

# CO-EXISTING WITH NATURE IN A SUSTAINABLE AND BUSH-FRIENDLY MANNER

## *A GPNR forum on guidelines relating to the interaction between humans and the natural environment*

---

### **Guidelines from our Constitution:**

For the next few months we'll be looking more closely at the GPNR Constitution and the valuable objectives and principles it contains.

***We would like to encourage everyone to send us his or her input and interpretation of the objectives and principles contained in the Constitution, such as:***

- 1. Sustainable conservation of the ecosystems of the reserve in their most undisturbed state possible (clause 7.2).*
- 2. To promote bush atmosphere and appearance within the parameters of the Reserve (clause 7.7).*
- 3. To allow the unhindered movement of game (clause 7.7.1).*
- 4. To act at all times in line with the ethos of a nature reserve and not to disturb fauna, flora or any other Members (clause 11.1).*

***Please send your comments to [liz.lewis.sa@gmail.com](mailto:liz.lewis.sa@gmail.com)***

But first:

### **Why do we have a Constitution and why is it important to respect it?**

I first came to Grietjie in 1991, when we moved into a cottage on number 9, which we rented from the legendary Jack Colenso.

Jack had built the 'big house' on number 9 in the early 1970s. It was so high, and its pinkish-beige colour contrasted so much with the bush around it, that the house became a reporting point for pilots training in the area. Apart from the this house, Jack also added another big double storey building, a pool and pool house, a 6 car garage with a self-contained flat attached to it, 3 labourers cottages with separate ablution facilities, plus the cottage at the river that we rented.

Jack also owned number 8. He had been a RAF fighter pilot during the Second World War, and ever the passionate aviator, he built a large hangar on number 8, and bulldozed a wide airstrip right across it. The airstrip, still very visible today (despite every effort to rehabilitate it),

stretches from the road down to the river. Luckily, as the story goes, another legend, Rita Miljo, had persuaded Jack at the very last minute to spare the beautiful fig trees on the banks of the river.

In addition to all these buildings and structures, a multitude of roads criss-crossed the two properties. Not even the river escaped. There were ropes across the river to pull boats to the other side, and at one stage there was also a hanging bridge, suspended by luminous orange ropes, anchored to crimson posts.

At the time, of course, this picture of human interference was not unique to numbers 8 and 9. In fact, from a visual and environmental impact perspective, many properties were in a worse state, and on some properties, literally nothing had remained of the natural environment. For the greater part, Grietjie consisted of an array of old farm houses, sheds, garages, labourers' accommodation and workshops, not to mention cattle enclosures, stables and chicken runs. Therefore, instead of game, one saw horses, cows and chickens. And, on many properties, instead of indigenous vegetation, there were ploughed and planted fields, vegetable gardens and fruit trees.

Every property was fenced, mostly with strands of barbed wire, complemented by ugly farm gates. There was scrap and rubble everywhere, and the horizon was dotted with derelict buildings. On the roads were tractors and trucks.

But quite unbelievably, in spite of the devastation of their natural habitat, there were a few impala, grysbok, warthog and other small animals, as well as monkeys and, yes, baboons. Sometimes one would see kudu, very seldom an odd buffalo, sometimes a hyena, and if you were extremely lucky, a leopard. At the river were waterbuck, hippo and crocodile, but not nearly as many as we see today. For many years, there were so few crocodiles that people could quite safely wade across the river when it was low.

There were none of the regular sightings that we now take for granted. Seeing any game was more the exception than the norm. There were no elephant! There were no rhino. There were no lion (other than a few unfortunate individuals who were shot, after they had been lured with carcasses).

In general, poaching was rife, and hardly combatted, which meant that whatever game there was, was also shy. Snares were everywhere, as we well know from the numbers of old snares that are still being found. People used to drive in from Phalaborwa for the sole purpose of finding something to shoot. Many owners held exactly the same views, and shot whatever they could.

Now, fast forward from this Grietjie of the early 1990s to the Grietjie of today, this special place that we are privileged to share with such an abundance of wild animals. A place (mostly) without fences and gates, where the game can move relatively freely through the natural bush. Today, Grietjie is a place where we see large tracts of beautiful, indigenous vegetation that has replaced the jigsaw puzzle of cultivated land and animal enclosures of the past. From a collection of rather shabby smallholdings, where one was worried about being run over by

a neighbour's truck, we are now in a wonderful reserve where instead, we are worried about being chased by elephant. Many would agree that this is a privilege rather than a problem.

This dramatic change could never have come about by accident. Rather, it took much effort on the part of a number of dedicated owners who recognised the need for Grietjie to be reconceived as a nature reserve and member of Balule.

These early stalwarts included Freek Venter, who was also our first Chairman; Ian Owtram, the first Secretary; Colin Robertson, the first Treasurer; Mike Clulow; Ian Bleach and Jack Colenso; and also 'oom' Theuns Trollip, who, as the 'farmers' representative', gave the first Committee his support, as he has done with successive committees.

For Grietjie to become a nature reserve required a clear vision, and sustained commitment to the vision. This vision was encapsulated in the GPNR Constitution, of which the first version was signed in 2003. At the time, 79% of owners were in favour of Grietjie becoming a nature reserve. But, it required years of hard work by a succession of persons dedicated to the vision, and it required adherence to the spirit and ethos of the Constitution by all those who shared the vision.

Achieving the ultimate goal of transforming the old Grietjie into a nature reserve that is officially recognised as a 'protected area' remains a work in progress, and one in which we all need to participate. It is a fact that we cannot attain this goal without having the necessary blueprint and vision, both of which are still contained in the GPNR Constitution.

We therefore greatly look forward to receiving your input regarding the constitutional objectives and principles – those very objectives and principles that have facilitated the transformation of the 'old' Grietjie into the reserve it is today.

---

Compiled by Liz Lewis

*With thanks to Ian Owtram for providing the facts and figures relating to the first Committee and first version of the Constitution.*