

History of the KwaZulu-Natal Crane Foundation (KZNCF) by Henry Davies and Ann Burke

Throughout the world, cranes have traditionally been revered by many cultures on the five continents where they occur. Over the past two centuries, crane populations have suffered great declines in both numbers and range. Today, 11 of the 15 species are considered threatened with extinction. The leading cause of decline is a result of the species' reliance upon fresh water wetlands. Human caused destruction and degradation of these life-supporting ecosystems threatens not only the cranes, but the world's biodiversity on an ever increasing scale.

Three crane species occur in South Africa: the Blue Crane (South Africa's National Bird), the Southern African Grey Crowned Crane and the Wattled Crane (classed as *Critically Endangered* in South Africa).

The principal objectives of the South Africa organizations involved with crane conservation are to ensure the long-term survival of these species and the wetland and grassland ecosystems that sustain them.

The first crane-focused organization formed in South Africa was the Southern African Crane Foundation (SACF), today the KwaZulu-Natal Crane Foundation (KZNCF). It was established in 1989 to monitor and combat the factors causing the decline in KwaZulu-Natal's (KZN) crane populations. It's founding was sponsored by the Wildlife Society of Southern Africa (now WESSA), and the S.A. Ornithological Society (now Birdlife S.A). It also enjoyed the full support of the International Crane Foundation (ICF) (U.S.A) and the Natal Parks Board (NPB) (now Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife).

The decision to found the SACF was the result of several years of research. After field surveys and consultation with ICF, the NPB convened a public meeting at Himeville Nature Reserve in September 1987. A steering committee, under the chairmanship of Mr D. J. Porter was elected to investigate the establishment of a crane interpretative centre and the formation of a crane-dedicated foundation. In October of 1988, a constitution was adopted and the SACF was registered under the Fund Raising Act. The Foundation remains South Africa's sole specialized crane conservation group.

In December 1989, the first Southern African Crane Conference, hailed as a conservation milestone, was held at Nottingham Road, Natal. It was attended by 69 delegates and it highlighted the 90% decline in Blue Crane populations over a major portion of the birds breeding range during the 1980s.

A conference delegate, Dr G. W. Begg, identified the Hlatikulu Vlei as one of the province's priority wetlands. In 1991, the SACF entered into a joint venture with Mondi to establish the Hlatikulu Crane and Wetland Sanctuary and offer environmental education courses on a 186 ha section of the vlei owned by Mondi. From 1995-2001, WESSA operated SACF's

educational arm under the name of the Drakensberg Wetland Project. Over 3,000 students of all races and ages from schools across the province undertook wetland study courses and visited the SACF Crane Centre per annum.

In 1993, Mr Ian Guthrie, a MSc. Student (today an educator at Michaelhouse) commenced his research on the Hlatikulu Vlei. Later in 1993, the SACF received a bequest of R1 million from the trustees of Lady Nora Usher's Estate. The bequest specified that these funds were to further crane conservation exclusively within Natal.

Also in 1993, Eskom released details of its preferred route for the proposed 400kV Venus to Ariadne line. The suggested route, to the west of the N3, caused a public uproar in the Natal Midlands. The principal concern expressed was for the well-being of the region's cranes. Bowing to public pressure, Eskom commissioned the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) to undertake an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). Mr K. McCann (current Chair of the KZNCF) was appointed to undertake the assessment and conduct a study of the cranes and their daily and seasonal movements within the area. The results of his research, known as "Eskom/EWT Crane Study" aided in the decision to route the much needed power line to the east of the N3.

To its enduring credit, Eskom has continued its partnership with the EWT to the present day and employed Kevin McCann as the national coordinator of the Eskom/EWT National Crane Conservation Project from 1996 to 2001. Since 1996, Eskom has fitted flight diverters to many kilometres of powerlines identified as being a threat to the cranes across South Africa where cranes occur.

In 1993, the efforts to rehabilitate the Hlatikulu Vlei were completed. In 1995, the SACF officially opened its Crane Centre and it appointed its first aviculturist in 1995.

In early 1995, a meeting of all the crane groups that had been established since the founding of SACF in 1989 was convened. It was agreed that an umbrella organization to formulate national crane conservation policy be formed. In 1996, this organization, comprised of members drawn from 15 crane groups and projects became known as the South Africa Crane Working Group (SACWG). In turn, SACWG would become a working group of EWT. It was further agreed that each group would retain its autonomy and be responsible for promoting crane conservation in their particular regions with the assistance of the relevant nature conservation authorities. Until SACWG was re-organized in 2005, it made an enormous contribution towards crane and ecosystem conservation nationally and within Southern Africa. Mr Kevin McCann and Ms Lindy Rodwell are credited with providing exceptional leadership and guidance to these accomplishments.

In 1996, Ms Helena Wilkens was sent to ICF for training to prepare her for becoming Curator of Birds at the Hlatikulu Crane and Wetland Sanctuary. Later she became National Coordinator of the Wattled Crane Breeding Programme – a programme designed to coordinate all permitted organizations countrywide including the Umgeni River Bird Park,

Mitchell Park Zoo, Treehaven, Amazona Birds, and the Pretoria, Johannesburg and Tygerberg Zoos.

In 1995, under permit from the NPB, the SACF collected second eggs from wild Wattled Crane nests, incubated and hatched them prior to sending the several day old chicks to the Highlands Crane Group in Mpumalanga. The chicks were subsequently hand raised using a technique called “Isolation” or “Costume” rearing which allows chicks to be properly imprinted while preparing them for life in the wild.

The first releases of isolation-reared Wattled Cranes at Verloren Vallei Nature Reserve in Mpumalanga met with failure. In 2000, it was decided that isolation-reared chicks would be released into the wild flock of Wattled Cranes in KZN. Three birds were released in early 2000 and all three were alive one (1) year post release. During an aerial census, one of these birds was observed amongst a flock of Blue Cranes in 2002.

In August 2000, SACWG hosted the first Population and Habitat Viability Assessment (PHVA) for the Wattled Crane in South Africa. In part, through the new tool of computer modelling, it was determined that, in order to reverse the population decline of the South African Wattled Crane population, priority must be placed on field research of the wild populations, identification of their habitat requirements and the factors contributing to juvenile mortality.

The outcome of this milestone meeting was to have a major impact on the direction of crane conservation in Natal - home to the bulk of the country's wild Wattled Crane population (± 200 birds). In an effort to better differentiate the respective roles between SACWG and the SACF, the SACF changed its name to the KwaZulu-Natal Crane Foundation (KZNCF) in June 2000. This name change was also accompanied by a change in focus for the KZNCF – its Curator of Birds, Mr Brent Coverdale (currently an officer with EKZN Wildlife) would become a Midlands Field Extension Officer. Its Education and Extension Officer post that had been established in 1997 and supported by Mondi would be transferred to the Underberg/Himeville region to further crane conservation as Field Extension Officer KZN South.

The dedicated efforts of these field officers were highly successful. Through a combination of school visits, farmers' days, workshops and exhibitions, talks to farm labourers, networking with other conservation organizations and the award of “Crane Custodian” boards to farmers actively conserving cranes on their lands helped create a heightened level of awareness regarding cranes and their ecosystems through KZN.

In early 2001, the KZNCF began discussions with Mr Jon Bates about the possibility of taking over ownership of the Usher Conservation Centre (UCC) originally owned by Centre for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife (CROW) and located on Mr Jon Bates (nephew of the late Lady Nora Usher) property of “Fordoun” near the village of Nottingham Road. In 2002, the KZNCF purchased the UCC from CROW and moved its headquarters there. Mr Nic Shaw,

originally employed by SACF and later by WESSA to run the Drakensberg Wetland Project, stayed on to continue educational programming at the Hlatikulu Crane and Wetland Sanctuary. Mr Shaw later established Entabeni Communications and has recently purchased the sanctuary where he operates nationally accredited training programmes.

The major influences that drove the KZNCF to move its headquarters from Hlatikulu to the UCC were cost effectiveness, the strategic location of “Fordoun” over Hlatikulu, ease and upkeep of road access, reliability of essential services and the potential that this new location could serve the needs of more than crane conservation if the KZNCF so chose.

From experience gained while working closely with landowners, the KZNCF became increasingly aware of the need for a holistic approach to conservation and biodiversity management in the regions where cranes occur. To this end, the KZNCF joined forces with three, conservation-minded landowners outside of Nottingham Road. This collaboration resulted in the establishment of the Bill Barnes Crane and Oribi Nature Reserve (BBCONR). The reserve formally protects 450 ha of Drakensberg Moist Foothill Grassland and was one of the first proclaimed under the KZN Biodiversity Stewardship Programme in 2009.

Today, KZNCF's vision is to leverage the milestone achieved by the establishment of the BBCONR by encouraging additional landowners to formally commit to biodiversity stewardship on their lands and encourage area schools to utilize the reserve for educational purposes. The specific area the KZNCF plans to target for biodiversity stewardship includes the Fork Spring Conservancy and the "triangle" that is bisected by the N3 Toll route, located from Mooi River to Mount West and Nottingham Road.

In renewing its commitment to crane conservation, in 2009, the KZNCF joined forces with two additional partners, the Johannesburg Zoo and the African Association of Zoos and Aquaria (PAAZAB) in the National Wattled Crane Recovery Programme. This partnership positions the KZNCF to launch a new project - the Wattled Crane Release Project (WCRP).

KZNCF Chairmen, 1989-Present:

Kevin McCann, 2011-present

Henry Davies, 2006-2011

David Cook, 2005-2006

Ricky Pott, 2001 - 2005

Charles Byron, 1998-2001

Henry Davies, 1996-1998

Bill Barnes, 1994 – 1996

Don Porter, 1989 -1994

KZNCF Committee Members (former and present):

Dr E A “Nolly” Zaloumis, Doug Burden, Gavin Shaw, Dr David Johnson, Dave Roberts, Elna Kotze, Dr Warwick Tarboton and Ron Physick.