

The History of Thicket Forum

Thicket Forum
2011

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Keeping people on the land in living landscapes

You can't know where you're going
until you know where you're from

...so, where have we come from?



Thicket – The Lost Biome

- Acock's – 'transitional'
- CSIR Co-operative Scientific Programmes 1980s
- First Valley Bushveld / Subtropical Thicket Symposium – Grasslands Society (Zacharias et al. 1991)
- Recognised as a biome in 1996 (Low & Rebelo 1996)
- Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany hotspot confirmed 2005
- Historically under-researched - dense, spiny, hot & dry
- Dominates historically neglected provinces



The STEP Project

- 45% of solid thicket types severely transformed
- Declining returns on 'traditional' agriculture
- STEP Project 2001 – 2004
- Spatial prioritisation released 2003
- STEP Implementation Strategy launched 2003
- Thicket Forum established 2004



The Goals of Thicket Forum

- Promote conservation of thicket
- Encourage research into thicket
- Promote young environmental professionals
- Promote the STEP Implementation Strategy
- Complement the Eastern Cape Implementation Committee
- Social learning



Thicket Forum – The Events

- 2004 – Zuurberg, near Addo
- 2005 – Grahamstown
- 2006 – Döhne Agricultural Development Institute, Stutterheim
- 2007 – Rhodes University, Grahamstown,
- 2008 – Thomas Baines, Grahamstown
- 2009 – Assegai Trails, Grahamstown
- 2010 – Assegai Trails, Grahamstown
- 2011 – The Monument, Grahamstown



Thicket Forum – The Changing Focus

- 2004 – mainly academics, hosted by the STEP Project
- 2005 – Grahamstown
- 2006 – ‘knowledge-interfacing’, discussion-style format
- 2007 – Combined with Grasslands Society, improved stakeholder representation, first farm visit (Yendall’s)
- 2008 – GFRR carbon visit, biofuels/Meadery visit, first alien hack
- 2009 – Coega Nursery visit, second alien hack
- 2010 – Spekboom planting Crown River Safaris
- 2011 – Big attendance



Thicket Forum – The People

- 2004 – Andre Boshoff and Sharon Wilson
- 2005 to 2006 – Andrew Knight
- 2007 to 2010 – Gillian McGregor
- 2011 – Dieter van den Broeck and Mike Powell

Other influential individuals:

Richard Cowling, Lynn Phillips, Niels de Ridder,
Pieter Conradie, Suna Harmse, Abigail Kamineth,
Jonathan Pryor, Clayton Weatherall-Thomas, Zelda
Odendaal, etc...



Promoting Thicket Forum

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News & Views

Into the thick of it: bridging the research–implementation gap in the thicket biome through the Thicket Forum

Andrew T. Knight* and Richard M. Cowling*

WHILE OUTLINE THE EVOLUTION OF THE Thicket Forum as a social learning institution in the thicket biome; highlight recent research findings and future research directions, with a focus on new insights into how thickets function; and what has been done to conserve it. We also report on the outcomes of the forum's 2006 meeting.

South Africa's thicket biome is enigmatic; ecologists have long struggled to place this weird assemblage of spiny, evergreen shrubs and bulky succulents into any of the pre-existing biomes.¹ Only in 1996 was thicket recognized as a distinct biome.² It is characterized by a unique suite of plant forms: evergreen shrubs (predominantly), tall succulents (think of tree aloes and euphorbias), a wealth of climbers, and—intriguingly—very little grass. Thicket is most extensive in the southeast of the country, principally along the coastal parts of the Gouritz, Gamtoos, Sundays and Great Fish River valleys. It forms the western (Albany) sector of the Maputaland–Pondoland–Albany biodiversity 'hotspot', which is defined by the high incidence of endemic plants, those being mostly succulents and bulbs.

The difficulty encountered in placing thicket in an appropriate ecological context has made problematic the identification of a suitable institutional home for coordinating research. Thus, when the erstwhile, highly successful Co-operative Scientific Programmes of the CSIR were introduced in the early to mid-1980s, the question arose: where do we place thicket? Is it karoo? (perhaps, since it thrives where annual rainfall is less than 250 mm); savanna? (surely not, where are the grasses?); fynbos? (definitely not, it doesn't burn, and there are no rodents or protozoa; forest? (a Lilliputian one maybe, as John Acock aptly put it). By the late 1980s, ecologists were dissatisfied with inert, in-limbo status of it, and launched their own—arguing Nelson Mandela Metropolitan (now, Port Elizabeth) area, South Africa. E-mail: and@thicketforum.co.za

albeit informal—programme, and held a meeting in 1990 which yielded many important insights on the workings of thicket.³ Thereafter, as a result of the demise and decline in the early 1990s of organizations that spearheaded thicket research, the rate of accumulation of knowledge on thicket slowed markedly.

Save for the spirited initiatives by Graham Kerley and associates at the former University of Port Elizabeth, and some excellent work on indigenous plant use by Michelle Cocks from Rhodes University, thicket research languished for almost a decade. However, the focus on thicket was re-established in 2001, when the World Bank, through the Global Environment Facility (GEF), funded the Sub-tropical Thicket Ecosystem Planning (STEP) Project, specifically to raise awareness of the thicket biome's globally important status as a biodiversity 'hotspot', and of the rate at which the thicket biome was being transformed; it also aimed to lay a foundation for the implementation of nature conservation activities. This was

achieved by undertaking an innovative, systematic conservation assessment to identify priority conservation corridors,⁴ and developing STEP Implementation Strategy with land managers, government and academics.⁵ This strategy outlines the actions required to ensure the conservation and sustainable management of the thicket biome, and recommends the establishment of social learning institutions to facilitate the fusion of research and management through an adaptive approach, which meets the challenges posed by the ever-changing landscapes of the thicket biome.

The STEP Project, together with the GEF-funded Conservation Farming Project,⁶ has provided great impetus for learning more about thicket. We now have an expanded concept of thicket in southeastern South Africa that encompasses the mosaics that it forms with other biomes.⁷ We also have a hierarchical classification of thicket for this region that recognizes four major types (Dune Thicket, Moist Thicket, Valley Thicket, and Xeric Thicket), subdivided according to biogeographic locality and grain (solid or mosaic).⁸ We are beginning to appreciate that thicket, as we know it now, was part of an ancient global biome that preceded the rise of the fire-prone savannas, grasslands and sclerophyllous shrublands.⁹ Thus, our earlier concept of thicket as a relatively young vegetation type, comprising a mixture of species derived from adjacent biomes, appears to be erroneous; indeed, phylogenetic analyses suggest that the evolutionary age of thicket surpasses that of all adjacent biomes.⁸ We also now know—as had been



There is increasing evidence that thicket, such as this millwood (Sideroxylon thicket) dominated community, is ancient and once globally widespread biome, having developed as the response of an early Tertiary continental flora to pervasive drying and cooling, starting in the late Eocene, some 40 million years ago. Contemporary thicket has retained its xerophilous characteristics, even when growing under the wet climatic regime. Thus, Xeric Thicket, which grows where the annual rainfall is less than 300 mm, stores the same amount of carbon per hectare as the dense forests of Maputaland, arguably South Africa's most productive region. As a Mediterranean biome, thicket offers great potential for restoration aimed at carbon sequestration.

The STEP Strategy

- Knight et al. 2003

M-P-A Hotspot

- Mittermeier et al. 2005

Scientific articles

- Knight & Cowling 2007
- Shackleton et al. 2009
- Smith et al. 2009
- Knight et al. 2011

Website

- www.thicketforum.co.za



Why is Thicket Forum Important?

- ✓ Subtropical Thicket is in an internationally-recognised 'hotspot'
- ✓ TF is a truly stakeholder-driven initiative
- ✓ TF is non-partisan and non-aligned
- ✓ Members collectively possess vast expertise and experience
- ✓ Complements the ECIC
- ✓ Uniquely positioned to ensure persistence of thicket



...that's where we've been...

...so, where are we going?

