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# WALEAF CHALLENGES GDRM

by Melissa Dalton

## KEEPING AN EYE ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL PRIZE!

The environmental watchdog WALEAF (Wilderness and Lakes Environmental Action Forum) is currently focused on a proposed high-density exclusive development on Erf 1297 in Kleinkranz. WALEAF has been battling with the Garden Route District Municipality since June 2022 to get the relevant information and documentation with respect to the tender process and the ninety-nine-year lease agreement development plans.

In addition, we believe the George Municipality has been stalling regarding providing information on the current zoning of the property, which is under question. The WALEAF committee is currently engaging with environmental lawyers in respect of the above. It will continue to ensure the best conservation and environmental outcome for this important piece of property. It is for the benefit of all living in Wilderness that we are aware, remain informed and keep an eye on ongoing activities that have the potential to undermine the natural beauty and sense of place that Wilderness offers. These two

primary attractions that pull us to come and live in the Wilderness area are the very attractions that will be threatened if left unchecked and a blind eye turned.

Five residents started WALEAF in 2002 as an "environmental watchdog" in response to a proposed residential development in the Lakes Area, Wilderness - the Eco Lakes Resort and Golfing Estate. The objections by the group acting under the banner of WALEAF came in the context of the numerous golfing estates being approved by the George Municipality at the time and in recognition of the hugely detrimental impacts on the natural environment associated with these massive developments in the Garden Route, particularly in the Greater Wilderness, an area especially noticeable for its rich biodiversity and the presence of a large variety of bird, insect and wildlife.

The outcome of WALEAF's efforts to prevent the Eco Lakes development was a successful one. Since then, they have continued to monitor activities as an Independent and Affected Party (I&AP) in the Greater Wilderness region by commenting on land use

applications, OSCA applications and any illegal BUILDING activities posing a threat to the natural environment that are brought to their attention.

Why is there a need for an environmental watchdog? It is important for Wilderness for numerous reasons:

- No one else is enforcing environmental rights as enshrined in the Bill of Rights in the Constitution (Act No.108 of 1996).
- Unchecked and rapid development over the past 15 years in the Greater Wilderness area is a continual threat to the Afromontane forest and fynbos biome and the high level of biodiversity associated with it.
- Ongoing approvals of property boundary relaxations and subdivisions are leading to higher population densities resulting in an increased loss of biodiversity in the area. As houses with big walls and solid fences are erected, they block the free and safe passage of wildlife in the area.
- A lack of enforcement of town planning and environmental legislation by George Municipality and its town planning department to ensure sustainable development and legal building activities.

• Left unattended, there will be accumulated losses of forest and fynbos to development eradication with every approved development ... a thousand little cuts!

## SUCCESS STORIES

While most of our comments and objections regarding activities in the area geared towards promoting sustainable development and ensuring adherence to environmental and building legislation fall through the cracks, WALEAF has made some headway over the years.

While our ongoing efforts to protect are overridden/thwarted/ ignored and our input often overruled, they have not been in vain. Over the years, there have been several successful attempts.

- A wall was built illegally in Wilderness Heights, preventing the free passage of wildlife, especially tortoises, across the area. It took two years of pressure from WALEAF to declare the height of the wall illegal and GM to tell the owner to lower the height of the wall.
- A Tree Offset policy has been established in collaboration with the Environmental Department and DFFE to address the accumulated loss of protected indigenous trees in Wilderness.

waleaf@langvlei.co.za