI and climate change work in South Africa. All exciting, new and stimulating stuff!!

In case you are wondering, Sheona and Charlie are still very much together and will start a life of commuting between two homes and making the most of all the food, wine, hikes and art that Cape Town and its surrounds have to offer. So change is happening in both their work and personal lives. Sheona has always been a bit of a restless person, having made many moves throughout her childhood and married life. She sees this as her last job before semi-retiring and free-lancing back at home in Grahamstown.

Farewell Sheona, we wish you all the best for this last chapter of your working life.



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## Honors on the ground: a community engagement experience

**By Shannon Hardisty**

This year the honours class teamed up with Amakhala and the Sandisulwazi High School in Paterson as our community engagement project. The official aim was to help the school obtain their “eco-schools” status, but we also hoped to share our experiences and learn from each other. The first few interactions consisted of admin work; we won’t get into the details, but I can assure you it was as thrilling as admin work usually is. Once this was out the way, the real fun began.

The students decided the theme “Local and global issues” as their focus for the year. This posed a new challenge: how do we decide on what issues we should focus on? The answer: Litter. The students and honours class teamed up and pooled their artistic abilities, most came from the high school students (see pots outside the department as an explanation for this bias), to create posters to raise awareness about litter around the school. The next step was to wage war on the litter around the school by doing a clean-up mission... we won... this time.

We were also treated to a couple of amazing excursions at Amakhala. The first was a day filled with game drives and more artistic activities, as well as a trip to the Amakhala museum. Students from Rhodes and Sandisulwazi found their inner child’s enthusiasm when faced with a sleepy cheetah and a curious elephant, despite the seemingly freezing tem-

peratures we were exposed to! We closed the day with a quiz to test what we had learnt. The Rhinos put up a respectable effort, however the Elephants crushed the quiz as though it was nothing more than a little bug (I bet you can’t guess which team the writer was on!).

The second trip was a bush walk and scavenger hunt in a different section of the reserve, much to the cheetah’s relief I’m sure. We were shown different plants on our walk and stumbled into a tower of giraffes; again the inner children were ecstatic! The scavenger hunt allowed us all to explore the area and learn something new from everyone. After a long morning of activities, we closed the day with awards and speeches. The project was not without its challenges and frustrations, but what isn’t? We hope that there are a few more



people in this world that care about the environment, and can honestly say that this experience has affected how we think and work. We can all move forward from this experience knowing and caring a little bit more.



*“It was inspiring to see the eco-schools students keep going, even through the derision thrown at them by their fellow school friends”*

## Postgrad walk/run

Initiated by Rebecca and Penny the walk/run around the Botanical Garden done by staff and students of Department of Environmental Science on 19<sup>th</sup> of July was a refreshing change from routine. The trail was around the Botanical garden in a circle, climbing up the hill and back to the Department.

While some of the walkers took it easy and savoured every bit of the view, including exploring the graves in the Botanical Garden, others clicked pictures of the aloes and weird and wonderful flowers found along the walking trail.

The view from the top of the hill was entirely worth the climb, for it was the perfect “selfie” spot with the town in the background.

Special mention must be made of James, who brought in gender diversity to the group. At the end of the 45 hour exercise, we all enjoyed drinks at Saints Bistro and agreed to do this walk/run + drinks



# DES Annual Research Symposium

By Mwazvita Dalu

The Department of Environmental Science recently held its annual two-day conference on the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of October, 2017. The conference started on a high note, with our esteemed guest speaker, professor Kakembo from NMMU presenting on the vulnerabilities that are brought about by climate change with regards to invasive species and land. Also part of the exciting line-up of speakers was our Head of Department; Prof S. Shackleton, who started a stimulating conversation on decolonization of the education system leading into a lively plenary discussion amongst the audience.

As part of the many topics discussed, the issues of policy and practice were discussed from a conservation perspective. In continuance with the governance theme during the conference, municipalities were also a hot topic, with regards to their climate change responses and disaster reduction and preparedness. More on the natural side of the environment, Rebecca Powell presented the bigger five-year restoration projects in the Macubeni catchment that the department is part of, which also facilitated for several of the Honours researches presented during the conference.

Land degradation kicked off with an insightful presentation by Professor Gambiza, who introduced the building blocks of the land degradation neutrality target setting programme; a programme motivated by the UNCCD, COP 12 (2015) and SDG 15 mandates. The programme aims to restore 100 000 hectares of land by 2030. The session on land and livelihoods hosted several interesting talks, with food security being a resonating theme across all presentations within the session.

Also presented were thought-provoking insights into very practical applications of environmental science in issues of energy and waste.



Discussions were energetic; and even yielded positive influences on pro-environmental behavior amongst the audience. Finally, the day topped off with a delightful presentation by Slyvia, one of the Honours students in the department, ending the first day of conference.

Day two kicked off with a rather peculiar and interesting topic on names, nature and urban biodiversity presented by Professor C Shackleton. The session on urban environments focused on the importance of urban greening, and highlighted some of the key differences; and challenges, that are linked to socio-economic factors within the field. Many thanks to the vibrant presenters members of the department who contributed and attended this year's conference. Thank you to all guests who were a part of an exciting two days for the department, who included the Dean of Science, Professor Booth, amongst other esteemed colleagues of the department.



## Following invasive species around the world

By Ross Shackleton



A rainy 3rd year fieldtrip in 2011

I did my undergraduate and honours in Environmental Science at Rhodes University between 2009 and 2012. Despite fond work related memories (especially the field trips), good friendships and a lot of time in the good old Rat and Parrot, studying at the Department of Environmental Science taught me a lot, and has set me up for some exciting adventures and work since I left.

Studying through the Department of Environmental Science taught us early on about the importance of inter and transdisciplinary research and the crucial link between social and ecological systems, which has been the foundation of my research career. After leaving Rhodes, I completed a PhD at Stellenbosch University, focusing on the social and ecological impacts and management of a major invasive species known as *Prosopis* or mesquite in the arid parts of South Africa. This integrative approach led to a more novel and cross cutting project than the usual studies in the field of invasion biology, which traditionally focus primarily on ecology. This more novel approach has definitely helped me in my academic career. At the same time I was lucky to learn a lot more about wine in this beautiful area. This was followed by a short one year postdoc in Stellenbosch working in the same lab, where I primarily worked on the impacts of different invasive species in eastern Africa.

Since then I have been based as a postdoc at the Interdisciplinary School of Environment, Resources and Sustainability at the University of Waterloo near Toronto in Canada. The work here has been exciting and has focused on the social dynamics of invasion science (i.e. how people perceive invasive species and how these species impact humans). It has also been an awesome in that I have experienced snow for the first time in my life, and to a lesser extent temperatures of around minus 15 °C. As of December, I will be starting another postdoc at the interdisciplinary Faculty of Geosciences and Environment at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland, working on a similar topic. I am excited for new experiences there, and an abundance of cheap chocolate. What I have learnt in my travels is that invasive plants are an issue globally, with all countries around the world are facing similar problems and challenges to what we do in South Africa. Furthermore, the approach to studying and managing these species requires working with both people and the invasive plants themselves.

I may be a bit biased (with two parents in the department), but I would reiterate the importance of what you are being taught in this department, which is a lot more forward thinking and globally relevant than other places that I have been based. This will help set you up for a good academic or non-academic career in the future.



Working in Canada: showing off South Africa



Enjoying Canada (with an old Rhodes hoodie)

# DES at the PECSii Conference in Mexico: Mole, Mezcal and Meaningful place-based research

By Alta de Vos, Jessica Cockburn and Georgina Cundill Kemp

In early November, we headed off to [Oaxaca City, Mexico](#) to attend the [2<sup>nd</sup> Conference of the Programme on Ecosystem Change and Society](#) (PECSii). The city of Oaxaca was the perfect backdrop for this conference on sustainability science. Oaxaca is known as one of the bio-cultural hotspots of Mexico, and we were lucky to be able to enjoy some enriching cultural and historical excursions, multiple delicious and intriguing meals and colourful [Dia De Muerte](#) (Day of the Dead) festivities. Who knew- grasshoppers go with everything, maize fungus tastes as good as blue cheese (if not better), and chilli, chocolate and meat are BFFs!

The intellectual menu on offer at the conference was almost as diverse, covering a wide range of topics related to place-based transdisciplinary research for global sustainability. The conference started with a bang: a rather sedate earthquake drill, just to prepare us for any possible eventuality. A variety of talks, workshops, immersive sessions, panel discussions, yoga, and documentaries kept us busy from 8 until late. Some of our favourite sessions covered topics such as [the tensions between protected areas and ecosystem services](#), the personal and ethical dilemmas we face in knowledge co-production, and the difficult questions emerging from socio-technical transitions.

Some of the more edgy discussions revolved around [tax havens and their influence on global environmental change](#), [partnering with the right and wrong people in marine resource management](#), and taking local conflicts, violence and crime into account when trying to understand sustainability challenges. We also participated in pre- and post-conference workshops discussing, for example, the success factors of collaboration for stewardship across diverse contexts, and the need to build new alliances with activists and civil society to increase the impact of sustainability science.

Although this conference took us to the other side of the world (and it took a looong time to get there and back!), it was surprising to find how much we as South Africans doing environmental research have in common with our colleagues in Latin America.

If you are eager for more on the conference: Alta and George both wrote blogs related to various sessions (Alta) and a pre-conference workshop (George). You can find these on the [Pec-sii blog page](#) and the [Oxfam "Views & Voices"](#) website, respectively.



ecoSERVICES Workshop participants



Jess & Alta enjoying yummy Mexican food and Mezcal Margaritas



Selfie at Monte Alban—an ancient Zapotec ruin

## Where is William?

By William Mponwana

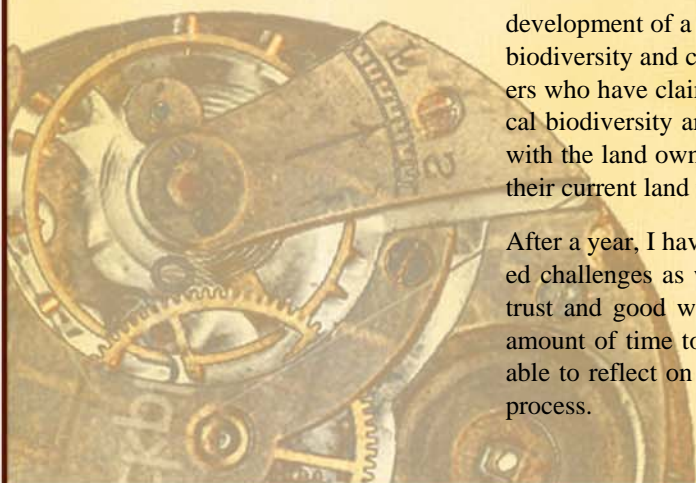


During my last week as a Rhodent in 2015, I clearly remember walking back to my residence during lunch time from the DES, when I came across Charlie Shackleton (my then supervisor) just outside Eden Grove. We had a brief chat and he asked me what my plans were for 2016. At that time I responded to say “I would like to go back home (Limpopo) and look for a job in the NGO sector somewhere and then see how far I would get with that”. At that time, it was something I wanted to do, but didn’t really have a clear plan. Little did I know that it would turn out that way. Six months into 2016, Charlie linked me with an associate professor from Wageningen University who at that time was looking for someone based in the Eastern Cape to assist with his research on bushmeat hunting or as others call it: ‘poaching’. What came out of our communications was that I would do a similar study back home in my village. At that time what I thought would be a challenging piece of work was actually fun and getting people to talk was so easy- apparently I was easy to trust. In fact I learned a lot about people in my village and their livelihoods.

As I was finalizing the write up on the work, I get an email from my (now) supervisor at AWARD. I had applied for an internship at AWARD earlier in the year. Fast forward into August, two days just after my birthday, and I find myself working for AWARD (Association for Water and Rural Development) as a research assistant. The first weeks were great, I had a very warm reception from everyone and entered a totally different environment. Our project- the Municipal Support Initiative (MSI) is one of the many projects which are part of the RESILIM-O (**R**esilience in the **L**impopo Basin-**O**lifants Catchment) project currently implemented by AWARD.

The MSI takes on a systems view by working with the institution of local government supporting their mandate in three areas of work as part of building resilience of local governments in the Olifants. Applying a participatory approach to learning, the MSI provides support within each of the above mentioned directorates by working with i) decision makers and the municipality in general, ii) tools, plans and guidelines and iii) with practitioners, to transform practices within the institution. I work specifically with the SPED directorates and we have been working collaboratively with practitioners in the development of a suite of tools that would assist local municipalities to consider and integrate biodiversity and climate change into their planning. We have also begun work with land owners who have claimed large tracts of high value land which falls into one or the other of critical biodiversity areas in the two municipalities. This involves working on land use planning with the land owners (including young people to build custodianship), to start thinking about their current land use management and future land uses .

After a year, I have learned a lot about working with local government. Our work has presented challenges as we work within an ever-changing, often politicized environment. Building trust and good working relationships is a process which we have had to invest significant amount of time to. Over and above, I have seen the importance of learning by doing, being able to reflect on processes of learning and the need for adaptive management in a learning process.



## My Journey as a Post-doc

### By Deepa Pullanikkatil

be our publisher that I couldn't work for a whole day from the excitement.

The departmental seminars and discussions over tea was such an enriching experience as I learnt about the interesting work colleagues at the department do. I am happy to know most of them on first name basis and hope to continue collaborating in future.

Living in the quaint little town of Grahamstown away from my family and without a car had its ups and downs. Travelling every month to Swaziland (taking a total of 20 hours one-way) in buses wasn't the most fun experience. But when this little town transformed itself during the National Arts Festival, I was certainly feeling blessed in living here. I am so pleased that my family could visit during the festival and we enjoyed many shows. It is a pretty town, I particularly liked the high density of historical buildings, the many trees and of course the beautiful university campus, all of which has been captured in my camera and in my mind. As I leave this town and the universi-

ty, I carry with me many memories, a longer list of friends and greater self-confidence and, want to thank Charlie and all my colleagues for giving me this enriching experience.



Research team in Swaziland for the fibre craft survey

This has been an amazing 15 months as a Post Doctoral Research Fellow, where I dived deep into reading, indulged in reflection, got the opportunity to improve writing skills, expand my thinking and establish close connections with the scholarly community particularly at my department. The early days were a steep learning curve where I could understand my weaknesses and worked on acquiring more skills in academic writing. I still have a lot to learn about writing arguments and critiquing others' work, but this post-doc gave me more confidence in writing. Prof. Charlie Shackleton, the SARCHI Chair under whom I did this post-doc gave me the freedom to get lost in my thoughts and explore topics, which I am thankful for.

During this post-doc I got a chance to work independently and be part of teams. Doing 200 interviews of fibre crafters in Swaziland and Malawi was an experience I will cherish, as I got to visit many places I wouldn't normally visit and meet with warm friendly rural communities, some of whom even offered me food in their homes after the interviews. This was part of a study Charlie, Gladman and I did to compare fibre craft in Swaziland, Malawi and Zimbabwe. Another interesting group work was a "writeshop" with colleagues developing a paper on "Land Sparring and Land Sharing" debates. While trying to grapple my head over this topic, it certainly helped that we were in picturesque East London and took long walks at the beach during the writeshop. What I learnt from this was that the bigger and more diverse the team, the more creative the collaboration and the greater the exchange of ideas.

Another interesting part of the post-doc was writing a book with Charlie which included case studies from around the world (six continents). That's when I realized how powerful networking is! Charlie's amazing networks, our Linked-in contacts and scholars we connected through colleagues like Penny and others in our Department helped bring together a rich collection of case studies. I am very excited about this book and was so overwhelmed with gratitude when Springer agreed to



Woodcarver in Kenya who shared his life story for the book on NTFP's and reducing poverty



Writing retreat in East London with Charlie, Penny, Hezekiah, Mallika and Frans

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