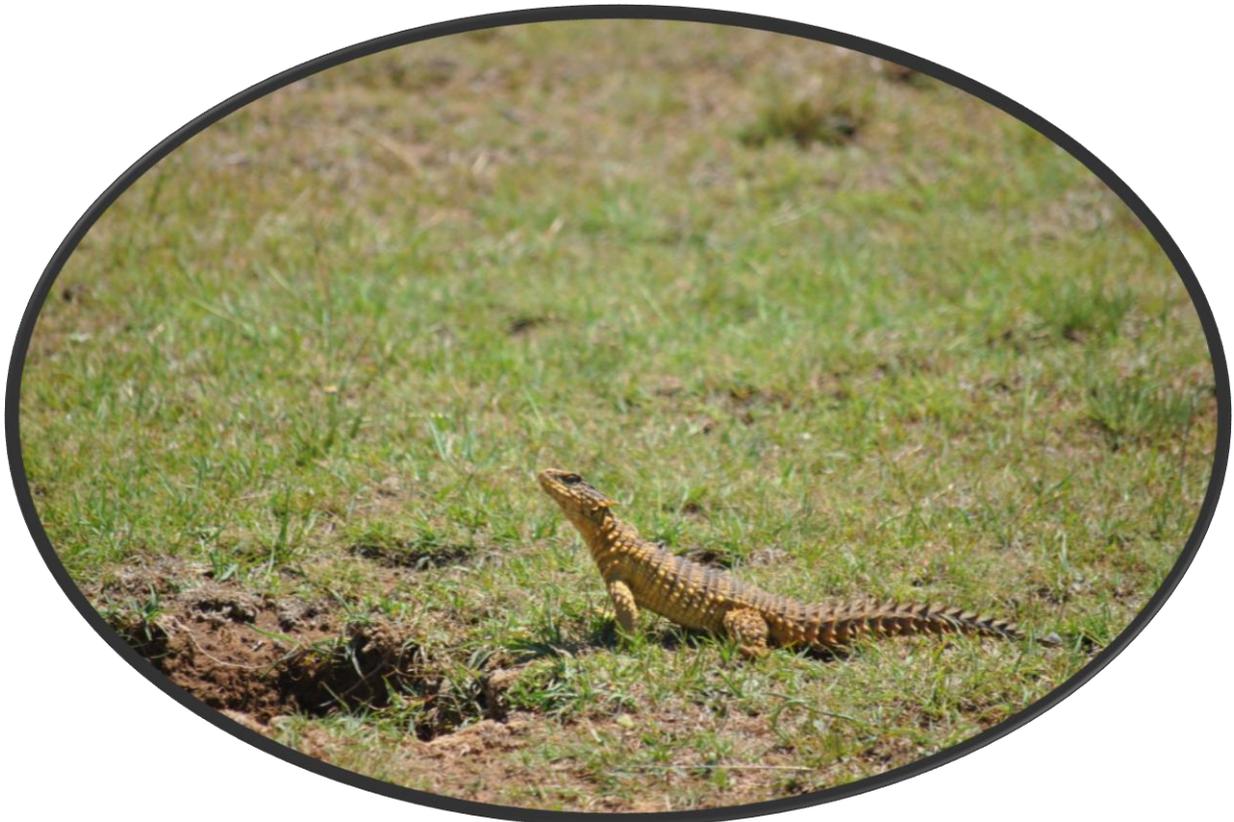




people's
trust for
endangered
species

Final Report: December 2015

Sungazer Conservation Project Threatened Grassland Species Programme Endangered Wildlife Trust



1. Introduction

The Sungazer Conservation Project is now almost certainly the most dedicated and largest reptile species conservation project that this country has ever seen. We at the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Threatened Grassland Species Programme are very excited about this groundbreaking project which is growing by the day. Our work with farmers is also continuing and we are building strong relationships with many landowners who have Sungazer populations on their properties. In the last three months it has been possible to visit new areas, namely Reitz, Petrus Steyn and Golden Gate National Park where Sungazers were recorded. Visits to the farms within Welkom, Volksrust and Vrede districts have been ongoing during the reporting period and more landowners have shown keen interest in the stewardship process (a process whereby private landowners formally declare their properties as protected areas for the conservation of biodiversity). We held a meeting at the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency to discuss stewardship sites under new criteria drawn up by the provincial officials and specifically around the proposed protected environment in Volksrust (Versamelberge Protected Environment). This necessitated a follow-up visit to the landowners in this priority area. Linked to the stewardship programme we have initiated a custodianship project whereby landowners who have shown commitment to the conservation of Sungazers and other species on their land are awarded custodian boards and are encouraged to act as ambassadors for conservation in their areas.

Finally we have appointed, on the 1st of September, an additional staff member by the name of Mauritz de Bruin. Mauritz is based in Wakkerstroom and will be focusing mainly on Botha's Lark (which co-exists with Sungazers) in the north eastern Free State and southern Mpumalanga but will also work with Zwelakhe Zondi (A Masters student) in tackling Sungazer trade related conservation work as well as other threatened, specialist and endemic species work in the region.

2. Activities undertaken during the reporting period according to methodology

2.1 Stewardship

To date we have visited over 120 landowners who have Sungazers or were reported to have had Sungazers on their properties in the past. All of the 5 priority areas (Harrismith, Vrede, Volksrust, Edenville and Welkom districts) have been visited several times during the year and new farms were also visited in the Roadside, Reitz and Petrus Steyn districts during 2015. The majority of farmers have been told about the stewardship process, but efforts have been made in the sensitive Sungazer population found in the Volksrust region found in southwestern Mpumalanga. This is the only remaining large population within the province found within intact grassland. This area is known as the Versamelberge Protected Environment. Bradley Gibbons

(senior field officer for the EWT) and Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MTPA) staff visited landowners in the proposed protected environment near to complete the stewardship forms following the previous visits which included site assessments in May and September. Bradley also met with the MTPA team to discuss the stewardship process in the next 5 years. The outcome of the meeting is to divert our stewardship focus away from areas with mining prospecting so that less time is wasted opposing mine applications but rather focus on biodiversity rich areas without potential mining at this stage. Obviously we will be excluding some biodiversity rich areas for now in terms of stewardship but we will still be involved with those mining applications that could affect biodiversity through the Environmental Impact Assessment process and these can possibly be options for stewardship further down the line.



Photo taken during a site assessment visit to the proposed protected environment in September

Efforts for the proclamation of protected environments in the Free State province have been delayed due to governmental nature conservation departments being understaffed. However, the custodianship programme was initiated during 2015 and landowners who have shown commitment to Sungazer conservation and have large numbers of Sungazers on their properties, were awarded custodianship signboards. These can be put up on display at their farms, and landowners were asked to sign an agreement that is valid for 5 years. This is a commitment from the landowner to continue conserving Sungazers on their respective properties and is not legally binding but is a first step towards formal stewardship and follows a similar process where landowners also agree to protect the Sungazer colony(ies) on their farm(s). These landowners are the most dedicated voluntary conservation friendly landowners in each of the regions and we hope to encourage them to take on a role as regional champions to encourage other landowners in the areas to follow their example.

All 20 custodian boards have been given to farmers in all of the 5 focus areas as well as additional areas with Sungazers.



A landowner (and son) together with Bradley Gibbons receiving a Sungazer custodian board

WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) is also very active with stewardship to the east of our area of focus. During the reporting period, we have met up with the new manager of the project, Sam Mnguni, and have discussed ways in which we will work together and also discussed our priorities in order to ensure productive alignment of efforts. Similar meetings have been held with BirdLife South Africa to ensure alignment with their Important Bird Areas programme which is an initiative that prioritizes parts of South Africa according to bird diversity (and special species) in need of protection.

2.2 Biodiversity Management Plan

Work has been done throughout 2015 on the Biodiversity Management Plan (BMP) for Sungazers. This has been sent to members of the Sungazer Working Group for comment and a workshop was held in October 2015 to make changes and discuss certain sections in detail. The document is in final draft format and final comments are being compiled. This will be submitted to the minister in early 2016 for final approval.

2.3 Relocation procedures

Time was spent in Golden Gate National Park with Dr Gideon Groenewald who was involved with the translocation of the Sungazers to the Park from Tshiame (an area near Harrismith in the Free State) about 20 years ago. The 3 areas where the Sungazers were released were visited and some evidence of burrows that appear to have been utilised in the last few months

before winter could be seen. Although this area needs to be re-visited in summer in order to confirm the presence and numbers of Sungazers, Gideon was asked about the procedure followed during the translocation process. This included factors such as the soil type and aspect that was matched in the new areas where the Sungazers were located to.

This is the only known in-situ relocation effort to-date and the lessons learned have contributed to the development of both a position statement on Sungazer translocation and a translocation guideline document which will guide any and all future translocations. The latter is an adaptable document and will be updated if and when new information is received or lessons are learned.

2.4 Trade

A non-detriment finding (NDF) workshop took place for the Sungazers that was led by the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI). This is a requirement by CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) and addressed many of the factors such as threats that Sungazers face. Following the results of this NDF workshop it has been highlighted that the trade in Sungazers must stop.

Another key development in our efforts to gain traction in the fight against illegal trade is the initiation of an extensive dedicated schools awareness project. To this end our colleague, Samson Phakathi, helped with an environmental education plan and questionnaire at Mpophomo Combined School, near Van Reenen. This was the first farm school visited with a focus on Sungazers and was for grade 6 to 8 learners and was treated as a pilot for a broader project targeting all of the key rural schools (some 40 in total) in the eastern Free State. The lessons highlight the fact that Sungazers are not numerous and are threatened by the impacts of habitat loss and trade. We also conducted questionnaires to understand what the learners know about Sungazers.

We have recently, in partnership with the South African National Biodiversity Institute and Tshwane University of Technology, initiated an MSc study looking at the extent and impact of trade on Sungazers. The student, Zwelakhe Zondi, started his field work in spring and will be covering the species range interviewing traditional healers and people at traditional medicine markets, (locally known as *muthi* markets) to gain an understanding of the uses and frequency of the use of this uniquely South African lizard. He will also canvas the international pet trade to try to get a handle on the extent of illegal smuggling.

Finally, the Sungazer Working Group has been actively involved in dealing with trade related issues and 2 meetings have taken place during the reporting period (in March and in October). This collaboration is a valuable means of coordinating the various parties interested in Sungazer conservation efforts not only within South Africa but including

some international partners. An advisory group meeting also took place for the TGSP and plans for the future were discussed with a panel of experts and advisors.

2.5 Re-assessment of CITES assessment

A Non-Detriment Finding (NDF) was completed in collaboration with the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) as part of the requirements for CITES II species. The NDF was positive meaning that the assessment showed that trade in any wild individuals will have a significant detrimental impact on the wild population. This has been signed by the national scientific authority and is in the process of being gazetted. This outcome means that trade will be banned unless successful captive breeding to F2 generation can be proven (no captive breeding has ever been successfully done for this species). The NDF has helped us understand the importance of the conservation of Sungazers.

3. Other activities during 2015

EWT registered as an interested and affected party for the new proposed Rhino Oil and Gas exploration in the northern Free State, southern Mpumalanga and southern Gauteng. A public participation meeting was attended in Vrede by Bradley and in Standerton by Mauritz for this proposed development.

A lesson on grassland conservation with a focus on Sungazers was done at Lüneburg Schule and a few weeks later, a function was attended that one of the themes for the environmental side was grasslands. The children put up a few posters about grasslands and threatened species found in the grasslands.

The Memel Show was attended and a small display was put up for TGSP. Farmers and residents of Memel were seen and spoken to about grassland issues. There was also a colour-in activity for children.

A Sungazer was picked by a farmer in the Volksrust in a “middle of a road” in the Volksrust and relatively far from the nearest colony. The best decision was to take it and care for it before it gets in the wrong hands

A teleconference was held with Kishaylin Chetty from Eskom (who deals with environmental matters). We agreed to discuss the Majuba Power Station Sungazer colony and Kishaylin has offered to get the reserve managed for the benefit of Sungazers.

A meeting was attended in Newcastle in connection with the Commissiekraal proposed coal mine. The meeting has a focus on biodiversity and water usage in the area and various factors were discussed.

The SCCP (Symposium of Contemporary Conservation Practice) was attended in Midmar, Howick area and a presentation entitled “Sungazers and Stewardship” was given to delegates during a session on stewardship.

The Wakkerstroom Bird Club was given a tour in the Volksrust area where a group of Sungazers are found. The overall impression was positive and this was the first time for many to see a Sungazer lizard in the wild.

4. Plans for 2016

We will be working hard to get the BMP (Biodiversity Management Plan) completed and signed off by the minister of Environmental Affairs and linked to this we will continue our efforts to get this species recognised as the national lizard of South Africa (through the Department of Arts and Culture).

The remaining farms in the first phase of the Versamelberge proposed protected environment needs to be visited again for the next site assessment that will be done together with the officials from Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency.

The Golden Gate National Park needs to be visited in the summer months to get an idea of the population numbers in the national park. This will be a priority for 2016, but most importantly we will continue with our stewardship efforts in order to secure as much habitat under formal conservation as possible and with our trade work to limit the number of these precious lizards either being killed for traditional medicine or from leaving our shores through illegal transactions.

We will be working closely with Eskom (South Africa's energy producer) to manage and secure their reserves that house Sungazers. These will also act as core areas (starting with Majuba Nature Reserve) for future stewardship efforts in the region.

5. Conclusion.

Over this reporting period, a few people have accompanied Bradley and seen the Sungazer for the first time. One such group is the Wakkerstroom Bird Club who focus on having bird outings and joined Bradley on an outing to look for Sungazers. People's reactions have been similar, because most people regard the Sungazer as looking like a prehistoric dinosaur and even point out similarities to crocodiles. It is always emphasised that Sungazers give live birth and hence no eggs are laid, making these lizards unique and full of interesting facts for the public. Farm workers and school children speak with enthusiasm and interest about Sungazers and conversations with these local people who have interacted with this species for centuries are always of interest not only from learning about traditional medicinal use but also stories of how children play with the lizards and inform us of previously unconfirmed colonies on their areas. Hopefully this is a sign that Sungazers are now being recognised and starting to get much needed attention that is necessary for their protection into the future.

Financial report

| Category | Item | No. of items | Cost | Total | Actual spent |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------|------|-------------|--------------|
| Staff costs | Field worker costs | 18 | 215 | 3870 | 3913 |
| Field equipment | | | | | |
| Laboratory equipment | | | | | |
| Travel | Fuel costs | 18 | 55 | 990 | 1033 |
| Subsistence | Food while doing field work | 18 | 10 | 180 | 94 |
| Consumables | | | | | |
| Report production | Analysis, design, review and printing | | | 890 | 890 |
| Administration | | | | | |
| Insurance | | | | | |
| Other | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| Budget total* required | | | | 5930 | 5930 |

We overspent very slightly on fuel and travel costs this however was balanced by an overall underspend on subsistence costs. The remaining GBP43.00 was used for staff costs resulting in a final budget balance of GBP 0.00. We trust this is all in order and thank PTES for their generous support of this important work.

