

# The Department of Conservation Ecology and Entomology's award winners

## 2022 Best Conservation student - Jemma Mitchell



I have been so blessed to live a life immersed in wild spaces. I grew up and live on a bushveld farm in the Nhlamvini valley near Ixopo, in rural KZN. To me, it is the most beautiful place in the world. My family loves nature, it is part of our identity, and from a little girl my parents provided me with so many chances to spend time outdoors. I would go fishing and hunting with my dad, and I enjoy going on photography walks and birding excursions with my mom. Our home is

always filled with animals. We have had the usual pets – dogs, birds, fish, snakes, hamsters and we have also had some more unusual additions to the family. As a little girl I kept pet moths and made friends with the frogs in the garden. We fostered warthog piglets (Kiara, Pumba and Nala) that loved to sleep in my bed and we also cared for swallows, Egyptian geese, calves and sheep. My family loves travelling and appreciating the beautiful wild places South Africa has to offer and, as a result, I have been so privileged to explore our country's diversity and many of its game reserves. From as early as I can remember we have spent family holidays in the Kruger Park, a place that holds a very special place in my heart. Its magic captivated me from the start and even now I find myself in awe of its complexity, ancient trees and intricate grasses.

All of these precious experiences growing up fostered my great love for wildlife and being outdoors. It is the wild places of South Africa that set my soul on fire and it has always been a dream of mine to work in conservation one day, to protect these spaces and to ensure their continuation into the future. I am so grateful to my parents for giving me the chance to follow my passion and study what I love. I am so thankful for their continuous guidance and encouragement to do my best. Studying Conservation Ecology these past four years has been a wonderful experience for me. I have learned so much and I know that the course has set firm foundations for my future conservation endeavours. I am so thankful and honoured to receive this award and I

hope that I can use the knowledge I have gained to make a meaningful contribution to conservation, especially in South Africa. Next year I will be continuing with my studies, pursuing a MSc in Zoology, also at Stellenbosch University. I am so excited to start this new chapter and I greatly look forward to what the future holds.

## 2022 Best Entomology student - Rigardt van Rooyen



I see myself as an inquisitive person. I have always been fascinated in all living things. I remember waking up early in the mornings whenever my family and I were on holiday at a place we had never visited before. At sunrise I would venture outside when the holiday-goers were still in bed, but nature had already woken. I cherished this as the time when I would likely observe something new and exciting.

My passion for studying the behaviour of animals started off at a young age. When I was a boy, my dad built a den

for all my curious pets. I had chickens, geese, pigeons, guineapigs, and rabbits. It was my favourite activity to look after and care for them.

During my High School career, Biology and Geography were my most enjoyable subjects. I had no doubt that I wanted to study Conservation Ecology at Stellenbosch University. I had always hoped to pursue a career in wildlife conservation, never thinking much about the entomology component of the degree. During my Undergraduate, my curiosity in what I had learnt during lectures extended beyond my books and transformed hiking outings with friends into exploration expeditions.

Insects however, never really stood out to me. It was only after a field assistance opportunity, thanks to Prof Pia Addison in my final year which convinced me to take up an entomology module. Now, any insect catches my eye. Family and friends have already gotten used to me suddenly stopping in my tracks to stare at a bush or drop to my knees to inspect a critter creeping along the ground. I am now grateful to undertake an MSc with Prof Pia Addison and Dr Gulu Bekker. Although the future is still unsure, I am hopeful for what is to come.

## 2021 Best conservation student – Olivia Brunings



I grew up in Montagu, a small town surrounded by mountains which cultivated an immense love and passion for the natural environment. From a young age, I loved spending time outdoors whether it was hiking (and picking up as many pretty rocks as my tiny hands could carry), paddling on the local dam, or enthusiastically examining any mountain turquoise that happened to come across my path. Both my parents are land-use planners and growing up I accompanied them on numerous site inspections and road trips through our stunningly diverse country. While I might have kicked up a fuss from time to time (bundu bashing is not always particularly appealing to a 10-year-old) I soon grew to love seeing new places and watching how the natural vegetation changes as you speed through the landscape on tar roads or smell the distinct fragrance of the fynbos plants while slowly winding your way up 4x4 tracks.

The beauty and simple complexity of the natural world quickly established a captivating hold on my heart and mind. As I grew older, I developed an increasing interest in the intellectual side of the environment and enjoyed learning about the functioning of the natural world. I also became more aware of how dependent human survival and wellbeing is on the functioning of natural systems, however, this realization came with increasing knowledge on how human behaviour is posing a severe threat to the survival of the ecosystems on which we depend.

When it came time to decide on a career path, I knew environmental science was my future. I felt at home the moment I set foot in the Conservation Ecology department during Stellenbosch University's open day in my matric year. The lectures were down-to-earth, welcoming, and excited to train future environmentalists. I have thoroughly enjoyed my studies and have developed a particular interest in the field of sustainable agriculture. I hope to be able to put what I have learnt into practice in this sector to ensure that sufficient food is produced without harming the natural environment on which these agricultural systems depend. My goal is to bridge the gap between science and on-the-ground application to ensure that ecosystems are protected and the services these ecosystems provide are enhanced and valued. This degree enabled me to combine my love for nature and science and pursue my passion in becoming actively involved in environmental protection to ensure a sustainable future, for the people and biodiversity of South Africa.

The class of 2021 has faced many challenges during the last 2 years of our degree and despite not being able to see each other face to face during classes, I have learnt so much from my peers. This year was tackled with determination and perseverance by all, and everyone was willing to lend each other a helping hand where needed, be it in the field, the lab, or simply emotional support. I am extremely grateful that I was able to study and grow with this inspiring group of ambitious, caring,

nature-loving people. May we all step into this industry confidently and use the knowledge we have gained to make a positive impact in all areas of conservation. I have nothing but excitement for opportunities that lie ahead of each of us.

## 2021 Best entomology student – Samara Singh

There was once a time where the mere sight of an insect would send me running in the opposite direction – how things have changed since. I grew up in the bustling city of Durban, surrounded by manicured lawns and brick houses. In my suburb, insects have no place. They are often seen as an inconvenience or a pest; they simply don't belong here.



Being a part of the Indian community, the pressure to pursue a career in medicine, engineering, or education is immense. Instead, I chose to take a different route. As expected, with this career choice came a whole new challenge – explaining my coursework to the conservative mindset of the older generation. Thankfully, my parents have always been very supportive of my dreams and ambitions.

From an early age, my parents instilled in me a love for nature and adventure. I spent most of my school holidays travelling all across South Africa from one game reserve to another. From this, my interest in the natural world was born; I wanted to learn more, but most importantly I wanted to conserve all that I had fallen in love with. That

led me to Stellenbosch University. I'll be honest, at first, I wasn't particularly interested in the 'Entomology' aspect of this programme. However, throughout these 4 years, I found myself gradually sinking deeper into the enchanting world of insects. Before I knew it, I became an 'insect junkie'. I could no longer run away from these little creatures, instead, I developed a life-long fascination (or obsession) for insects.

However, my journey into the insect world didn't exactly begin in 2018. During career week in matric, a lady from the nearby university came to my school in hopes of enticing new students to study entomology. I still remember my exact reaction, "Why would I want to study insects?". Talk about foreshadowing. Today, I am proud to share all the knowledge that I have gained throughout this programme. I am truly grateful for the opportunity to have studied a BSc in Conservation Ecology at Stellenbosch University, and I am delighted to be a Matie alumnus. I wish to inspire the people around me and educate those with little to no interest in insects on the importance and value of these incredible creatures. I look forward to making a positive impact in my field, with plans to continue my studies sometime in the near future.

## 2020 Best conservation student – Nicola du Plessis



Although I grew up in the city of Cape Town, the first time I really felt the strong pull of nature was in the indigenous forests of the Eastern Cape. From the age of eight, my father who was an ornithologist at the time allowed my sister and I to come along on his research trips as ‘field assistants’. His work took us to the coastal town of Morgan Bay: home to several colonies of glossy birds with red bills called Green Wood Hoopoes. Before first light, we would stumble from our beds, blurry-eyed and cheeks stinging from the crisp September air. Navigating through the surrounding farms, we would arrive at a precise location that my dad had carefully selected the night before. There we would clamber down into the deep dark valley, treading lightly so as not to disturb the sleeping ecosystem. After locating the right tree, we would fix a net around the hole, which housed a family of birds, waiting silently on a picnic blanket for one to fly out

whilst listening to the enchanting sounds of the forest waking up. These field trips continued until my sister and I grew too big to all squeeze on to one motorbike, but from then on, I was hooked on the outdoors. To this day, I have taken every opportunity that comes my way to spend time in nature. It is there that I feel most alive.

I wanted to study Conservation Ecology at Stellenbosch University for three main reasons, firstly to learn more about how the natural world works, secondly to understand where we as humans are going so wrong, and thirdly to equip myself with the necessary tools to solve these problems. I truly believe that this degree has helped me to achieve these goals. I have been exposed to some of the best academics in their respective fields and have learnt so much from my classmates. Although this year was especially tough trying to adapt to a new normal with COVID-19, it was the class of 2020, as well as my lecturers and supervisors that got me through. I wish to specifically thank Alanna Rebelo and Karen Esler for supporting me in every step of my fourth year project - it is these two inspiring and exceptionally driven women that really deserve this award.

This year more than ever, I have realised the importance of investing in people and I am so grateful to the Department of Conservation Ecology for investing in my future. In May next year I will begin a Masters’ at the University of Cape Town in Conservation Biology which I believe will kickstart my career in the conservation space. I am so excited to see what the future brings – but I know that whatever I do, I will do it confidently, knowing that I have the best possible foundation.

## 2020 Best entomology student – Handré Basson



Me at the age of four with a female rhino beetle (*Oryctes boas*) and at 24 with a female zig-zag emperor moth (*Gonimbrasia*)

I don't know where my passion for insects came from. It was just there, since I can remember! And it's really challenging to prioritize and focus on "more important" things with such an intense passion lurking in your subconscious. I grew up in Kraaifontein, a suburb of Cape Town in the Western Cape. I never had a dull moment, because we are surrounded with insects and other arthropods regardless of where we are. I've spent every break (yes, every single one!) at school searching for insects and other interesting arthropods. I couldn't wait to finish my lunch so that I can use my lunch box for catching insects. In class, all I could think of is where to explore next in my next break or after school. On my way home from school, I would sneak into peoples' gardens with the hope to find something new or different. The more places I could explore, the better! Needless to say- I've been chased away so many times! Can you imagine a random small kid flipping rocks and logs in your garden? By that time, I knew exactly which insects I can find in our backyard, what they're eating and where to find them. I am very grateful that my parents always encouraged me to learn more about my passion by buying me books. At the age of nine, we moved to a smallholding near Klawer (between Clanwilliam and Vredendal). I spent the rest of my school career in a hostel in Clanwilliam. I went to an agricultural school where

having a girlfriend and playing rugby was the norm. But no- for me it was just insects. I knew very well at a young age that this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. I want to study insects. At the age of 16 I discovered a new species of spitting spider (Scytodidae: *Scytodes species*) in a cave near our house. The largest species in Africa and a cave specialist! That is when I started learning the Latin names, because local names can be confusing since they differ between different regions. Many people used to tell me that there is no future for bug crazy people like me. But this never got me down- I knew where I was going and what I want to achieve in life. My maths and physical science marks were very low in grade 11 and matric, which meant I couldn't join the main-stream first year group at Stellenbosch University in 2015. I took a gap year to improve my marks, which still didn't meet the minimum requirements. I did not lose hope! For the first half of 2015 I was lab assistant for a MSc Entomology student at Stellenbosch University. My job was to identify all the insect samples to family level. Then, for the second half of the year, I worked at Butterfly World in Klapmuts. In 2016 I joined the Extended Degree Programme (EDP) due to my low school marks, which meant my course was five years instead of four. I knew that this was the only way for me to get into entomology and that there is no such thing as a shortcut. I was told that, according to my low marks, I will not be able to finish my first year. But my passion was so prominent and dominated all the external negativity. In my second year, I was a co-author of a scientific paper "The phoretic association between *Cyaneolytta* Péringuey (Coleoptera: Meloidae) triungulins and *Anthia* Weber (Coleoptera: Carabidae) in Southern Africa" (Scholtz, Basson and Bologna, 2018). I was also a co-author of a second scientific paper "Recent records of fruit chafers (Scarabaeidae: Cetoniinae, Cetoniini) in the southwestern Cape region of South Africa suggest that range expansions were facilitated by human-mediated jump-dispersal and pre-adaptation to transformed landscapes" (Roets, Allison and Basson, 2019). I will do my MSc in Entomology in 2021, and hopefully my PhD after that. Believe in yourself and let your passion guide you!

## 2019 Best conservation student – Judith Stopforth



To commemorate my first year on our planet, Earth, my parents gave me a tortoise. Little snotnose me named her Judith and till this day she still happily grazes in the back yard of our smallholding. Throughout the next few decades I would come to love not only her but also various other additions to our family including a sheep named “Beauty”, who occasionally ran around the house in a nappy, a horse called Tantor (named after the elephant in one of my favourite childhood movies, “Tarzan”) and several dogs, cats, chickens, some calves, bunnies and a few naughty goats. Additionally, to our back yard being a mini farm or perhaps in some cases a zoo, our family loves nature and travelling. I am privileged to have seen much of South Africa and its many game reserves. My life’s recipe has led me to develop a taste for our natural world and a profound love for all living things. I find the word is enticing. Amazing. And spectacular. Often, it’s also sad. Broken. And sometimes mad. Mostly I find it mysterious. A place awaiting to be discovered again and again by the fortunate souls that dare to call themselves adventures, explorers or perhaps simply scientists.

Through knowledge comes power. It changes the way we perceive the world and allows us to influence and teach

people. I wish more people could love and see the natural world as I do. I think this is the one reason I chose to study Conservation Ecology. The other, simple reason is the fact that I would simply hate to sit in an office all day long. This degree has taught me how to read various sections of the book called “nature” and how to explore it in depth. It has taught me that the world is a puzzle and that everything fits together in a delicate balance which is life.

To my fellow Conservationist. Thank you. I thoroughly enjoyed your company and have found a few beautiful, cool souls whom I am happy to call my friends. I would like to thank all the lectures for creating friendly learning environments for us and of course for passing on your infinite wisdom.

Thank you to the Department of Conservation Ecology & Entomology for sponsoring my award. I am truly honoured to receive it. The incentive is much appreciated and I am humbled by the investment into my future.

I hope to combine my passion for photography and the knowledge I picked up in this degree in the work I will do one day. Hopefully inspiring people to love the natural world and all its creepy, cool and beautiful crawlies as I do.

## 2019 Best entomology student Stefan Hansen

I have had a deep and passionate interest in Life from as early as I can remember. For me; the existence of life (both in the form of humans, and the myriad other life forms with which we share the planet) remains the one of the most astounding and mysterious wonders of Creation.

The root of my interest was sparked and nurtured by parents and family who exposed me to this world through frequent visits to aquariums and nature reserves; a multitude of books and TV programs (no doubt Sir David Attenborough should carry a large share of the blame of my final study-and-career choice); and allowing me to keep pet spiders in salad bowls on the kitchen counter.

The entomological route of my life started through a chance meeting with the highly skilled and ever passionate Dr Schalk Schoeman from the Nelspruit ARC

in my high-school days. One job-shadow session later (which focused largely on stink bugs attacking subtropical crops) firmly cemented my belief that entomology should be my life's work.

I came to Stellenbosch University specifically to study entomology to further pursue a career in this subject; doing a double major in plant pathology and entomology through the department of plant and soil sciences. The lecturing and research staff involved in the department of conservation ecology and entomology; and agri-science in the broader sense; have played a tremendous role in my development and have fueled my interest in arthropods (and especially the role they play in agriculture) to an even higher level that it was in my pre-university days. I am where I am because of them. They all deserve mention; but for the sake of brevity I wish to specially thank Matthew and Pia Addison; Prof Antoinette Malan, Prof Lizel Mostert and Dr Julien Haran for the opportunities provided. I now walk out of this degree a very rich man indeed; both in terms of the knowledge and skills; but also the relationships built over the last 4 years.

I shall be continuing my studies in the department of conservation ecology and entomology in 2020 on the taxonomy and biological (read more environmentally friendly and sustainable) control of a fruit and vine pest known as the banded fruit weevil (maybe by the end we'll be one step closer to finding the root of all weevil); and am looking forward to that with a profound sense of joy and excitement.





## 2018 Best conservation student – Frederique Linnenbank



I grew up in Utrecht, the Netherlands, where I always had a passion for biology. My plan was however to study medicine which I did for four years. However during one of my holidays I went to Cape Town and fell in love with it. I stopped my studies and decided to take a gap year and spent some more time here. During this year I ended up staying in Nature's valley for a while, and there I realised I wanted to study nature in South Africa. I enrolled in Stellenbosch University for Biodiversity and Ecology but did not get accepted, I did get accepted to Viticulture. However during the orientation I found out about the BSc Conservation Ecology which I switched to before the year started. Because of the way I ended up doing this degree I really feel that it was meant to be and I am so grateful for that. I have enjoyed this degree so much, the courses that it offered were amazing and so diverse, and the lecturers were very inspiring and just overall lovely people. It has been amazing meeting many people with similar life views and priorities, both my peers and lecturers. The Conservation Ecology group I was in was lovely and I enjoyed the fieldtrips we did together every time. I know for a fact that many of them I will meet again somewhere in the world. I have worked very hard during this degree but it has never been

too much of a strain since all the assignments and study material, were so interesting and enjoyable. I have enjoyed every single bit of this degree and am so sad that it is over, I love listening and learning from great minds. I would love to thank all the lecturers for sharing all their knowledge and always making sure it is as enjoyable as possible. I will continue studying and do my Masters in Europe, but I really hope to see everyone back in Stellenbosch in the future.

## 2018 Best entomology student – Monique du Plessis



Ever since I was little, my parents would take us to game reserves all over South Africa. Even to this day, we travel to some sort of nature reserve at least twice a year. It is because of this great privilege that I have developed a profound love for all the breath-taking natural landscapes of our country. My deep-felt passion for all things natural inspired the topics of most of my artwork during school. It was already at this stage that I believed my purpose is to contribute towards the conservation of our spectacular wildlife. At the end of matric it was time to decide what I was going to pursue as a career. Instead of choosing art, like most people assumed at that time, I decided that I would much rather study the science behind conservation. Since starting my studies in the BSc ConsEnt degree I have never looked back. I cannot emphasize enough how I have absolutely enjoyed every moment of it, something only a few people can say about

their studies. At first, my greatest interest was of course large mammals. However, this degree has taught me to appreciate the entire web of life, even the tiny creepy-crawlies. I never would have guessed that insects would crawl so deep into my heart, but indeed they did. Entomology has broadened my view of the natural world and I certainly see it from a different perspective now – mostly crunched down attempting to take a picture of a bug on a leaf tip.

Thank you to the ConsEnt Department for supporting and inspiring me every step of the way. I am truly thankful for receiving this award and recognition for my hard work. I hope to one day combine my science knowledge with my other passion for art and photography to ultimately contribute towards the awareness of conservation issues across South Africa, and even the world.

## 2017 Best conservation student - Madeleine Pienaar

I grew up in the busy city of Cape Town, and now live on a calm and beautiful smallholding in Wellington. I went to Jan van Riebeeck High School for 12 years and progressively discovered my fascination and deep appreciation of nature. I'm not entirely convinced that I would be the (relatively) sane human being I am today without my many trips to the wild lands. I'm always met by a sense of relief, peace and aliveness as the landscape becomes more natural.



When I started to seriously contemplate what I wanted to do after school, I was torn between wanting to march into the high-ranking offices and fix this ecological/social/political/economic mess we're in, or hide away in a mossy forest cabin surrounded by organic vegetable gardens, tie-dye fairies, rock pools and singing birds. I was forced to face reality as time continuously refused to move any slower. I chose to study Conservation Ecology due to the immense responsibility I felt to try and do something about the brutal daily bludgeoning of the most wonderful world, which provides us with every crumb we have.

I've been realizing more and more how important nature is on so many levels, from the basic technical functioning of society, to helping people have a more satisfying experience of life. I'm very grateful that I've had many opportunities to immerse myself in nature's splendour from a young age. I agree very much that it is vital for humans to be touched by nature in a therapeutic way. The heartfelt realization that we are part of an enormous web which influences everything about us from our basic survival to our mood and mental health, may be a missing link needed to mend many destructive patterns inflicted by the very strange human species.

The last two years of this course has captured my interest through a roller coaster of enjoyable and challenging tasks and experiences. I was especially inspired by Prof. Karen Esler and her insights into restoration. I also enjoyed landscape ecology and management with Dr. James Pryke and Prof. Michael Samways.

I'm very excited to be taking a gap year next year, where I'll be au pairing and then travelling to Australia, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and Burma. The plan is to do a good amount of trekking, hiking, living simply, working on organic farms or smallholdings, and seeing where our whim takes us in between. Stellenbosch has grown on me and I'm happy to be coming back in 2019 to begin a master's degree (either at the Sustainability Institute or The Department of Conservation Ecology and Entomology).

What I've learnt in and out of class these last four years has left me greatly concerned for the Earth. Nevertheless, I have decided to gently and stubbornly direct my sphere of influence towards a world which I'm not ashamed to leave behind, however slow and small the collective process may be. I would love to be of service to the world through some sound conservation action, and join the part of society which is already striving to be more considerate, sustainable and responsible.

## 2017 Best entomology student – Chantel Smit



I was born and raised in the southern suburbs of Cape Town in the Western Cape, South Africa. I was fortunate enough to attend high school at Jan van Riebeeck High School in Cape Town which is an area known for its unique biodiversity. Since I can remember I have always found comfort in being outside surrounded by plants and animals. My love for nature has been obvious since a young age seeing as most of my time would be spent outdoors busy running, hiking or inside my rabbit's cage. When I was very young, my favourite hobbies included giving my rabbits a bath and feeding my chickens some popcorn. Seeing as I have always had such an immense love and passion for animals, I decided

that studying towards a degree in Conservation Ecology would give me the opportunity to learn how to conserve and protect them and the environment they live in. In my final year I decided to do an Entomology module which involved, amongst a few other things, collecting 150 insects and learning about the physiology of insects. During this module I became fascinated with insects, which made studying for the tests much more enjoyable. This resulted in me receiving the award for best Entomology student of the year for which I am very grateful and honoured. I would like to thank all the lecturers in the department for sharing their knowledge and supporting me, especially Prof. John Terblanche for sparking my interests in Entomology. During the 4 years of studying this course at Stellenbosch University I was fortunate enough to learn more about a wide variety of topics related to conservation and I am eager to gain much more knowledge on as many of these topics as possible. This degree has definitely intensified my love and appreciation for nature and I am looking forward to making a positive difference in the field of conservation.

## 2016 Best conservation student - Steven Myburgh

I was always adamant that if there was something we felt passionately about enough, we could teach ourselves whatever was necessary, and so I thumbed my nose at the concept of a university education – it was probably a good thing for that time, as I have had more changes of heart and interest in my adult career than most people cycle through hairstyles. However, the common thread throughout my life has been a love for all the green (and blue) in the world, and the richness, wonder and



mystery inherent in it. So I managed to subvert my subversive side, and was drawn to a degree that would teach me more about how nature works and the state of biodiversity.

I have not been disappointed by my choice. We have been exposed to breadth and depth of rich knowledge, which I feel has given me a base with which to investigate the complexities and wonders of nature. It's both an exciting and pressing time to be in conservation, a field that is still on a trajectory to honing its understanding of how to live alongside and benefit from the 'big and furries', the small goggas and everything in-between. We all have big shoes to fill and a lot to do in a short time. I am not certain yet what my next immediate step will be – whether an internship or a straight transition into masters - though I have developed a strong interest in climate change, other forms of global change, and the sustainability solutions that we can use to address the biodiversity loss crisis – and so that is the direction I am aiming in. I'm particularly passionate about granting legal rights for nature to continue to exist and have its integrity maintained, and the intersection between our economic paradigm and how the accounting system that underpins it influences our use of natural 'resources'.

Despite an age gap of roughly 15 years with my classmates, I can say they were so generous in treating me as one of their 'peeps', and I felt incredibly honoured to work with them on projects, assignments and test preparations. Our class has been incredibly cooperative with, and supportive of, each other – and I marvel at them meeting the challenges this rigorous course offered them at such a young age. I wonder whether I would have had the patience or the dedication at that age! I am glad there will be future leaders as passionate as those in our group was, out there on the frontlines defending nature's myriad members.

Our lecturers bring their career-long experiences to bear in the content they teach us, which have included soft skills and unique perspective as much as they have nuts-and-bolts type content. What is exciting about this degree is its transdisciplinarity, and I am sure it will continue to evolve and serve future conservation leaders in our biodiverse and science savvy country. This transdisciplinarity was embodied in my fourth year project, where I looked at the interaction between the climate phenomena of El Nino and La Nina, how fire in the fynbos works, and Protea reproduction cycles – complex stuff! This project and other studies we were exposed to, has given me an invaluable appreciation for the role of science in making decisions that affect the welfare of people and nature. I want to say a special thank you to the Booyesen family, for their recognition of

the value of budding conservationists and the work they do in preparing for their careers, in honour of the memory of their son Daniel.

## 2016 Best entomology student – James Robins



The world's ecosystem services, resources and wildlife are under significant strain through indirect and direct anthropogenic utilisation and disturbances. The unpredictable and unstable future of wildlife and ecosystem services has driven me to educate myself in this field. I want to make a difference, contribute and try to ensure sustainable use and protection of wildlife and ecosystem services are maintained, so future generations will benefit from these natural wonders.

Throughout my life as a child and adult all aspects of nature have intrigued and given me a sense that I am part of something much greater. In my early twenties I worked and travelled around the world and was never more content than when surrounded by nature. The intrinsic feeling I gained from these experiences made me realise that I wanted to educate myself in the environmental sciences, so I could make this passion into my career.

Conservation Ecology at Stellenbosch University helped to encapsulate the importance of ecosystem services and these every day services that we often take for granted. Through many fieldtrips into different biomes across South Africa, hands on experience of scientific research and data collection was a major part of the degree. Along with environmental aspects of research, the social and economic importance was also integrated into our reports and discussions. This helped me to understand that these facets are almost inseparable and crucial to include in all management decisions.

For my fourth year research project I implemented a water saving irrigation schedule called cycle and soak, into a gated community. My research resulted in a water use saving of 20% a year and a financial saving of up to R35000 a year. Highly positive feedback from the estate manager and my supervisor was extremely rewarding, and this experience has reinforced my passion and belief that science is my future. I plan on continuing my studies in the UK and hope to specialise in freshwater systems.

## 2015 Best conservation student – Philip Frenzel

The outdoors has always been my playground. Having grown up in a rural close-knit farming community in the KZN Midlands, my love for nature was instilled in me during those formative years of my life. Observing undisturbed natural areas, particularly in game reserves in various parts of South Africa, has allowed me to nurture a special bond. I thank my parents for these truly unforgettable family trips to these beautiful places. Sharing these special moments in the bush, developed this appreciation for all living organisms.

After completing high school at the Deutsche Schule Hermannsburg in KZN, the decision of which university degree to choose, was a relatively straightforward one. The need to study something in which I could make a difference to the environment, led me to study a BSc Conservation Ecology degree at Stellenbosch in 2012. The course has truly broadened my knowledge of all forms of life on our



pretty and fragile blue planet. This challenging, yet enjoyable course has opened my eyes to the challenges that the conservation sector experiences – especially the role that people play within this complex system. The class, in which I was privileged to have been a part of, has challenged my thoughts and opinions on a wide spectrum of issues. These experiences have enriched my time here at Stellenbosch. Class of 2015, you are a truly inspiring bunch of great people!

My journey forward will be guided by these amazing experiences, skills, contacts and knowledge that I have built up over these past four years. My interests lie in freshwater-related issues with a special focus on wetlands and the crucial role they play in purifying water. This has, in part, been inspired by the stark reality of the imminent water scarcity that faces society. Being a young scientist in the field of conservation, I feel that our generation has a huge responsibility, to ensure that we all contribute towards the continued availability of clean water. For these reasons, I hope to embark on an MSc next year in this field of expertise, with the goal of making this world a better place.

## 2015 Best Entomology student – Charl Deacon

Entomology has always been my interest as well as ecological issues since my high school career. In 2010, I was awarded 3rd place in the South African Youth Water Prize Competition at national level with a research project focusing on the issues around water scarcity in South Africa. The issues were addressed on an educational level, where I developed an innovative learning tool to address these issues in the younger demographic.



The following year (2011) I was awarded 4th prize at national level in the same competition for a project focusing on the potential of creating hydroponic material from mining waste. Both of the projects were, however, placed on hold after my commencing with a BSc degree in Conservation Ecology at Stellenbosch University. During the course of the study, a few smaller projects were tackled, including a study on the establishment of alien invasive fungi species, physiological adaptation of insects to changes in climate, and in fourth year a biological and ecological description of two rare damselfly species in the Western Cape. The latter also addressed several conservation concerns with regards to the habitats of these two damselfly species.

My plans for the future include contributing to the world of science in various lines of study, including taxonomy, nature conservation and ecology. I have been offered a position to undertake a MSc by research in the Department of Conservation Ecology and Entomology, which will be on ancient wetland conservation including the site of the Ceres Streamjack and its species conservation plan in co-operation with the Dragonfly Specialist Group and the IUCN/SSC

Species Conservation Planning Committee focusing on also using the damselflies studied in fourth year as an umbrella for conservation of other threatened and endemic species in the heart of this the Cape Floristic Region biodiversity hotspot.



## 2014 Best conservation student – Alicia Krupek



My motivation to study a BSc in Conservation Ecology stemmed from personally witnessing the desperate condition of our mother earth and fellow humans during a solo backpacking trip around the world. This eye-opening experience was a 'step into reality' and a sharp contrast to my childhood privileged with pristine forests, lakes, rivers and coast lines. All of the pollution, environmental destruction and food insecurity that I met throughout my journey left me with the desire to make a difference; my life shifted onto a pathway of becoming a useful and realistic individual in this world of carelessness.

Being born and raised in the lush temperate rain forests of Vancouver Island, Canada, the question I most commonly encounter is how I ended up at the Southern tip of Africa. I would be lying if I said it was a short story, but I suppose that it could be summed up by dreams of golden sun, a plethora of creatures unknown to me and some unfathomable diversity of plants. My curiosity got the better of me. Following my dreams and aspirations has led me into a new eye-opening learning experience beyond anything I had imagined. Discovering South Africa has been an unparalleled experience, yet it has also become a sad one to learn about the complexity of threats eating away at the expanse of the globally unique biomes, ecosystems and species.

Every piece of new knowledge, experience and curiosity that I have encountered throughout my studies, whether sad or positive, has fuelled my motivation to develop the skills to truly make a difference. The encouragement and inspiration from my peers and mentors has also given me courage to take the opportunities to do so.

## 2014 Best Entomology student – Aileen Thompson



There was never any hope for me. My parents, a forester and geography teacher, have dragged (albeit I was a very willing participant) me sideways, backwards and anyways across South Africa and further afield into Africa and beyond. If you were to ask my parents how I am usually found wherever we may be, their description of me would be something like this: crouched over, head and camera close to the ground and derriere pointing towards the sky. The main reason for adopting this pose is that there was inevitably some poor unsuspecting insect busy

going about insecty things in an insecty manner that I felt had to be further investigated. I am relatively fluent in Toktokkie, Katydid Khirps and Beetle Banter. I have a slight suspicion that I may be misunderstood when I do talk to the little critters, I may need help...

Being fortunate enough to have traveled so much in South Africa, I have learnt to appreciate the wonder and beauty that can be contained in the smallest of insects, charisma isn't only found in the big five. Although I am the first to admit that I need to learn how to appreciate grubs and worms more. I don't want to stop searching for the next little critter that crosses my path, each one has something special to offer and when all combined present the most wonderful story to read. So sorry mom, walking and looking down at my feet isn't going to stop, not even when crossing roads, 'cos I may just miss a beetle trundling along.

## 2013 Best conservation student – Luan le Roux

During the past four years, I always found it quite amusing when people asked me what I was studying. As soon as you say conservation ecology, or in Afrikaans 'bewaringsekologie', people always look at you funny and immediately ask what that is. Nowadays I realised that everybody understands when you describe it as environmental management or nature conservation. And in essence, this is probably the best way in which to summarize this diverse and interesting course.

My fondness for nature started at a very young age. Most of my childhood days were spent on a cattle farm near Kuruman in the Northern Cape province. It was here that I was taught to respect and appreciate all the wonderful elements of the veld. It was only later at the age of 11, when I was old enough to accompany my father on winter-month hunting trips, that I truly developed an interest in the identification and behavioural aspects of the different game and plant species. I started with my collection of field guides and information booklets at approximately that time and the knowledge I obtained through these sources I have always held dear and noticeably has been of great help in my subsequent years of studying. At the age of 17 I made the decision that a career behind a desk was not for me and I applied for at that time, the relatively new conservation ecology course at the University of Stellenbosch. Throughout the past four years, the course exposed me to a variety of interesting study fields. And it was this exposure to amongst others, soil science and agricultural economics that drove my decision to turn back to the agricultural sector, where I believe the scope for conservation-based initiatives is immense. This, and the great opportunities that exist for soil scientists in South Africa, has been the main force behind my decision to do a Masters in soil science at Stellenbosch from next year onwards.



However, I realised long ago that it does not matter in what direction my career is heading, as an agriculturalist or whatever, I will always incorporate a conservation way of thinking into my work. And according to me, that means the course has fulfilled its purpose. For me the most important lesson I learned over the past few years was this - the future of conservation lies in transformed habitats - and agriculture is at the this forefront. I am extremely excited to enter this arena and hope to influence and change the way farmers view their environment.

I sincerely appreciate each and every lecturer's contribution over the last couple of years as well as all my classmates who ended up being amongst my very dearest friends. It has been an amazing four years.

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*'There is a pleasure in the pathless woods, There is a rapture on the lonely shore, There is a society where none intrudes, By the deep sea and the music in its roar: I love not man the less, but nature more'*

## **2013 Best entomology student - Eleonore Slabbert**

Nature and all its weird and wonderful creepy crawlies have fascinated me from a young age. I still remember my very first 'bug house'! It was my most prized possession and I would always be on the look-out for a new 'gogga' to be discovered. My chosen field of study at Stellenbosch Universities Department of Conservation Ecology and Entomology was thus only a natural extension of this fascination, with not only nature as a whole, but also the delicate intricacies captured within the Lords creepy crawly creations. Admittedly I was at one stage terrified of flying cockroaches; I have luckily had a full recovery since then. My final year as BSc Conservation Ecology undergraduate has by far been a highlight in the four year course, thanks to the fascinating world of entomology I had the privilege to learn more about under the ever passionate and enthusiastic mentorship of Professor H. Geertsema.

My passion for nature finds an equal match in my passion for people, with specific emphasis on community empowerment. I see myself entering into a career focused on community

empowerment through applied research, in study fields such as functional ecology, natural resource management and applied entomology. I hope to play a part in promoting and developing a 'sustainable' interaction between communities and their natural resources. One of my long term dreams is to start up a NGO focused on conservation and community empowerment.

As part of my final year project on insects associated with Honeybush (*Cyclopia* spp.) I already had a glimpse of how it would be to merge my passions for ecology, entomology and community empowerment through applied research. Under the guidance of my supervisor, Rhoda Malgas and Genadendal community champion, Tannie Anna Joorst, I have learnt invaluable skill and life lessons concerning community orientated research. The experiences, skills and lessons I will always treasure greatly and they are sure to be put to good use in the near future as I continue to pursue a career in socially-conscious research. The next step from here is to continue with a Masters degree at Stellenbosch University in applied entomology.

