

# Gondwana Alive in its early days

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In 1999 we were introduced to Dr John Anderson of the National Botanical Institute by my dear friend, the late Amanda Uys.

I don't specifically recall how she had become involved, but I do recall how excited she was about working with a group of scientists supporting Dr John Anderson with his 'Towards Gondwana Alive' initiative.



Amanda Uys

I was curious and engaged as I had recently conducted some limited research at the NBI on the finger grass discovered by Jan Smuts for Piet Beukes' book, '*Smuts - the Botanist*'. In 1924 Smuts identified a group of *Digitaria* plants on his farm Doornkloof. According to Smuts, this group of plants differed from other finger grasses in the area because of its acceptability by animals. Material collected from these plants brought upon a new species namely *Digitaria smutsii*.

The grazing value of *D. smutsii* became very popular (early 1930's) under the influence of research done by Drs Pentz and Pole-Evans. In 1981 the botanical name of this grass became *Digitaria eriantha* cultivar Irene, which is still available today.

I had also become intrigued by Richard Leakey's hypothesis of the potential 'Sixth extinction' of living species. This was the focus of the TGA initiative - how to stem the Sixth extinction.

I was even more excited that TGA might be able to participate in the Johannesburg World Summit of Sustainable Development (WSSD) to take place in 2002. So I deeply appreciated being invited to participate in promoting the program.

I set about promoting the beautiful publication *'Towards Gondwana Alive - Stemming the Sixth Extinction'*. In my effort to promote consciousness about sustainability through awareness of the project, I set about doing my best to distribute the book. At the time I was engaged in a variety of public speaking events which presented an ideal opportunity.

It was a great honour to engage with the TGA team of scientists and we addressed many public gatherings.

My wife, Michelle Le Vieux, who had been at school with the Southern African Development Bank's (SADB) Julie Clark, helped us organise funding from the bank to make our time fully available for three months to the Gondwana Alive initiative. In addition the Bank provided funds to produce a 20-minute video on the project and the subject of the importance of preserving biodiversity. We named that video: *'Our Unique Opportunity'*.

I had previously worked with Dr Stranger Kgamphe, secretary General of UNESCO South Africa, who I introduced to the Project. He arranged UNESCO recognition for TGA. A UNESCO certificate of recognition was issued by Dr Kader Asmal—then South African Minister of Education.

We briefly worked with the CEO of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) with the notion of sharing a stall at the World Summit in Sandton—but the facility made available by the organisers was considered inadequate.

The SADB offered a venue for the TGA to run a one-day conference on Biosphere Reserves. I was fortunate to be put in touch with Princess Irene of the Netherlands, daughter of Prince Bernard who had headed the WWF, who agreed to present the keynote address. Her theme was: *'We are Nature'*. Princess Irene was passionate about South Africa—and especially fond of the Karoo where she owned a farm. The conference was addressed by Dr Nthathi Koka. Dr John Anderson and others, and it was attended by representative from various sustainability initiative like the IUCN, WWF, UNESCO etc.



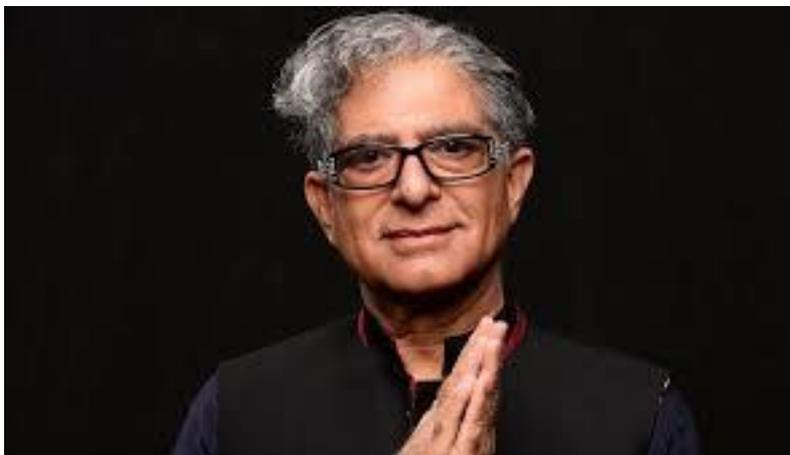
Princess Irene

Simultaneously, an alternative conference on sustainability was organised for the general public entitled, *'The People's Convention'*. When Dr Anderson was invited to address a gathering at their venue he was able to meet the illustrious Dame Jane Goodall.



Dame Jane Goodall

Meanwhile at the same time, holistic health author, Dr Deepak Chopra, was visiting South Africa and through his organisers I was invited to briefly share his platform at The Dome in Randburg. There I was also able to promote the TGA initiative and the book.



Dr. Deepak Chopra

Our ambitious idea at the time was to promote the whole of Gauteng as a potential biosphere reserve. We briefly engaged with somewhat skeptical officials at the Gauteng Department of Environmental Affairs.

With the intention of engaging young folks, we began to explore a follow-on initiative to the WSSD with a number of potential participants.

Dr Francis Thackeray of the SA Museum was willing to develop a mobile exhibit to display the two directions the world could take in the face of the extinction threat.

Dr Stranger Kgamphe would introduce the initiative into the Independent Schools Network ISPN with some 30+ participating schools, where the mobile exhibit would be displayed.

Jacana Publishing would introduce us to The Star's weekly edition of its schools insert where we could promote and educate students on the subject of sustainability.

Whilst events took a different direction before we could implement the initiative, I was able to introduce my friend and colleague Alex Anderson, former chairman of Mitak, to Dr John Anderson. He and Dr Anderson were to collaborate further and generatively with Towards Gondwana Alive.

It was both a pleasure and an honour to work with the TGA team. This deeply influenced by interest and concern about sustainability. This resulted in my wife and I attending a residential course on sustainability at Schumacher College in Devon entitled '*Cultivating an Eco-literate World-view*'.

The UN loop opened with UNESCO and the Towards Gondwana Alive initiative was closed when I participated with the Complexity Research Group of the London School of Economics in a UNEP-sponsored research project on the role of women in delicate coastal regions. <http://emk-complexity.s3.amazonaws.com/publications/Gender--Decision-Making-Project-Report-31-Jan-2015.pdf>

I guess the crowning moment was being able to attend James Lovelock's 100th birthday celebration at Exeter University (26 July, 2019). He is the author of the Gaia concept of Mother Earth as a unified and integrated living system.

I have the TGA initiative to thank for this rich vector in my life experience.