

Southern Cape Fire Protection Association hosts Nelson Mandela University Veldfire Management students

By Avelile Cishe and Hannes van Zyl, Nelson Mandela University



Dirk Smit, manager of SCFPA, explaining firebreak preparation

The management of natural disasters such as veldfires are becoming increasingly complex. This increase in complexity is driven by factors like climate change and an ever-changing

socio-ecological environment. This poses a substantial risk to the wellbeing of affected communities and the functioning of ecosystems. An integrated approach where all role-players are engaged is needed

to manage these 'wicked' problems effectively. Training and educating students is a key element of this integrated approach, after all they are the decision makers, scientists, activists and practitioners that will have to navigate the uncertain waters of the managing our environment for a safe and sustainable future.



Dirk Smit, SCFPA; Hlobisile Madlala, NMU class representative, Japie Hendrikz, SCFPA

The Nelson Mandela University's Higher Certificate in Veldfire Management (HCVM) aims to give both existing fire management practitioners and young students a holistic understanding of veldfire management. This cannot be done without the kind assistance of industry partners such as the Southern Cape Fire Protection Association (SCFPA). The SCFPA hosted the HCVM students for a field day in Knysna to help the students understand how theory

meets practice. The main objective of the field excursion was to learn and observe some of the approaches to effective disaster management, specifically for veldfires in the urban interface zone.

The field day kicked off with a brilliant presentation on 'Wildland-Urban Interface: Wildfire prevention, protection and suppression' by Dirk Smit the manager of SCFPA's Eastern Region. A special thank you to the Knysna Angling Club for making their facilities available for this. This presentation led to a heated discussion amongst the students that mainly dealt with the necessity to integrate various stakeholders eg government agencies, general public, higher education institutions and the private sector in the management of veldfires.

The students were also treated to a demonstration from a Working on Fire crew. The crew gave an in depth talk on the various tools they use to suppress fires and manage invasive vegetation. They also explained the importance of effective communication and the line of authority when dealing with a fire incident. The correct use of PPE and the differences between structural and wildfire clothing were demonstrated. The crew ended their session with a fitness and drilling exhibition to the delight of the students.

At Margret's Viewpoint students learnt about the history of the area and the effects of the devastating fires of 2017. This included the impact on the critically endangered Knysna Sand Fynbos and the rehabilitation efforts needed in the area. The land adjoining the viewpoint is a good example of where a conservancy applied for firebreak exemption, Smit explained application process and the requirements for firebreak exemptions.

The final stop of the day was at the viewpoint above Brenton on Sea for a stimulating discussion on the legalities and complexity of firebreak construction and maintenance. The importance of ecological burning was illustrated by showing how Brenton on Sea was saved by the

ecological burn that was done shortly before the 2017 fire.

The University sincerely thanks the Dirk Smit and Japie Hendrikz of the SCFPA, Ian Bezuidenhout of the Knysna Fire and Rescue Services for their continued support.

For more information of the Higher Certificate in Veldfire Management contact:

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Thabo from Working on Fire during the demonstration

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