

# Meet a Conservationist: Wendy Foden

Interview by Phoebe Barnard,  
South African National  
Biodiversity Institute



Wendy Foden, South African conservation biologist, hugging (actually, measuring!) a mature quiver tree, *Aloe dichotoma*, in Southern Africa's Succulent Karoo. (Photo: G. Ellis)

In this issue of the newsletter, meet Wendy Foden, an African conservationist brimming with energy and ideas for tackling the conservation challenges we all face. Wendy has been driven from the start. She finished school and her BSc, honours and masters degrees from Universities of the Witwatersrand and Cape Town, all with first-class distinctions. Her masters thesis showing evidence of serious climate change impacts on an arid-zone African flagship tree, *Aloe dichotoma*, has been reported around the world. But Wendy is no academic wall-flower. She is active in the field, a passionate initiator of threatened species conservation science projects and inputs to policy, and an ardent contributor to IUCN and other processes in southern Africa. Below, she talks to our roving reporter about her work and her values.

*Phoebe: How would you describe your main role in conservation - what is your job, and what kinds of activities do you handle in it?*

Wendy: I've just taken an exciting job as programme officer, working on climate change for

the IUCN in Cambridge, UK. There's some really groundbreaking work going on in integrating climate change into the Red List process. Before that, I managed South Africa's Threatened Species Programme (TSP), based at the South African National Biodiversity Institute. The programme focused on closing the gaps in Red Listing and Atlasing in the country, and partnership programmes tackling plants, reptiles, butterflies, arachnids, birds and frogs are in progress. As well as dealing with policy, conservation planning and research, the TSP has a strong capacity building component and supports a significant number of scholarships, internships and community outreach programmes.

I believe that species conservation forms the essential skeleton of conservation. The cuteness, cuddliness, scariness, sadness, vulnerability, beauty or ugliness of our cohabiting creatures is something we're all able to

relate to, and so species play an important role in building a firm consciousness of biodiversity conservation in our nations.

*Phoebe: What would you say are the most pressing issues facing African conservation today? facing South African conservation today?*

Wendy:

- Political instability and poverty – Conservation clearly takes a very low priority when people are poor, hungry and/or at war. Good national governance promotes sound long-term planning, policymaking, education and law enforcement for conservation and breeds a culture of respect and care for the environment.
- Corruption – corruption undermines all the hard work, good policy making and morale of conservation in Africa. I find it despicable, unforgivable and utterly depressing. Corrupt environment damagers should be

(Continued on page 5.)

(Continued from page 4.)

given the same fate they cause, e.g., a dose of the chainsaw, ploughing, or rifle treatment!

- Climate change – young conservationists face the unprecedented challenge of abandoning many of our existing concepts of conservation and learning to play a new role as the innovators who try to minimise extinctions and maximise the adaptive capacity of the landscape to deal with climate change.

*Phoebe: Can you identify a time in your life when you just decided you **had** to be a conservation biologist?*

Wendy: When I'd completed my university biology studies, I went to the UK to earn money to pay back my student loan and to "see the world". During

the next three years, I worked as a computer programmer in London, traveled extensively through Asia and Africa, and tried to work out what life direction to choose.

In 2000, I joined a student expedition to Tanzania to help determine remaining stocks of commercially exploited *Dalbergia melanoxylon*. Some hasty planning sent our small jumble-bag of students, kit and

faulty vehicles off down the cratered sandy road to remote and sparsely populated southern Tanzania for 6 weeks. As we entered the region's extensive miombo woodlands, I was awed by each giant tree in a realm of the most wild, noble, beautiful tree-beings

I've ever encountered. Everything that could have gone wrong did go wrong on that trip. But I happily spent any spare time with local villagers and their elders, finding out about the medicinal, cultural and magical uses of these trees and how they coexist with them.

In Tanzania it became clear to me that my life would be worthwhile if I spent my energy and time in a way that could help to protect such a place and such coexistence. I used a jumpy connection in a seedy Dar es Salaam internet café to apply for the Conservation Biology MSc programme at the University of Cape Town and I haven't looked back since.

*Phoebe: Who would you say are your 'conservation heroes' - in Africa or elsewhere?*



Conservationist and guide, Terry Umseb, explains to Wendy the location of quiver trees in the Brandberg Mountains, Namibia. (Photo: G. Ellis)

Wendy:

- Prof William Bond, ecologist, University of Cape Town. He showed me that science should be creative and fun and forced me to think innovatively and originally. He has contributed massively to South African conservation by drawing so many young minds into ecology, inspiring us and sending us out into the world equipped and passionate for conservation.

- Kristal Maze, director, biodiversity planning & policy at SANBI (also a student of William's). Kristal is my inspiration for making conservation happen. As a young woman in a traditionally male dominated field, she ignores the stereotypes and uses her own "no-mess-no-fuss" approach to get things done strategically and well. Kristal has already made great strides in getting South Africa's biodiversity conservation into top shape. I look forward to seeing the results of the rest of her career. (Author's note – Kristal has since been awarded the 2nd Young Women Conservation Biologists' Award of the SCB Africa Section in 2008).

If you would like to suggest someone as a future "Meet a Conservationist" subject, contact: SCB.ACT@gmail.com.

*Good national governance promotes sound long-term planning, policymaking, education and law enforcement for conservation and breeds a culture of respect and care for the environment.*