

Knysna Estuary

Jewel of the Garden Route



Evening view over the Knysna Lagoon towards the Outeniqua Mountains in the distant background
(Photograph: © Markus Hallberg)

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Alan Whitfield, Charles Breen & Mark Read

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Frontispiece: Knysna Estuary.

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Dedication



This book is dedicated to the late Professor Brian Allanson, who retired as Chair of the Zoology Department and Dean of Science at Rhodes University in 1988, and built his retirement home in Steenbok Crescent on Leisure Isle. Brian was one of the key drivers behind the launch of the Knysna Basin Project (KBP) in 1995 and the establishment of a research laboratory that supported the aims and objectives of this project. As Director of the KBP, he was also responsible for the compilation of a dedicated volume in the Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa, covering various scientific aspects of the Knysna Estuary. These papers have formed important reference works for the chapters presented in this book and taken our ecological understanding of the estuary to new levels. In this regard we thank Brian for his dedicated service in promoting research and supporting wise estuarine management, based primarily on scientific facts rather than opinion or conjecture. It is therefore most appropriate that the proceeds from the sale of this book will be donated to the KBP to help further Brian's dream of a healthy Knysna system for both the aquatic biota and people of this Garden Route gem.

Foreword

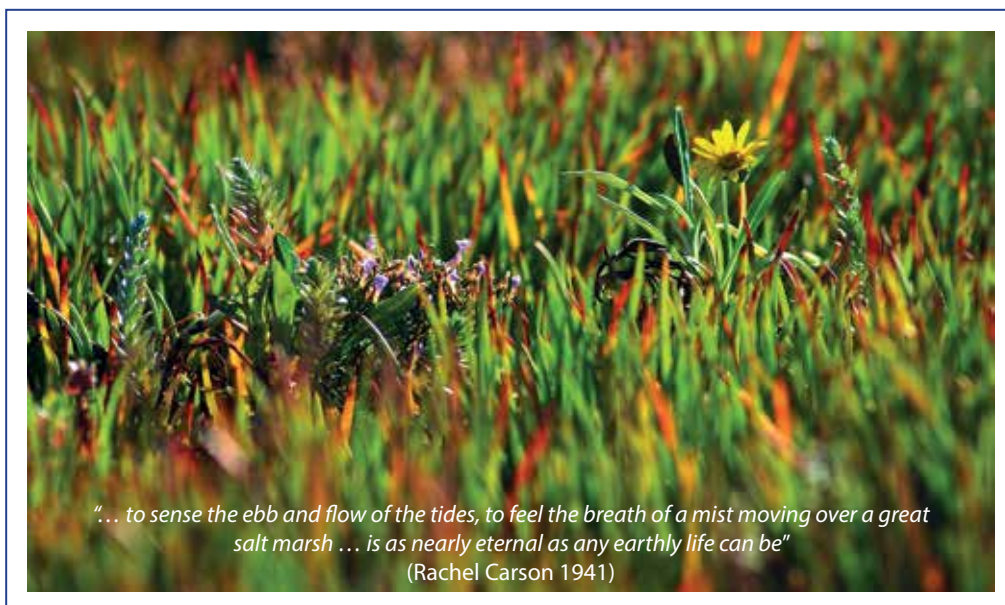
Knysna Estuary — It's hard to avoid superlatives: South Africa's most biologically diverse estuary; the most important for conservation; jewel; rich in history and prehistory; exquisitely beautiful; heaven on earth.

Three things set this book apart. First, the scope spans from the deep-time origins of the system to the modern world. It opens with five chapters that introduce the system, deal with early human use, palaeontology, physical development and nature, and its role as the meeting place between river and sea. Pivotal is the fact that towering on either side of the mouth are the twin rocky headlands that stabilise the estuary, so that much of it is dominated by tidal exchange. Second, the estuary has a rich scientific literature; but these papers are not accessible to the average person, so this synthesis is welcome. The book is written by renowned experts but in a communicative style that will be a joy for all to read. Thirdly, it is liberally illustrated, increasing the pleasure of the read and capturing its beauty and wonder. Four chapters deal with the plants and algae, invertebrates, the fishes and the water birds, and the book then concludes with the effects of climate change, the complexities of management, and the way forward.

My personal treasured memories of Knysna include spending the coldest night imaginable sampling for fish in inky snow-sprinkled darkness, having shots fired overhead from a 12-bore by JLB Smith when I had the temerity to sample 'his' eastern banks, multiple glorious sunrises dappling the lagoon, and the discovery of species as yet unknown to science.

It's a delight of a book: I read it from cover to cover, learnt a great deal, and cherished it for both content and design. It's a book to be devoured and then returned to time and time again to absorb its multifaceted coverage and details.

George Branch



Preface

The genesis of *Knysna Estuary—Jewel of the Garden Route* happened three years ago midway through a stroll along the edge of the eelgrass beds fringing the quiet northeastern side of Leisure Isle. I was ruminating about a vociferous braai-side debate the previous evening when topics concerning the much loved Knysna Estuary (or lagoon as it's more popularly called) had been aired. Should outboard motor power be limited? Does the fish catch bag limit affect the realities of contemporary fish populations? Is the partially treated sewerage water in the Ashmead Channel being sufficiently flushed by tidal movement? What effect will rising sea levels have on the estuary? These are amongst the plethora of questions asked and argued endlessly by people who have fallen under the spell of perhaps South Africa's most beautiful stretch of water. So many questions and no reliable in-depth source of information to address them.

Just then I spied a lone figure collecting mud prawns from an area within the bait reserve and I set off to remonstrate with the fellow who was clearly no sport fisherman, merely attempting to feed his family with a fresh grunter. What followed was that I received, by way of an erudite lecture, an insight that the establishment of the critical invertebrate bait reserves had happened many years ago, and the demarcation of these areas therefore needed to be urgently interrogated to make them more meaningful to contemporary South Africans from both a conservation and human utilization perspective.

For me the switch flipped at that point—it was obvious that a broadly informative and scientifically reliable reference book on the ecology and natural history of the Knysna Estuary was required. This book needed to be clearly presented and illustrated such that any member of the public could appreciate the issues and possible solutions for future management of the estuary. I also realized that this was an impossible task for an enthusiastic amateur naturalist such as myself to undertake. Fortunately, Charles Breen and Alan Whitfield took up the challenge and the result is a volume that will take its place amongst the finest publications dealing with South African nature and biodiversity. It is my fervent hope that this book becomes a much-used friend by all who seek to deepen their knowledge about our wondrous Knysna Estuary.

Mark Read

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Alan Whitfield
Charles Breen
Mark Read

Author Contact Information

- Adams, Janine (Prof) – DSI/NRF Shallow Water Ecosystems Research Chair, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha, South Africa (email: janine.adams@mandela.ac.za)
- Allan, David (Mr) – Durban Natural Science Museum, eThekweni Municipality, Durban (email: davidallan@telkomsa.net)
- Barnes, Richard (Prof) – Department of Zoology, Rhodes University, Grahamstown/Makhanda, South Africa (email: rsb1001@cam.ac.uk)
- Breen, Charles (Prof) – Knysna Basin Project, Knysna, South Africa (email: breenc39@gmail.com)
- Cawthra, Hayley (Dr) – African Centre for Coastal Palaeoscience, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha, South Africa (email: cawthra.h@gmail.com)
- Claassens, Louw (Dr) – Palau International Coral Reef Centre, Koror, Republic of Palau (email: kyss.louw@gmail.com)
- Cleghorn, Naomi (Prof) – Department of Sociology & Anthropology, University of Texas at Arlington, Texas, USA (email: Cleghorn@uta.edu)
- Cooper, Andrew (Prof) – School of Geography and Environmental Sciences, University of Ulster, Coleraine, UK (email: jag.cooper@ulster.ac.uk)
- De Vynck, Jan (Dr) – African Centre for Coastal Palaeoscience, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth/ Gqeberha 6031, South Africa (email: jandevynck2@gmail.com)
- Dixon, Mark (Mr) – African Centre for Coastal Palaeoscience, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha 6031, South Africa (email: ghostfishing@strandloperproject.org)
- Freitag, Stef (Dr) – South African National Parks (SANParks), Knysna 6570, South Africa (email: stef.freitag@sanparks.org)
- Green, Andrew (Prof) – Geological Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa (email: greenal@ukzn.ac.za)
- Helm, Charles (Dr) – African Centre for Coastal Palaeoscience, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha, South Africa (email: helm.c.w@gmail.com)
- Hodgson, Alan (Prof) – Department of Zoology, Rhodes University, Grahamstown/Makhanda, South Africa (email: a.hodgson@ru.ac.za)
- Human, Lucienne (Dr) – South African Environmental Observation Network (SAEON) Elwandle Node, Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha, South Africa (email: lr.human@saeon.nrf.ac.za)
- James, Nicola (Prof) – South African Institute for Aquatic Biodiversity (SAIAB), Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha, South Africa (email: NC.James@saiab.nrf.ac.za)
- Lamberth, Stephen (Dr) – Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment (DFFE), South Africa (email: SLamberth@dffe.gov.za)
- Largier, John (Prof) – Bodega Marine Laboratory, Coastal & Marine Sciences Institute, University of California Davis, Bodega Bay, USA (email: jlargier@ucdavis.edu)
- Nurse, Pat (Mrs) – Lakes Bird Club, Knysna, South Africa (email: jgn@lantic.net)
- Read, Mark (Mr) – Everard Read Group of Galleries, Johannesburg, South Africa (email: mark@everard.co.za)

Roux, Dirk (Dr) – South African National Parks (SANParks), Garden Route and Frontier Research Unit, South Africa (email: dirk.roux@sanparks.org)

Russell, Ian (Dr) – South African National Parks (SANParks), Garden Route and Frontier Research Unit, South Africa (email: ian.russell@sanparks.org)

Smith, Kyle (Mr) – Scientific Services, South African National Parks, Sedgefield, South Africa (email: martin.smith@sanparks.org)

Stear, Willo (Dr) – African Centre for Coastal Palaeoscience, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha, South Africa (email: willostear@gmail.com)

Taplin, Megan (Ms) – South African National Parks (SANParks), Knysna, South Africa (email: megan.taplin@sanparks.org)

Thesen, Guy (Mr) – African Centre for Coastal Palaeoscience, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha, South Africa (email: gthesen@gmail.com)

Turpie, Jane (Dr) – Anchor Environmental, Tokai, Cape Town, South Africa (email: jane@anchorenvironmental.co.za)

Van Berkel, Fred (Dr) – African Centre for Coastal Palaeoscience, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha, South Africa (email: fn.vanberkel@gmail.com)

Van Niekerk, Lara (Prof) – Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), Stellenbosch, South Africa (email: LvNieker@csir.co.za)

Wasserman, Johan (Mr) – DSI/NRF Shallow Water Ecosystems Research Chair, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha, South Africa (email: johanwasserman@gmail.com)

Watt, Lorna (Mrs) – Lakes Bird Club, Knysna, South Africa (email: lornawatt@telkomsa.net)

Whitfield, Alan (Prof) – South African Institute for Aquatic Biodiversity (SAIAB), Grahamstown/Makhanda, South Africa (email: A.Whitfield@saiab.nrf.ac.za)

Wooldridge, Tris (Prof) – Department of Zoology, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha, South Africa (email: Tris.Wooldridge@mandela.ac.za)

Wurz, Sarah (Prof) – School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa (email: Sarah.Wurz@wits.ac.za)

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