



COMMITTEE REPORT TO THE MEMBERS OF THE KIRSTENBOSCH BRANCH OF THE BOTANICAL SOCIETY OF SOUTH AFRICA AT THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING ON SATURDAY 20 JUNE 2025.

BRANCH COMMITTEE

The Committee being elected today will continue to oversee the Branch's administration. Unfortunately two members of the Committee resigned during the year under review. However, three new nominees, Ingrid Roomes, Janet Askew and Saba Zahara Honeybush, bring skills, expertise and relevant experience to the Branch. The Committee appreciates their willingness to participate, thus supporting the Branch and the Society. Active support from BotSoc members is vital if the Branch is to fulfil the mandate set out in its Constitution.

In addition to our new nominees I would like to express my appreciation to the other Committee members Louis van As, Alex Faria and Mmei Matjuda. Mmei's tenure has come to an end and I thank him for his service to the Committee. Louis is the Committee's Treasurer and Alex holds the conservation portfolio.

BOTSOC SUPPORT FOR NATIONAL BOTANICAL GARDENS 2026 (*Prepared by Gianpaolo Gilardi*, Branch Volunteer coordinator and Branch Assistant)

In 1913 The Botanical Society was established to help develop the country's first National Botanical Garden at Kirstenbosch. According to Wikipedia the Botanical Society actually administered the Garden from 1913 before the former National Botanical Institute took over this responsibility.

The Kirstenbosch Branch's active support of the Garden continues to this day in 2026. The Branch continues to co-ordinate the deployment of volunteers where we administer the Volunteer Programme on behalf of Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens, mostly BotSoc members, to support the Garden. Volunteers are deployed at the Herbarium, Bookshop, Millenium Seedbank, Plant Production Nursery and Collections Nursery. Volunteers are also deployed in the Garden for weeding and maintenance and as Garden Guides leading tours of the Garden. Volunteers also assist with the maintenance of succulents, bulbs, caudiciforms and other rare plant species that have been confiscated from poachers. Other volunteers assist with the maintenance and propagation of rare and endangered plant species for Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden.

At present there are 105 active volunteers on our database. We have two volunteer appreciation days per year. We also celebrate and feature our volunteers in our monthly newsletter and social media segment called "voice of the volunteer".

Apart from the contribution referred to above through the volunteer programme, the Branch donated funds for the repotting of Kirstenbosch's Bonsai Collection which can be viewed in

Evolution Garden in the Courtyard at Gate 1 and purchased tractor tyres. MEMBER ACTIVITIES (*Prepared by Elvirena Hope, Branch Manager*)

Volunteer Programme & Engagement

The Branch acts as a recruitment agent for the SANBI volunteer programme. The past year has involved engaging garden management on formalising the administrative process and improving the volunteer experience.

Improvements include:

- Updating the volunteer database.
- Clarifying that volunteers need not be BOT SOC members as the programme is open to all members of the public.
- The Branch is the contact point and administrator of the programme and SANBI Staff provide training and oversight of the volunteer after onboarding is complete.
- All volunteer information stays with the Branch.
- The inclusion of a guest speaker to the garden guide monthly meeting has been a consistent feature with talks happening at various locations such as Babylonstoren and the City of Cape Town's Westlake Conservation Centre

Events & Member Experiences

- Botanical walk leaders have seen a decline in numbers joining them on monthly walks. Current walk leaders are retiring from their long-serving volunteer commitment to this activity and a call for new walk leaders will be made. The current walk leaders are Marget Kahle, Dirk Muller, Tony and Patricia Rebello who have kindly offered to train new walk leaders to take on the various routes.
- The branch donated R30 000 in support of a joint proposal by the Ingcungcu Sunbird Project and the Princess Vlei Forum.
- A very informative public lecture fundraiser was arranged by the Branch Manager in collaboration with the SANBI Garden Manager and Horts in support of a tree summit envisioned to be held during arbour week in September. This forum hopes to gather tree experts from around the country to discuss research, best practices and collaborative efforts in tree conservation. The Branch raised R5300 for this initiative and we wish to thank our community for their support and attendance.
- Support has been given to the National Lotteries Fund school garden projects by joining in the planting activities, promoting the project on all platforms, calling for volunteers and hosting two of the project coordinators at the Branch office.

Member Communication

Branch Newsletters have been distributed monthly in the past year but will revert to quarterly newsletters going forward as we focus our attention on broadening our conservation efforts and tangible member engagements. Weekly social media posts will continue to inform and spread awareness of branch events and partnerships.

Branch Appointment & Operational News

As of 1 May 2026, Branch Manager Elvirena Hope became a permanent member of staff and continues to serve as both Operational Manager and Secretary to the Branch Committee.

Bookshop Management

Sadly we have not been able to rescue the bookshop operations post pandemic. Despite increased marketing and sales events this past financial year's figures tell the stark reality of the challenges faced by bookshops everywhere.

As a Branch we are very much aware that the Kirstenbosch Bookshop has been as much a part of the BOT SOC identity as its long serving staff members and it is with regret that the Committee has had to take a realistic approach to the sustainability and trend in sales over the last few years. The four retail staff members in the bookshop have been issued section 189 letters (in terms of the Labour Relations Act) following multiple consultations in an attempt to improve the bookshop's financial prospects. Strategic discussions on the closure of the bookshop versus a downscaled volunteer run business are under way at this time.

CONSERVATION (*Prepared by Alex Faria, Conservation Portfolio*)

This report is a summary, for our members, of the work undertaken within the Conservation Portfolio since I took on the role. This has been a foundational year: the focus has been on establishing the portfolio, setting a clear strategy, building a committed team, and developing a pipeline of projects and collaborations to the point where they are ready to run. What follows is an honest account of that groundwork — what has been put in place, and where it is headed.

The Role

In practice the aim of this work has been bringing structure to conservation efforts, connecting people and groups who might otherwise work in isolation, and creating the conditions for members and the wider public to take part in meaningful, practical conservation.

A Strategy to Work To

Rather than running activities ad hoc, the portfolio is built around a simple cyclical framework. Each stage feeds the next, so that early curiosity is steadily converted into lasting involvement and visible impact:

1. Exposure	Putting conservation in front of people.
2. Interest	Turning a first encounter into genuine curiosity.
3. Engagement	Drawing people into participation.
4. Action	Hands-on conservation work on the ground.
5. Impact	Real, measurable ecological outcomes.
6. Visibility	Sharing that impact so it is seen and valued.
7. Growth	Visibility brings new people in, and the cycle repeats.

The thread running through every stage is **connectivity and collaboration**. The portfolio's core purpose is to link existing conservation groups, hack (clearing) groups, volunteers, BotSoc members, Kirstenbosch activity, and external organisations into a more coordinated whole — so that effort is aligned rather than scattered.

Building the Team

A central piece of this year's work was putting together a functioning structure beneath the portfolio. The aim was to compile a subcommittee of six, with the emphasis on clear roles, delegated responsibility, and a steady rhythm of coordination so that work continues reliably rather than depending on any one person. This is still an ongoing endeavour.

The desired outcome is as follows:

- A six-person subcommittee established and active.
- Project and portfolio leads identified, with work delegated to members.
- Clearer portfolio structure across projects, partnerships, Kirstenbosch coordination, and community engagement.
- An accountability and reporting rhythm to keep momentum and catch issues early.
- Committee buy-in secured for the projects in the pipeline.

Collaboration & Coordination

Much of the value of this role lies between organisations rather than within any single one. A priority has been to strengthen coordination between the existing volunteer, conservation, and hack groups already active in and around Kirstenbosch — consolidating effort, reducing duplication, and helping groups support one another.

- Consolidating and helping better coordinate hack (invasive clearing) and community conservation groups.
- Joining up groups that previously worked in isolation, so effort is aligned.
- Assisting other community conservation groups with hikes, hacks, and restoration days.
- Working towards formal collaboration agreements and standard operating procedures (SOPs), so partnerships rest on clear, repeatable process rather than goodwill alone.

Volunteers & Hands-On Work

On the ground, the portfolio supports and helps organise the practical conservation work that members value most: hikes, hack and clearing days, restoration and rehabilitation activity, garden volunteering at Kirstenbosch, and dedicated volunteer days open to the community. These are the moments where the strategy becomes tangible.

- Conservation hikes.
- Hack / invasive-clearing days.
- Restoration and rehabilitation work.
- Garden volunteering at Kirstenbosch.

- Community volunteer days.

Communications & Member Engagement

Keeping members and the public informed and involved is its own stream of work. Several channels and formats have been developed to carry conservation information outward and to give people easy ways to take part:

- A moderated, post-only community WhatsApp group for events, volunteer days, and conservation opportunities — with a broader coordinating role around WhatsApp communication between groups.
- A planned monthly conservation article.
- Conservation posters for public and member spaces such as nurseries and campuses.
- Talks and a possible guest speaker night.
- A social-media approach developed alongside conservation and community NGOs.
- Community-facing “Friends of BotSoc” messaging to widen participation.
- Light funding pitches to support outreach, printing, and conservation activity.

HUMAN RESOURCES *(Prepared by Janet Askew, HR Portfolio)*

Committee Context

I joined the Committee in March 2026. My initial focus was on strengthening compliance and embedding best practice. However, the financial realities facing the Branch have required us to shift attention towards cost reduction, including the difficult consideration of employee headcount.

Legal & HR Matters

- **Branch Manager Employment Contract**
The contract has been amended and finalised.
- **Employee Handbook**
A revised draft has been completed and is awaiting Committee review prior to adoption.
- **Bookshop Viability**
 1. The bookshop has incurred sustained losses over several years. Despite initiatives to revitalise the physical store and enhance online sales, results have not materialised.
 2. The bookshop was intended to generate profits to sustain itself and contribute to KBB projects. Its current position is untenable, requiring consideration of alternatives.
 3. In line with legal requirements, letters have been issued to all bookshop staff in terms of Section 189(3) of the Labour Relations Act, initiating consultation on possible retrenchments. We are acutely aware of the human impact of this process.

4. Retrenchment is also financially costly. We are legally and morally obliged to provide severance packages of at least one week's pay per completed year of service.
- **Proposed Re-Entry into BotSoc National**
Negotiations regarding integration with BotSoc National:
 1. If employee contracts are ceded to National, employment will continue seamlessly (S179 LRA)
 2. If contracts are not ceded, KBB will remain responsible for all staff, which may necessitate retrenchment of the entire workforce. This would incur significant costs in severance packages, after which employees would need to negotiate new contracts with BotSoc National, without any guarantees of re-employment. Our priority is to avoid this outcome, both to protect employees and to safeguard KBB's finances.
 - **Morale and Public Image**
The current negative coverage in the press regarding the Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden and on social media, combined with the Section 189 process, is affecting staff morale. We remain committed to transparent communication and to exploring every possible alternative to retrenchment.
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Closing Note

The Committee recognises the gravity of these challenges. Our approach is guided by compliance with labour law, fairness to employees and the long-term sustainability of the Branch. We will continue to engage openly with staff and stakeholders as we navigate this difficult period.

FUNDRAISING *(Prepared by Ingrid Roomes)*

I was co-opted on the Committee in March this year and was assigned the fundraising portfolio. The three months that I have served on the Committee have involved a steep learning curve and I am yet to meet the many volunteers that make up the Botanical Society. What struck me at my first Committee meeting was that our Branch carries a substantial overhead of seven staff members, and significant fundraising will be needed to cover those costs.

In my short time we launched a BackaBuddy campaign, where Mmei Matjuda raised funds for Ingungcu Eco Club by running in the Sanlam Cape Town Marathon. The amount raised was R10 450. To raise these modest funds a significant amount of time was spent on marketing and social media. This type of fundraising is essential for the Branch's visibility to the public but does not cover our operational costs and in the absence of significant donations and bequests we have to proactively approach organisations for donations and apply for grants.

The loss of the garden access fees means that we are no longer able to carry out our mandate in the constitution which is "know, grow, protect and enjoy the indigenous plants" without a significant cash inflow and I recommend that we once again become an internal branch of The Botanical Society of South Africa.

Platform Alignment and Integration

It has become evident that the operational separation between the Kirstenbosch Branch and the National Botanical Society of South Africa (Head Office) has had unintended consequences for communications and marketing efforts. Specifically, the development of parallel and independent digital platforms has resulted in fragmented audience engagement, duplication of content efforts, and the diversion of resources that could otherwise have been strategically consolidated.

This separation has limited the potential for cohesive brand growth and has constrained opportunities to diversify and strengthen content creation, digital storytelling, and marketing impact across a unified ecosystem. Rather than expanding reach through collaboration, current structures have led to the maintenance of separate feeds and messaging strategies, reducing overall efficiency.

With a potential organisational realignment or merger on the horizon, it is strongly recommended that a dedicated Communications Strategy Workshop be convened. This process should focus on:

- Aligning brand identity and messaging across all platforms
- Strategically merging or phasing out duplicated digital channels
- Ensuring a structured and ethical handover process
- Protecting and retaining existing audiences during any transition
- Establishing clear governance and management of future communications platforms

In addition, there is a clear opportunity to strengthen collaborative efforts with SANBI. A more open and proactive approach is recommended in re-engaging SANBI around key strategic areas, including the re-negotiation of member benefits, particularly in relation to garden access. Strengthened alignment in planning and communications, such as for flagship programmes like the Tree Talk Seminar, can unlock greater shared value and audience reach.

Furthermore, discussions around potential sponsorship management collaborations present an important opportunity to align fundraising and partnership strategies. A coordinated approach could enhance resource mobilisation, streamline stakeholder engagement, and ensure consistent messaging across institutional partners.

Content strategy should also prioritise the production of short video reels that profile people and community voices, alongside the amplification of existing longer form content that has already been commissioned. Integrating these formats will strengthen storytelling, broaden audience engagement, and maximise the value of current content investments.

Conclusion

The anticipated transition presents a valuable opportunity to reset and unify communications strategy while deepening institutional partnerships. With intentional planning, transparent engagement, and stakeholder alignment, the organisation can move toward a more efficient, impactful, and integrated communications and partnership ecosystem.

BRANCH FINANCES AND FUTURE FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

As reported in previous Committee Reports SANBI's decision to revoke National Botanical Garden free access to BotSoc members lead to a precipitous decline in BotSoc's membership. In June 2023 the Kirstenbosch Branch had about 8000 members to whom electronic newsletters were sent. That number dropped to about 880 members in May 2025 and has declined further with the current number of members being 842. Of this figure 425 members are life members. These figures illustrate clearly that the overwhelming majority of the 8000 members in 2023 had joined the Society in order to gain access to the Botanical Garden rather than contribute to implementing the Branch's mandate.

The decline in membership has had a negative impact on revenue. In 2023 membership fees were R432 437. In the financial year ending in March 2026 membership fees amounted to R61 000.

Unfortunately the overall financial situation of the Branch continued to decline during the financial year. Membership income received from BOT SOC SA was insufficient to compensate for the bookshop's inability to make a profit for the year. The details will be presented today by our Treasurer, Louis van As. Revenue from donations and bequests and events and fundraising increased slightly but this was offset by sales decreasing. The overall reserves continued to decline.

The Committee remains concerned about the Branch's financial situation. We advertised a bid for service providers to present a recovery plan for the Bookshop's online sales. It was intended that this service provider would earn commission on sales instead of receiving a pre-determined contract fee. Unfortunately no suitable bids were received. More recently the Branch placed a moratorium on the granting of funds for conservation projects. We have initiated a Labour Relations Act procedure for the retrenchment of bookshop staff. We have met representatives of SANBI to discuss the possibility of a rent holiday and relocating the bookshop to smaller premises at Gate 2 where it could be manned by volunteers. We will also engage with the gift shop to discuss the possibility of their taking over the bookshop. The Branch will probably not renew the lease of the Pearson House Annex where our staff offices are located. Gianpaolo Gilardi could potentially use part of the premises at Gate 2 and our Office Manager Elvirena Hope and Treasurer Keith Christian could work remotely from home. It is therefore clear that we are on the brink of introducing severe cost cutting measures to stabilise our financial situation.

NEW INITIATIVES UNDER CONSIDERATION

Transitioning to a Non-Profit Company (NPC)

Our Branch was constituted as a voluntary association in terms of our Constitution. BOT SOC SA is also a voluntary association. BOT SOC SA's Council is considering transitioning to an NPC. An NPC is governed by the Companies Act and requires a Memorandum of Incorporation which replaces a Constitution. BOT SOC SA has been advised that the most significant advantage of an NPC for an organisation dependent on donor funding is that it is a structure with high credibility. It is widely accepted by corporate and institutional donors. This is of particular significance given the Branch's financial situation. It is worth noting that other environmental NGO's such as Birdlife SA have transitioned to an NPC structure to enhance transparency and governance.

Transitioning from an External Branch to an Internal Branch

With the exception of our Branch and the Kogelberg Branch, all BOT SOC Branches are “internal branches”. As an “external branch” we have our own Constitution and we are a separate legal and financial entity from the national body. It is noteworthy though that our Constitution is almost identical to BOT SOC SA’s Constitution. Our mission and objectives are virtually identical, the only difference being our Branch’s focus on our region and the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden.

BOT SOC SA’s members may adopt a resolution transitioning to an NPC at the next AGM. Prior to this happening it will consult with the Branches. Our Branch will need to decide whether to remain an external branch or transition to an internal branch. If we remain an external branch we will have a choice – either remain an NPO or transition to an NPC. If we transition to an internal branch we will automatically transition to an NPC after BOT SOC SA transitions to a NPC.

If we transition to an internal branch in an NPC structure, we will gain access to shared administrative systems and donor opportunities while retaining our local identity and ability to deliver conservation programmes. Funders, especially corporate and institutional donors, generally prefer engaging with a single legal entity rather than with multiple affiliated bodies. For its part BOT SOC as an organisation cannot afford a competition between its affiliates for limited donor funds.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Shaun Schneier', on a light blue background.

Shaun Schneier

Chairperson

Kirstenbosch Branch

Botanical Society of South Africa.