

final review



Core funding for the Fitz Centre of Excellence (CoE) ends in 2022 and we were asked to produce a self-evaluation report on the CoE's activities since it was established in 2004. It was a daunting task. Over the past 18 years, the CoE has published some 1700 peer-reviewed papers, 23 books, almost 1000 popular articles and graduated 65 PhD and 263 MSc students. Equally importantly, the research conducted

has helped to conserve birds and their habitats throughout southern Africa, both directly, through the implementation of effective management and mitigation measures, and indirectly, through increased awareness of the threats posed to birds.

BECOMING A CoE

In 2004, the South African Department of Science and Technology and the

National Research Foundation (NRF) invited proposals to establish national Centres of Excellence that would enable researchers to collaborate across disciplines and institutions on long-term projects that were both locally relevant and internationally competitive. The Fitz was recognised as one of six original centres and was granted this prestigious award to establish the CoE on Birds as Keys to Biodiversity

Conservation. The CoE had two main themes: understanding biodiversity, which described the wide range of birds and the evolutionary processes that accounted for this, and maintaining biodiversity, which explored and attempted to mitigate the impacts of global change on birds and the ecosystems on which they depend.

Midway through the first five years, then-director Morné du Plessis left to head up WWF-SA. He was replaced by Phil Hockey, who reported on CoE activities during the first five-year funding cycle. The review panel, comprising three eminent ornithologists and conservation scientists from the UK, USA and Australia, was positive about the performance of the fledgling CoE, but called for greater emphasis on maintaining rather than understanding biodiversity. On the basis of this feedback, funding of the Fitz CoE was increased and extended for a second five-year term.

Phil used this opportunity to develop the 'Hot Birds' programme in conjunction with Andrew McKechnie, which is now a flagship programme for the CoE. We recruited Pierre Pistorius to further strengthen our important seabird research programme and he was later joined by Lorien Pichegru. Research on the evolution and behavioural ecology of birds continued through productive collaborations with overseas partners, including Rita Covas, Mandy Ridley and Rauri Bowie, but most CoE funding was allocated to more applied projects, including the role of waterfowl in the spread of diseases, the impacts of power generation and transmission infrastructure and the conservation of vultures, eagles and other raptors.

CEMENTING A LEGACY

In 2013, after a generic review of all the CoEs, it was decided to continue funding for a further five years. As 2019 approached, there was much debate about the fate of the six original CoEs. All were flourishing research centres, but the NRF wanted to free up funds to support new CoEs. In the end, funding



was extended for a further three years (2020–2022). But then Covid hit and midway through 2020 we were notified that funding was going to be reduced incrementally over three years, which left the CoEs scrambling to balance their budgets. The Fitz managed to weather the storm thanks to the support of the University of Cape Town and help from BirdLife South Africa, and we are now transitioning smoothly into the post-CoE era. The main impact we anticipate is a decrease in the number of students in the short term, but other outputs should not be unduly affected by the loss of CoE funding.

There is no doubt that recognition as a CoE improved both the quality and quantity of research and training conducted by the Fitz and that by promoting collaborations with partners at other South African universities, the cause of bird conservation was enhanced throughout the country. We thank all the members of the CoE team for their hard work and enthusiasm, which enabled us to achieve so much over the past 18 years. We look

above Morné du Plessis, seen here ringing a Green Wood-hoopoe, led the proposal to have the Fitz recognised as a national Centre of Excellence in 2004.

opposite Chatter, a habituated Sociable Weaver, reflecting on bird behavioural data collected on a hot day in the Kalahari.

forward to continuing the strong links established through the CoE to further promote our understanding of birds and to ensure the best possible future for our extraordinary biodiversity.

PETER RYAN AND SUSAN MILLER

If you want to learn more about Fitz activities, please download our annual report from www.fitzpatrick.uct.ac.za

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