

factor that has driven the evolution of the unique biodiversity found here.

Funds from a joint Namibian – South African research support initiative that were awarded to Gobabeb in partnership with the University of the Witwatersrand and UNISA are now being focused in this direction under the *FogLife* programme (we will focus on *FogLife* in a future edition of *Gobabeb Times*).

This research will dovetail with a separate project aimed at understanding the role of fog in the Namib and the likelihood of it being affected by climate change – the

SASSCAL-supported *FogNet* programme being established in March 2014 (see below for more information on that).

** If you want more information, please visit the Namib Sand Sea website www.sandsea.org, where you can also download the Dossier and supporting documentation.*

Training beyond 50

Gobabeb has been involved in training and education since its inception. How can we grow the training programme while capitalising on our research strengths?

Gillian Maggs-Kölling

Gobabeb has operated as a scientific and educational facility for 52 years. From the onset, education for sustainable development (ESD) has been a core component of its activities, with more than 100 Masters and Ph.D candidates executing the bulk of their thesis research at the Centre.

At Namibia's independence in 1990, Gobabeb expanded its educational activities to include learners at primary and secondary schools. Initially, it filled a gap by producing educational materials (mainly textbooks) to realign the school syllabi towards a more appropriate Namibian focus, particularly in geography, biology and agriculture.

Over time, Gobabeb again shifted focus to give hands-on learning experiences to nearby primary and secondary schools and training and outreach activities at Gobabeb evolved in concert with these developments. The Centre is currently recognised as a key player in ESD in Namibia.

At the same time, however, specialised training programmes at Gobabeb are unique in being symbiotic with the focussed, high-quality research being conducted at the centre. By adopting a research-based approach to learning about the environment and sustainable development, while promoting skills in critical thinking and problem solving, and knowledge of scientific processes, the value of what Gobabeb has to offer as a research centre has been maximised.

In recent years, training at Gobabeb has crystallised into three major streams: graduate training in terms of

Masters and Ph.D. research involving students from Namibia and all over the world; introductory research training for newly graduated Namibian students (GTRIP and SDP); and exposure of senior secondary students (Grade 11), on the verge of completing schooling, to potential career paths in science and environmental fields (YES).



GTRIP 2013: Studying the effects of exploration and recreational off-road driving on the biota of the gravel plains.

The five-month GTRIP (the Gobabeb Research and Training Internship Programme) is aimed at postgraduates or graduates that have to do some form of in-service training. For the past five years, GTRIP has focused on restoration ecology as a primary research topic, with the result that not only are we producing

more skilled young Namibians, but we are also growing our knowledge base on the best techniques for the restoration of hyper arid ecosystems. In a part of the country where uranium mining and biodiversity conservation have to co-exist, knowledge and skills in ecological restoration is clearly of high value.

Judging from the interest shown by so many people, there is no doubt that GTRIP is addressing a critical need. However, the popular and widely known 17-year old Summer Desertification Programme (SDP) seems to be equally relevant. This nine-week course held over the Christmas break every year, addresses a range of critical environmental issues and controversies. For example, two years ago the group of twelve students studied the mortality and health of trees in the major ephemeral rivers. These trees – which are critical components of the Namib's ecosystems – were reported to be dying, with many people putting the blame for this on the mines.



SDP 2012: Reading borehole levels in the Kuiseb River.

Similarly, SDP 2013-2014 looked at sanitation, solid waste and water management in the Greater Sossusvlei Protected Landscape (GSPL), an area that has to support large numbers of tourists every year in a highly sensitive environment. Elsewhere in this issue you can read in more detail about the last two SDPs.

The Youth Environmental Summits are aimed at the critical career-deciding point of Grade 11. These young people are at the cusp of their adult lives and have to make decisions that will affect the paths their lives take. YES aims to introduce them not only to a career in the field of environmental management or science, but also, through a strong focus on developing critical thinking skills, to place in their hands the tools to make such important decisions. YES is a part of what we believe is a growth point in the world of education: providing opportunities for early career professionals to improve

their skills for the job market, to improve their insight into the world's problems, and to learn how to make good decisions.

We plan to develop this area of training to make best use of the many opportunities that await. One of the key things we are doing in this regard is to establish a closer relationship with the Polytech of Namibia, with the added benefit of having direct access to postgraduate students.

Our training programmes do not only focus on education in the strict sense though. We also want to use these opportunities to raise awareness of relevant environmental issues, e.g. climate change and



YES 2012: Grade 11 learners studying the biodiversity of the gravel plains for an exercise in biodiversity impact assessment.

biodiversity, and current events, e.g. Namibia hosting the 11th COP of the UNCCD, and the inscription of the Namib Sand Sea as a World Heritage Site. Because we expect most of the young people that go through our programmes to end up as leaders in society, this type of awareness-raising has a deep multiplier effect, which we hope (and fully expect) will result in a wiser, more broad-minded and better informed group of decision-makers.

Gobabeb's training programmes rely on support from various corporate donors and on cross-subsidising from research grants. If you are interested in supporting these programmes, please contact Gillian Maggs-Kölling at gillianm@gobabebtrc.org.