

# **50 years of mountaineering in the Eastern Cape : 1951-2001**

## **Diary of events in the life of the Eastern Province Mountain Club and the Eastern Province Section of the Mountain Club of South Africa**

### **Preamble**

*There is... an unusually fine spirit of comradeship among our members. There is something about the common love of mountains and the veld, which binds us in an unusual way. I have never experienced this spirit in any other organization.*

- Desmond Polack, 1952 Chairman's Report  
Eastern Province Mountain Club

Desmond's vision and leadership contributed greatly to the setting up of the then EPMC. And the spirit that Desmond talked of is still very alive today, and plays a major role in the strength and success of the Club.

*I think it is a sign of the growing maturity of the club that private parties continue to increase in popularity. Official meets are just not enough for the enthusiasm and energy of our more active members, who by their private exploits added substantially to the knowledge of the mountainous hinterland of Port Elizabeth. Very often private parties are of an exploratory nature and experience gained thereon stands our Section in good stead for the planning of its official programme.*

- Ludwig Abel, 1959 Chairman's Report, MCSA EP Section

The EP Section is unique in having an immense terrain in which to climb, covering a variety of mountain types from the quartzites of the Cape Fold Belt, to the Karoo dolerite inselbergs, to the southern end of the Drakensberg, with Cave sandstone and basalts. We have a vast repertoire of outings, and we rely on the explorations and collective experience of many people in arranging our activities. Many areas only get visited every few years, and we are now, after 50 years of climbing, still exploring some previously overlooked areas.

### **1950 (December)**

Desmond Polack advertises for interested people to join him in climbing the Cockscomb.

### **1950-1951 (30 December to 1 January)**

Desmond Polack, Dennis Moore, and Stella Smith spend the weekend climbing Cockscomb from Mr. Rudman's farm to the south via Waterfall Cave. During the climb Dennis Moore conceives the idea of forming a club.

### **1951 (22 February)**

As a result of the weekend climb, Desmond advertises that an inaugural meeting to form a Mountain Club will be held in the Athenaeum Club on 22 February 1951. Thirty-two people attend this meeting and the Eastern Province Mountain Club is born. Fred A. Magennis ("Pop") is elected President and Desmond Polack is elected Chairman. The meeting decides that the

assembly point for meets will be Richardson's Building on the Market Square, while Uitenhage members will meet at the Royal Hotel, Uitenhage.

### **1951 (3/4 March)**

The first meet organised by the Club is to Fernkloof, and is led by Pop Magennis who had hiked and camped for many years in the Groendal area.

*Who will forget the first outing to Fernkloof, the harmonious effects of shadow and sunlight filtering through the quite dense foliage, ripple and chatter of the kloof stream, the complete peace of the night after the chatter had died down; the sweaty emergence from the kloof over the krantz and prickly slope on the morrow, and the nine hours slog across fold after fold to the accompaniment of weighty arguments as to the merits of various return routes.*

- Robert Stevens, Newsletter No 2, EPMC, August 1951

### **1951 (May)**

The Club's first newsletter and meetsheet is issued.

### **1951 (4 August)**

A meet led by Robert Stephens to climb Formosa ends in disaster, with Robert's truck in the flooded river below Assegaaibosch causeway. A hilarious weekend ensues with dancing, Robert in jail, climbers cooking supper on the heaters in the hotel lounge, and a fight between two champions down at the river! All ends well ...

### **1951**

Robert Stephens proves to be the moving spirit in the search for climbing areas. Together with Arthur Harlow and Dennis Moore, he covers nearly all the ground since covered by the Club — from Seven Weeks Poort to Compassberg to Ben McDhui.

The Club badge, in the form of a Leopard, is designed. The motif of the Leopard is chosen because of a meet to Pop's cave in Chase's Kloof when Eric Sauer, leading Robert and the other "rebels", came face to face with one of the said cats.

*Not the least beautiful of the many beautiful things to be relished [in Groendal] is the view of Strydomsberg ... a king among mountains reigning majestically and aloof over a mass of green foothills, wooded valleys and hidden streams.*

- Desmond Polack, EPMC logbook, March 1953

### **1952 (1 March)**

The first Club dance is held at the home of Desmond Polack.

### **1953**

The first rock climb is opened, on Cockscomb, led by Arthur Harlow and Erik Manson. It was called Coronation Buttress because the meet was held on the weekend when Queen Elizabeth II was crowned.

### **1954 (22 January)**

Enthusiastic Mountain Club members help to found the Eastern Province Wild Flower Society.

### **1954 (23 June)**

After cordial negotiations the Club is accepted as a Section of the Mountain Club of South Africa.

## **1957 (July)**

Under the leadership of Dennis Thomas, rock-climbing tuition is given on the Lady's Slipper on Saturday afternoons.

## **1958**

During 1958, weekly coffee evenings are held at Chez Victor Restaurant in Main Street. By 1959 these have been replaced by monthly socials held in members' homes on the third Wednesday in each month. These socials prove very popular.

## **1958**

Bill Clarke, Mervyn Chappel and Mike Streeter complete the first successful ascent of the 300-metre "Cockscomb south face".

On a trip to Crystal Cavern (named after the *crystal*-clear water), Raymond Packwood leads the first kloofing style outing, complete with lilo's. This was the precursor of many great and exciting things: Chase's Kloof, Gillie's Kloof and the Storms River swim were opened in the next decade.

## **1959**

Negotiations are set in motion to obtain permission from the Department of Forestry to build a hut in the Lottering area. G.B. Anderson had introduced the Club to this area. Many years previously he and his friend, Poppy Parsons, had climbed Formosa from the Langkloof side, doing a cross-over, which ended at the Lottering valley and he had never forgotten the beauty of the area.

## **1960 (February)**

The first Rock Climbing Sub Committee is formed, and a new leader, Bill Clarke, takes over and proves a tower of strength in building and sustaining rock climbing in the Section.

## **1960's**

The Cockscomb gorges are explored and yield many fine routes. The climbers of the day were Mike and Geoff Streeter, Colin Wynne, Mervyn Chappel, John Wallace and Tim Robertson. On more level ground, Raymond Packwood, Hans Jorritsma and Derek and Carol Moore are exceptional mountaineers.

## **1960 (16 March)**

A special General Meeting authorises expenditure of £200 for the construction of a hut at Lottering.

## **1960 (29 May)**

Formosa Hut, which has been prefabricated at Beehive Shopfitters, is erected on foundations previously prepared at Lottering. The official hut-warming party takes place on 3 December 1960.

## **1960 (November)**

Our first President, "Pop" F.A. Magennis, dies. The same month, on 16 November, the Club is given the use of a clubroom under the Crusader grandstand, and weekly socials are held here on Thursdays.

## **1961 (February)**

Desmond Polack is elected President.

## **1963 (February)**

Desmond steps down as President and “Andy” G.B. Anderson is elected our new President.

## **1963 (3 October)**

Led by Schalk Theron, Ludwig Abel, Peter Heugh and Jack Wallace, the Club takes an option over a plot on the Lady's Slipper. The purchase of our Slipper property is confirmed by a Special General Meeting held on 30 June 1964. Funds for the purchase are raised by generous donations from members and from sympathetic bodies, such as the Wild Flower Society.

## **1960's – 1970's**

Over many years, Peter Heugh and the “Ou Bulle” explore the full extent of the Groendal Wilderness area.

Schalk Theron, Ben Loots and friends explore the Wild Coast of the Transkei and the Tsitsikamma coast.

## **1966 (5 February)**

The first Club outing down Chase's Kloof takes place. This classic kloofing trip was opened by Gerhard Payr and friends on their third attempt.

## **1968**

Gillie's Kloof was conquered by Gerhard Payr and friends.

## **1968 (30 December)**

Alf Schultz, Wells Anderson and “Klippie” Stone conceive the idea of doing a ridge-walk from Strydomsberg to Cockscomb in 3 days, calling it Upaka after the first participants, Wells Anderson, Klippie Stone and Alf Schultz, thus, UP A (for Andy) K (for Klippie) and A (for Alfie).

## **1970**

After lengthy negotiations and through the good offices of an old farmer friend, Lance Bosman, the way is cleared for the purchase of an area of Cockscomb Peak from Oom Kerneels Joubert, whose farm covers a portion of the Cockscomb. In an earlier exploratory trip led by Peter Heugh, a large cave was found on the property, which subsequently proves to be the kingpin of the Club's activities in the area. Transfer of this property into the name of the Club is registered in November.

## **1970 (11-13 December)**

Alf Shultz, completes the first Upaka ridge walk, solo, in 56 hours, after several failed attempts by various parties.

## **1970's**

Don McLennan and sons, Gavin Stewart, John Moss, Keith James and Dave Frere open climbs on the south face of Compassberg and crags in the Grahamstown and East London areas, seacliffs in the Transkei, as well as the Cockscomb gorges.

## **1971 (20 February)**

A celebratory meet to T'Numqua Cave on our new Cockscomb property is held. This name is the original Hottentot name for the Cockscomb — meaning “Mountain of Mists”.

## **1972 (February)**

Witte River in the eastern Bavianskloof is explored, and an unusual flowering bulb is found. Gwen Skinner subsequently collected specimens and these prove to be a new species endemic to the eastern Bavianskloof, named *Cyrtanthus montanus* in honour of the Mountain Club.

## **1972 (September)**

Tim Robertson is selected as one of two South Africans to attend a mountaineering course in Chamonix.

## **1974 (December)**

Our President “Andy” G. B. Anderson dies and Ludwig Abel is elected President.

## **1975 (September)**

First successful ascent of Peak Formosa from the south using the circular route via Spitskop, by the “Bearded Bastards” (Anton McLachlan, Tertius Coetzee, Dave Thompson and Paul Theron), who gave the name to BBC cave.

## **1975 (18-19 December)**

Record for Upaka, 33 hours 34 minutes, set by Wells Anderson and Etienne Weideman.

## **1976 (August)**

Ludwig Abel discovers a new species of Erica (the 635<sup>th</sup>) in the Groendal Wilderness area. He submitted a specimen to the South African Herbarium, and after much study it was confirmed in 1984 to be a new species and was named *Erica abelii*.

## **1970's – 1980's**

Over many years, Cliff Hughes and friends explore the Groot Winterhoek, Bavianskloof and Kouga ranges.

## **1979 (February)**

The Club enters into negotiations to purchase portion of the Witte River Kloof in the eastern Bavianskloof from Mr. F.F. Botha, in order to protect the habitat of *Cyrtanthus montanus* in this magnificent kloof.

## **1979 (December)**

Formosa Hut is improved with the provision of bunks and the reconstruction of the fire-place and chimney.

## **1980's**

Wayne Clausen, Werner Illenberger and friends explore sections of the Eastern Cape coast and kloofs in the Tsitsikamma area. Chris Jones contributes to exploring the Kouga, culminating in the Kouga Kop crossover.

Andrew Forsyth, Mike McKechnie, Alvin Wood and friends are at the forefront of rock-climbing, “The Final Cut” being opened in 1983.

## **1981 (June)**

Andrew Forsyth is selected as one of two South Africans sponsored to attend a course at the International School of Mountaineering in Switzerland.

## **1981 (August)**

Witte River purchase finally concluded — the fruit of patient work done by Ludwig Abel and Peter Heugh.

## **1982 (4th/12th April)**

An inter-section camp is organised. Fifteen attend including nine members of other Sections. Parties enjoy climbs in the Groendal and Cockscomb areas.

## **1982 (April)**

Gavin McLachlan and Tertius Coetzee walk from Port St Johns to Kei Mouth over nine days.

## **1986**

The Land Fund is established, following an initiative by Tertius Coetzee.

A newsletter is launched for the EP Section by Dave Thompson. It was first called “Beacon Snippets” and later “Cockscomb Chronicle”.

## **1987**

The historic old farmhouse in the Baviaanskloof, Doornkraal, is acquired on a five-year lease from Cape Nature Conservation. Renovations are led by Rudi Goossens and George McAll. It proves a convenient base for exploring the area.

## **1980's**

Raymond Packwood has proved (by doing it) that any Eastern Cape peak can be climbed in one day (sometimes rather long days!). Strydomsberg from Groendal and Formosa from the south vie for being the most difficult route.

## **1980's (late)**

Gavin McLachlan initiates exploration of the Grootrivierberge in the Steytlerville area.

Mike Roberts, Keith James, Alan Briers and friends take traditional climbing to new heights and introduce sports climbing. “The Legend” (trad) and “The Myth” (sport) on Mary & Martha are classic climbs on the national circuit. Of note is “Old Man’s Ecstasy” in the Cockscomb gorges and “Just a Memory” at Tierhoek. “Graceland”, “Wasteland” and “Smooth Chalker” are outstanding climbs at Grootrivier Poort.

## **1987 (1 October)**

The venue for the Thursday evening meetings is changed to the EP Veteran Car Club in Conyngham Rd. The new venue proves to be very popular.

## **1989 (March)**

The official opening of Doornkraal is attended by 86 people from around the country.

## **1990's (early)**

Caoimhin Ardren, Leonora Ferreira, Derek Rowles, Angus Bradford and friends explore many new kloofs in the Bavianskloof and Tsitsikamma areas, adding extensively to our kloofing repertoire. New rock areas are explored in the Tsitsikamma and Kammanassie ranges.

## **1990 (May)**

Gavin McLachlan and Peter Smith walk from Doornkraal Hut along the Bavianskloof over Scholtzberg and then across the Kouga mountains to Krakeel.

## **1991**

As part of the Centenary celebration of the Mountain Club of South Africa, the Eastern Province Section sends an expedition to climb the Ruwenzori's, led by Bert Bongers. The Eastern Province Section climbed 12 of the 100 peaks ascended nation-wide by all the Sections

of the MCSA on 11 May 1991. Four members participated in a national relay traverse of the Drakensberg escarpment from Rhodes in the Eastern Cape to the Northern Transvaal.

### **1991 (December)**

An inter-section camp was held at Groendal. About 30 people attend, and some parties enjoy getting lost in the mist.

### **1992 (April)**

Peter Smith and Werner Illenberger walk from Groendal along the Groot Winterhoek ridgeline to Doornkraal Hut over nine days.

### **1992 (September)**

The MCSA national dinner was hosted by the EP Section in Port Elizabeth.

### **1993 (February)**

Ludwig Abel steps down as President and Frank McLachlan is elected our new President.

### **1993 (April)**

An inter-section Easter Camp was based at Doornkraal. About 80 attend, and enjoy climbs in the eastern Baviaanskloof and Cockscomb areas.

### **1994 (December)**

The EP Section organised a Sport Climbing Wall at Kings Beach Amphitheatre and held a competition as part of the National Sport Climbing circuit.

### **1995 (August)**

Caoimhin Ardren is selected as one of five South Africans sponsored to attend a snow and ice meet in Switzerland.

### **1997 (28 March- 6 April)**

An inter-section Easter Camp is organised. About 90 attend, and enjoy climbs in the eastern Baviaanskloof area. Flood conditions add interest to events, but do not dampen spirits.

### **1997**

As part of the 100<sup>th</sup> MCSA Journal, the Eastern Province Section contributes articles on Protea atlasing and rock art in the Eastern Cape. Club members have made significant contributions in these fields in the Eastern Cape.

### **1998**

An expedition organised by the Eastern Province Section climbs peaks in South America.

### **1999**

The "South Cape Sub-Section" based in the Southern Cape of the EP Section is formed, headed up by Dave Jones. EP Section's web page is launched.

### **1999 (February)**

Frank McLachlan steps down as President and Cliff Hughes is elected our new President.

### **1990's (late) to 2001**

Activities and explorations in Kouga, Grahamstown and East London areas increase with active rock-climbers from these areas joining the EP Section and forming climbing groups. Keith James, Derek Marshall, Vincent and Bronwyn Egan, Steven Reed, Shannon Law, Jeremy

Colenso, Kevan Watkins and friends are involved. The Hogsback and Fort Fordyce areas become a sports climbing Mecca attracting adventure tourists from around the world.

### **2000 (October)**

A servitude is registered on the farm Hoeree, giving us access to Smutsberg in the southern Kouga Mountains.

### **2000-2001 (26 December - 2 January)**

Bergplaas in the Baviaanskloof was the venue for a National MCSA camp and for celebrating 50 Years of Mountaineering in the Eastern Cape. This camp was attended by 106 Mountain Club members from all over South Africa. There were a variety of hiking and kloofing trips from easy one- day to strenuous 4-day trips.

### **2001 (22 February)**

A social get-together was held to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the inaugural meeting of the Eastern Province Mountain Club. Founder members together with past and present members attended. Many stories were told relating to past events in the life of this Section. The evening ended with the traditional “Toast to the Mountains”.

### **2001 (3-4 March)**

The very first official outing of the newly formed Eastern Province Mountain Club took place on 3-4 March 1951 to Fern Kloof in Groendal. Present day members commemorated this event by repeating the outing, including getting slightly lost, as had happened 50 years previously.

*I trust that our club will continue to flourish and that we shall become a permanent asset to those who love our countryside and who feel a spiritual need which can be fulfilled only by close contact with it.*

- Desmond Polack, 1952 Chairman's Report,  
Eastern Province Mountain Club

This history was expanded from an initial diary compiled by Frank McLachlan covering the early days. Contributions were made by Caoimhin Ardren, Tertius Coetzee, Rudi Goossens, Arthur Harlow, Cliff Hughes, Chris Jones, Raymond Packwood, Dot Pitman, & Peter Smith. Final compilation was by Werner Illenberger. We have tried to concentrate on significant events; many more details can be found in MCSA journal articles of the past 50 years.

*PS: Of course we weren't the first mountaineers in the Eastern Cape. That honour belongs to the San people.*

*Furthermore, the first recorded events were way before our time: Formosa Peak was climbed about 1860, Strydomsberg was climbed in 1887, Cockscomb when?*

*And the first mountain club in the Eastern Cape was formed in Graaff Reinet in the 1940's. Unfortunately it didn't survive the test of time.*