

University of the Third Age Plettenberg Bay

Newsletter April 2023

Dear Members

April was a month full of information-rich events, as reflected by the size of this newsletter. There was too much to share! For those who were unable to join us, perhaps the summaries below will compensate for not being able to be there.

Our outing to Sutherland was a huge success. Originally the number of participants was to be capped at 25, mainly because most of the Sutherland facilities cannot cope with more people. We ended up with a group of 34. Fitting in all of the people was at times a tight squeeze, both at the Sterland stargazing tour around the telescopes, as well as during the SALT tour. The Sutherland restaurants were also overbooked.

We had two excellent talks this month. David Hall-Green's fascinating presentation on the tragic shipwreck of the São Gonçalo off Robberg Beach was attended by 82 people. Bruce Noble and Gareth Greenwood spoke to us about sharks in Plettenberg Bay and finding sustainable solutions to protect both people and sharks. Over 90 people attended this talk. We used every chair in the building, as well as the garden chairs, and still did not have enough seating.

There are several points worth noting. First, our talks and outings are becoming attractive and we are receiving numerous thank you emails – for which we thank you. We need to highlight the people who make it all possible. Beth Hackland is responsible for organising all outings, which she does exceptionally well. Lynette Timme not only organises speakers and follows up on all of their requirements, but she also spends countless hours pre-viewing various documentary films to identify the best ones for our Monday morning viewings. Bugs is not a Plett u3a committee member but is employed by Formosa Garden Village. He always helps us immediately when we run into technical difficulties with the projector or sound equipment, especially during load-shedding periods. He is an electronic wizard. To each of you, and also to Formosa Garden Village for our use of your facilities and the supply of coffee and tea at all meetings, we would like to extend our deepest thanks.

The second observation regarding the past month's meeting attendances is that we seriously need to start looking for alternate and larger venues for some of our events. If you have any ideas in this regard please share them with us.

Best wishes
Plett u3a committee

Welcome

A warm welcome to our new members: Carol Risley, Philip Merton and Heather Kennedy.

Plett u3a events programme

The calendar of upcoming events is sent as a separate document together with the newsletter. The programme calendar covers the next two months. Overviews of future events are included in the calendar document. More detailed information regarding future talks and outings is sent to all members as 'Upcoming events' email notifications about two weeks prior to the event. A reminder is sent approximately 24 hours before the event.

Changes

The programme is subject to change. Currently these concern the viewing of documentary films on Monday mornings. It was decided that showing more than four episodes of a documentary series can be too much of a good thing. It seems that the more we show the less interest (some of) our members have in subsequent episodes.

Accordingly we will show only four episodes of the BBC's original (2001) Blue Planet documentary narrated by David Attenborough. After viewing the first episode on Monday 24 April the audience further decided that, instead of watching the first four episodes sequentially, they would rather cherry-pick the episodes they want to watch – hence the programme changes.

Outings

These need to be booked through u3aplett@gmail.com. Please note that due to the popularity of our outings that we need to stipulate that visitors for these events must be accompanied by at least one Plett u3a member. This is to avoid our having to turn away members trying to book for outings due to groups of non-members having taken up what would otherwise have been available spaces. We very much welcome visitors but our members do have priority.

Interest groups

Please see the programme calendar for more information. Don't forget that the inaugural meeting of the Poetry interest group will be held on the 11th of May.

Past activities

Monday 3 April: Norman Rockwell: an American portrait

Norman Rockwell (1894 – 1978) was a prolific and talented commercial illustrator, and probably America's most popular artist in the middle of the 20th century, painting over 300 covers for the weekly *Saturday Evening Post.* Many of his works, especially his magazine covers, appear overly sweet in the opinion of modern critics, as they tend toward idealistic or sentimentalised portrayals of American life. His was an America of soda-fountains, proms, mountainous Thanksgiving turkeys, of avuncular cops, twinkly grandpas, young love and long marriage.



This documentary shows Rockwell was a perceptive social commentator of exceptional artistic skill and narrative power. Rockwell appears to be a photo-realistic painter, but what he saw is never the same as what he made of it. For one thing, facial expressions are at their most extreme – squinting, sighing, beaming or frowning. His style is described as 'an exaggerated realism – real-looking people and situations but with a hint of caricature'. Rockwell's view of life excluded the sordid and ugly, he said, because: "I paint life as I would like it to be." He portrayed an idyllic life based on American virtues. His art is about making the American dream look real and selling the best possible version of America back to America.

Monday 17 April: Grupa MoCarta / The MozART Group

Grupa MoCarta, the MozART group, is a cabaret and comedy string quartet based in Warsaw, Poland, known for its unique approach to classical music. Their cabaret acts are very original, full of imagination and good music – and funny. The four musicians are extremely talented. In one of their shows Jaślar plays Georges Bizet's "Habanera" from *Carmen* while simultaneously playing the tune with left hand pizzicato, singing the soprano part, playing the rhythm with a ping pong ball on a paddle and balancing on one leg. Try that! The quartet has deservedly received prestigious prizes from several countries for their outstanding achievements.



Monday 24 April: Blue Planet – E1

'Our planet is a blue planet: over seventy percent of it is covered by the sea. The Pacific Ocean alone covers half the globe. You can fly across it non-stop for twelve hours and still see nothing more than a speck of land' (*David Attenborough).*

This original documentary series of 2001 is described as 'the first ever comprehensive series on the natural history of the world's oceans'. It took almost five years to make the series and involved nearly 200 filming locations. The underwater photography included creatures and behaviour that had previously never been filmed. Some of the animal behaviours were new to science, which resulted in scientists honouring the programme and recognising the documentary's contribution to promoting a wider understanding and awareness of the oceanic environment, by naming a newly-discovered species of phytoplankton (*Syracosphaera azureaplaneta)* in 2018.

The opening episode shows how ocean life is regulated around the globe by currents and the varying position of the sun. Near a Pacific seamount, there is a large concentration of marine animals, because when the current makes contact with the submerged rock it forces plankton and other organisms upwards. This in turn attracts other fish to the area that are higher up the food chain, like tuna, and those that are higher still, such as silky sharks.



Sunset over the Pacific Ocean from outer space

Off the coast of Natal in South Africa, a similar situation occurs every June during the sardine run, when huge congregations of predators, such as sharks and dolphins, feast on the migrating fish by corralling them into 'bait balls'. The South Atlantic waters are the roughest, and storms churn nutrients up to the surface. These feeding grounds support the world's largest albatross breeding colony on Steeple Jason Island, west of the Falklands.

Phytoplankton forms the basis of all sea life, and every night some 1,000 million tonnes of creatures ascend from the deep to search for food. Lunar phases affect marine life, as reflected in the mass arrival of Ridley sea turtles on a Costa Rican beach. Herrings represent the most productive food chain, providing sustenance for humpback whales, as well as Steller's and California sea lions. In addition, their eggs are nutrition for many, both above and in the sea. In Monterey Bay, orcas were documented attacking migrating gray whales and killing a calf. Special submersible were used to enable the crew to dive over a mile into the San Diego trench, where the carcass of a 40-ton gray whale was placed to attract a large variety of scavengers, among them hagfish and a sleeper shark.

Talks

Wednesday 12 April: David Hall-Green – The tragic fate of the São Gonçalo



In 1630 the Portuguese trading ship *São Gonçalo* was en-route back from India to Portugal carrying a cargo of pepper and Chinese porcelain, as well as an unknown number of slaves destined to be sold in Europe. It anchored in the bay near Robberg for repairs, when a huge storm claimed the ship as well as 150 of its crew. About 100 survivors managed to swim ashore and made the Piesang Valley their home for about eight months and built a church. From the remains of the São Gonçalo and timber supplied by the surrounding forest the sailors built two boats.

The sailors set out in two directions from Robberg - east and west. Those who set out for Lourenco Marques (a Portuguese colony) got a return voyage to Portugal. The seamen who went west were picked up at the Cape of Storms by a Portuguese fleet. Ironically they found themselves heading back to India for trading purposes. After spending many months there the sailors eventually returned to Portugal. Their ship was wrecked on a sandbar when entering Lisbon, but the sailors survived.

Remnants and their locations



The *São Gonçalo* padrão

Just before they left the Bay, the sailors erected a stone marker (padrão) on the shore. This was the first 'Plett beacon'. A fragment of the padrão was re-discovered in 1980. It bore the inscription (in Portuguese) 'Here was lost the ship *São Gonçalo* in the year 1630'. For unknown reasons the padrão was cemented onto a stone structure on the walkway between Robberg 5 and Sanctuary Beach, a fair distance from the sailors' camp site. The brass plaque was stolen years ago and the padrão support structure is crumbling , so most people do not know that they are looking at a very valuable piece of Plett's history that appears to have been abandoned.

Pieces of 'kraak' porcelain from the Ming dynasty and other remnants of the sailors' camp were found in the corner of Robberg Beach by the Jerling family when they started excavating for their house foundations there in 'Die Hoek van Robberg' in 1988. Some of these artefacts, together with two paintings of the *São Gonçalo* (one of which is above), can be viewed at the small museum located in the Plett municipal offices in Sewell Street. The late Patricia Storrar captured the tragedy of *São Gonçalo* in her book *Drama at Ponta Delgada* (1988).

The wreck on Robberg beach

The shipwreck you can barely see under water off the Robberg peninsula should not be confused with the *São Gonçalo*, of which nothing remains. *The Athina*, a Greek fishing trawler, on her way back to Greece, was unable to return via the Suez canal, due to the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. Unfamiliar with the Cape route the captain rounded Whale Rock too sharply and ripped the bottom of the ship out. He deliberately ran the ship aground to save his crew, all of whom survived.



The Athina shipwreck

Wednesday 26 April: Bruce Noble and Gareth Greenwood – Sharks in Plettenberg Bay

Both Bruce and Gareth are Plett residents and shark experts. Bruce is known to some of us as an estate agent and keen fisherman. Gareth is a marine biologist.

Bruce has been studying sharks, especially great whites, in Plettenberg Bay since 2004. Sharks travel through our area all year around, from east to west and vice versa. Another shark species, which can also be found in the Keurbooms lagoon, is the Bronze Whaler, is not considered to be an aggressive species. Great white sharks are infrequent summer visitors. They tend to arrive in Plett around mid-April and leave toward the end of October or November. Their destination is the breeding colony of Cape fur seals off the Robberg peninsula. Seal pups are born in December. The great white sharks' arrival coincides with the young, predator-naive seal pups entering the water for the first time. The seals defend their offspring and themselves vigorously, both by chasing and biting sharks if possible, which results in the sharks have only about a 5% hunting hit rate.

There were four regular great white shark visitors until 2019, when a juvenile joined them. Since then the group has since remained stable at five members, all of whom have been named by Bruce. The largest, a calm 5 m female, is named after his wife, Susie. Bruce regularly conducts shark counts in our coastal waters by helicopter. This specific group of great whites has specialised in hunting seals in the shallow waters of Robberg Beach, where they swim in, around and under the rocky ledges to catch their prey. As winter progresses and moves towards spring, the sharks appear to diffuse more into the bay, especially around Beacon Island, and can be seen anywhere from the Robberg Peninsula, along the beaches to Keurboomstrand and beyond.

Nobody knows precisely why great white sharks attack humans. The most popular theory is that they mistake swimmers and surfers as prey. In June and September 2022 Plettenberg Bay had two fatal shark attacks. At that time 11 unknown great white sharks arrived in Plettenberg Bay. Sharks can be territorial. It is possible that their aggression levels were high because of the foreign intruders in their territory resulting in unusual behaviour.

The Plett Shark Action Group (PSAG) was formed in August 2022 by representatives from Bitou Environmental Management, Plett Great White Shark Research, NSRI and other key role players to set up an early warning system of shark activity to inform beachgoers to ensure their in-water safety as far as possible. In October 2022 the PSAG invited Shark Spotters from Cape Town to join them in

finding sustainable solutions that would protect both people and sharks in Plettenberg Bay. Since then Plett has formed its own Shark Spotters group, which is headed by Gareth. We now have a total of 14 trained shark spotters, who use various technologies, such as cameras at high points, drones and a jet-ski app, to spot and track sharks. Each spotter is in teamed with the lifeguard along a specific stretch of beach, so that the spotter can notify the lifeguard of nearby sharks and the need to get swimmers and surfers out of the water. The shark spotters are not only dedicated to beach safety, but they also collect observation data for shark ecology research.



Great white shark cruising perilously close to unaware surfers in Plettenberg Bay. Drone image: Zach Berman



Great white shark hunting in shallow water below Robberg Nature Reserve

A number of other measures are still being investigated, such as the electronic shark nets currently being tested by the Natal Sharks Board. Other measures have been put into place. Signage under the theme "Be Ocean Smart" informs the public of various risks of the ocean, including shark activity. Different coloured flags on the beaches provide shark-related information. A green flag means it is safe to swim; black means it's dodgy due to the weather or turbulent water conditions – be cautious; white means sharks have been sighted and a red flag means there is high shark activity. An educational programme is being developed to increase the awareness and understanding of sharks and marine conservation. A pamphlet, specifically aimed at guesthouse owners and their guests, is available. Plettenberg Bay lives off its tourism industry and it is vitally important that we ensure that our visitors feel as safe as possible. However, it is up to each individual to be responsible for his or her own safety.

It is estimated that sharks kill 5-8 people in South Africa per year, whereas jellyfish account for 40 deaths p.a. All apex predators inspire fear in humans, which results in them being actively hunted and killed. Sharks face an especially grim future, as large numbers of sharks are killed inadvertently by the longline fishing industry. Sharks are also commercial fishing targets, as their fins, gills and meat are considered to be delicacies in some countries. Off the Natal coasts the shark nets kill 19 sharks each year. New threats to great white sharks are climate change and, in South Africa, the appearance of Port and Starboard, a pair of adult male orcas notable for preying on great white sharks off the Western Cape coast by tearing out their livers and leaving the rest of the carcass. After orca attacks great white sharks flee the area for at least seven weeks. If the current shark mortality rate continues it is estimated that great white sharks will be extinct by 2056.

We are extremely privileged to have sharks in Plettenberg Bay as apex predators are key to the health of an ecosystem, such as our marine environment. Robberg Nature Reserve provides a unique opportunity to watch great white sharks in complete safety while they hunt relatively close by.

PS. Gareth messaged us to say that he had a hectic day after this talk, as the great white sharks arrived that afternoon, so he had to rush around town getting notices up and the shark spotters back on their job.

Outings

18-20 April: Sutherland trip and visit to the South African Astronomical Observatory

History



Once you turn off the N1 onto the R354 near Matjiesfontein towards Sutherland you have 112 km to drive until you reach your destination. The strong winds explain the wind turbines on the ridges. (In case you also hadn't seen them before, the Roggeveld Wind Power Station began commercial operations in March 2022). As the scenery becomes progressively bleaker and more inhospitable it is difficult to understand what drove increasing numbers of farmers to settle in such a bleak environment. Their numbers grew to such an extent that Rev. Henry Sutherland, a Scottish minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, persuaded the owner of the farm De List to sell it to him in 1855 so that he could establish a church and market town to serve the area's sheep farmers. This meant that Rev. Sutherland no longer had to travel to the area once a year from Worcester to conduct church services.

Sutherland lies in the western Roggeveld Mountains in the Karoo. The mountains are named for the wild rye (Afrikaans 'rog'), which was once plentiful in the area, but overgrazing almost caused its extinction. Sutherland has two main claims to fame: the South African Astronomical Observatory 18 km out of town and also it is the coldest town in South Africa.

By 1872 the town had a population of 138 registered citizens living in 19 houses. Currently there are about 3000 inhabitants. While the town once had 14 doctors and no hospital it now has a hospital and no doctors. These, and other interesting facts, were shared with us by our guide Amanda Louw during our 2-hour historical walk through town, which probably covered all of the existing original houses. Many are built from the 'blue stone' quarried from the surrounding mountains. In almost all cases the original Cape Dutch architecture was 'Victorianised' to create a veranda covered with corrugated iron sheeting curved in various styles.



The Louw house and museum



Sutherland's first hospital building



The first school building

Wooden components, such as doors, floors and window frames, were supplied by Scandinavian countries, especially Sweden. Construction materials, including imported windows, were transported to Sutherland by ox wagon. Most of the notable houses have been restored and now function as guesthouses. The streets are exceptionally wide and only the main road is tarred. Standard Bank still operates out of the original semi-detached building, one half of which is still the home of the branch manager.

The large Dutch Reformed church in the centre of Sutherland was built in 1899. In 1901 it was used by the British army as a fort and barracks during the Anglo Boer war. Graffiti scribbled on the walls by British troops are still visible on the walls today.

Despite our walking around on a workday there was very little activity in the streets or buildings. The town seemed to be abandoned, as though the residents had all locked up their homes to attend some major function elsewhere. At least one of the houses (Prokureurshuis) is said to be haunted.



The Dutch Reformed Church

Stargazing

Our astronomical studies started with Jurg Wagener at Sterland where you are able to observe the skies outside through one of his six powerful telescopes, which are securely covered by rocket-like structures when not in use. 'Walls' of dried brushwood keep out some of the wind. Prior to the stargazing activities we were taken into a lecture room, offered sherry/coffee/tea and then given an introduction to the stars and constellations which we would shortly be seeing, using Stellarium, a digital planetarium system which provides a real-time virtual sky display.

Once outside, and before we used the telescopes, Jurg pointed out some of the more significant stars and planets using a laser beam, which ensured that we all definitely understood what we were looking at and we could see the most significant features of, for example, the Canis Minor and Canis Major constellations. The telescopes then allowed one to enjoy more detail, especially in the case of the jewel box of the Southern Cross.



Telescopes at Sterland Photo by Gill Reid

Jurg had to contend with two constraints: (1) clouds kept scudding across the features he wanted us to observe and (2) the Eskom load-shedding schedule, due to start at 10 pm, meant that the show needed to end before then so that we could get back to our lodgings in time. Despite these problems it was an informative and enjoyable night tour, which provided many of us with perhaps our first clear understanding of how big exactly some of the constellations (eg. Scorpius) are and what they look like in real life. Finally, Jurg pointed out a strong glow on the southern horizon: it was the light pollution from Cape Town, some 300 km away as the crow flies. The one regret was that there was not enough time to look at the sizeable display of palaeontological items in the lecture room.

SALT guided tour

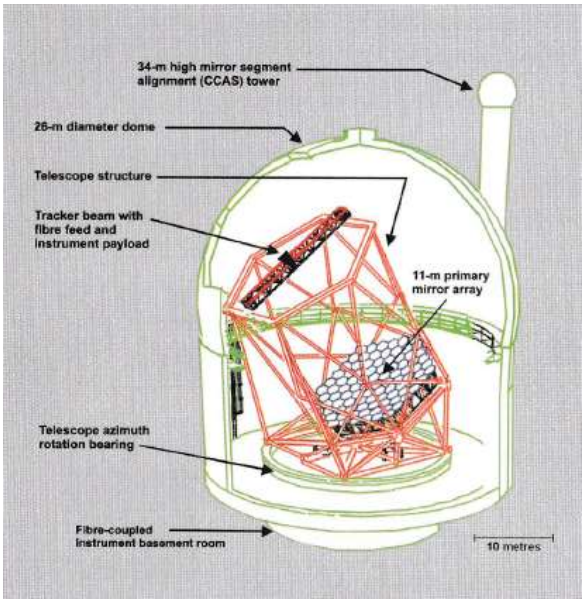
The South African Astronomical Observatory (SAAO) is the national facility for optical and infrared astronomy in South Africa. SAAO's history began with the founding of the Royal Observatory in the Cape of Good Hope in 1820. By the mid-20th century light and air pollution made it difficult to perform astronomical research in Cape Town. In 1974 it moved to Sutherland, together with the Radcliffe Observatory of Pretoria and the Republic Observatory of Johannesburg. Sutherland was chosen because of its reliably dark and clear - 80% of the year – nights (due to its remote location

and lack of light pollution) and its position between two major weather systems (fewer clouds) as well as its height, which means it is closer to the stars.

SALT is located on a hilltop 1 837 m above sea level on a barren plateau 18 km outside Sutherland, together with at least 17 other telescopes (the number keeps growing) which are owned and remotely operated by other countries, such as the UK, Japan, Germany, Korea, USA, Poland and other consortia. SAAO owns and operates four major telescopes: the Southern African Large Telescope (SALT), the 1.0m and 1.9m telescopes and Lesedi. These are all optical telescopes, which gather ultraviolet, infrared, and visible light from distant stars and galaxies.

Our tour began with introductory video viewings, after which we were allowed about ten minutes to look at all the information-rich displays. Again, there were many fascinating palaeontological displays for which there was no time. (The Karoo is a palaeontological wonderland. About 265 million years ago deposits of rivers draining into the shrinking inland Ecca sea entombed the remains of land animals that lived there.)





SALT Photo by Gill Reid

We then drove to SALT, which is modelled on the Hobby-Eberly Telescope (HET) in Fort Davis, Texas. Construction started in 2000 and it commenced operations in 2005. SALT is an optical telescope designed mainly for spectroscopy. It consists of 91 interchangeable hexagonal mirror segments, two of which are removed each week for polishing and re-surfacing to ensure maximum reflection. Each mirror segment is 1 metre wide and weighs about 100 kg. An optical wavefront sensor positioned in the tower is used to align all of the mirrors to an ideal spherical surface roughly once a week. SALT is able to record distant stars, galaxies and quasars a billion times too faint to be seen with the unaided eye – as faint as a candle flame at the distance of the moon. SALT allows astronomers to explore the scale and age of the universe, the earliest galaxies and quasars and the life and death of stars and planets orbiting other suns. SALT's researchers contributed to the international observations and recordings of the collision of two neutron stars in 2017.

After the SALT tour we visited the 1.0 telescope, which participates in the PLANET network (Probing Lensing Anomalies NETwork). This collaboration coordinates a network of telescopes to rapidly sample photometric measurements of the magnification of stars.



Planetarium 3D shows

The Sutherland Planetarium is located in the centre of Sutherland next to the church. We watched two 3D shows, 'Rising star' and 'SKA'. SKA (The Square Kilometre Array) is an intergovernmental international radio telescope project. In South Africa the core site is located at the Meerkat National Park near Carnarvon. Deploying thousands of radio telescopes over an area of one square kilometre in three unique configurations, SKA will enable astronomers to monitor the sky in unprecedented detail and survey the entire sky thousands of times faster than any system currently in existence.



The 'Rising star' film provides in-depth detail about our stars and galaxies, planets and other celestial objects. The planetarium's large dome-shaped ceiling is used as a screen onto which the films are projected. Fold-back seats are provided so that you can lie and try to take in the full 360 degree view. It's an amazing way of learning about the universe. It's also a must-see immersive experience. One minute you are whooshing in the sky above the SALT observatory, the next you are hurtling ever deeper and faster into space, past stars and galaxies and narrowly avoiding huge asteroids hurtling towards you. It's a great way to visualize astronomy in an astonishing manner.

Departure

When we arrived in Sutherland the temperature was 34^{o} C. On the morning of our departure we woke to an ominous thunder-like rumbling, which turned out to be the wind whirling roof-high clouds of leaves and dust down the roads. Fine icy drops out of a seemingly blue sky blasted us whilst packing the car. As we drove out of Sutherland the temperature was 9^{o}C and we were greeted by a magnificent rainbow against a blue sky, which soon became obliterated by clouds that reduced visibility to less than 15 metres at times. A memorable trip.



Committee		
Chair	Jan Hough	084-674-4235
Vice Chair	Lorna van der Merwe	082-784-9903
Secretary	Beth Hackland	072-266-1821
Facebook	Beth Hackland	072-266-1821
Finance & DVD library	Ian Hogan	083-261-5861
Marketing & communications	Felicity (Flick) Grube	082-557-7779
Membership	Peter Grube	083-381-5929
Newsletter	Felicity (Flick) Grube	082-557-7779
Outings	Beth Hackland	072-266-1821
Programme coordinator	Lynette Timme	079-313-9641
Special interest groups		
Bridge for beginners	Chrissy Hay	083-648-0306
Computer basics	Peter Grube	083-381-5929
Poetry group	Chrissy Hay	083-648-0306
Science group	Henry Timme	078-877-5829
French conversation (full)	Merle Decot	
General enquiries	u3aplett@gmail.com	