

1 December 2016

To the members of the board: Buffelskloof Nature Reserve

Usage of Buffelskloof facilities by the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences, University of Pretoria

I have been asked by John Burrows to write a letter outlining UP's Department of Plant and Soil Sciences' usage of the facilities at Buffelskloof, with particular focus on the implications of potential increases in accommodation and other costs to our visits.

I have had the privilege of annually taking the ecology honours student group (app. 4-6 students) to Buffelskloof since 2013, when I started lecturing at UP. We have gained a large deal from these visits. Due to the variety of habitats and vegetation types on the reserve, the high diversity of plants and also the facilities available on the reserve (accommodation arrangements, herbarium, meeting venues, wifi), Buffelskloof has been an excellent location to hold our field course. Another major drawing point has been John's assistance, knowledge and passion for the flora of the area (and beyond). Not only has John helped us a great deal with practical arrangements, but his passion is contagious – after every visit, students are newly inspired.

The nature of our visits to Buffelskloof is two-fold. First, we take an honours class to Buffelskloof on an annual basis. This trip is paid for by the department. It is one of very few field trips that still happen in the department. Several excursions that have had to be reduced already. For example, we have made our one-day field trip for second-years, at a location app. 70 km from Pretoria (duration = 1 day), voluntary to reduce the number of visitors to save money on the trip. In addition, the third-year plant ecology student have only one one-day excursion to a location in Pretoria for which we ask students to use their own transport. Therefore, our honours excursion to Buffelskloof is by far the most expensive of the excursions. The majority of the costs for this excursion go towards transport costs to Buffelskloof: travelling to Buffelskloof is a significant distance, and the need to take a 4x4 to get around on the farm means that if we are a group of six or more we always have to travel with two cars, rather than one large car. I would like to point out that my assessment of the financial constraints for our field courses does not take recent political developments in South Africa into account. These have resulted in additional cost-cutting at the university for 2017. These political developments are leading to further cost-cutting actions that are likely to limit funds available for teaching-related support such as field excursions. Therefore, if the costs of a stay at Buffelskloof were to increase significantly we would probably not be able to continue our honours excursions to the reserve.

We also visit Buffelskloof as part of a research programme I am running. We started this project in 2016 and a total of three or four visits were conducted this year. For research activities we apply for research funding. The consequences of significant fee increases in the immediate future would mean that I did not budget for such increases and my project might be compromised because the costs associated with visits

to Buffelskloof would be higher than budgeted for. In contrast, the long-term consequences might be less severe. If accommodation costs were to increase significantly, one could budget for these when applying for funding. That being said, many funding sources have limits in the amount of funding for which one can apply. Therefore, in some cases alternative and cheaper study sites might be explored. One thing that would make long-term field work in Buffelskloof more feasible would be if an alternative funding model for accommodation that offers rates comparable to renting a flat for a month in a city during longer-term visits (e.g. R3 500 per month). In such circumstances a significant increase in accommodation costs would be more bearable.

Finally, I was asked to comment on a proposed model that would involve paying for John's assistance/guidance in the field. As eluded to above, the department would not be able to pay for such services for honours excursions. For research projects, whether we are allowed to budget for consulting services will depend on the funding source. However, realistically, funding is usually quite tight, so that I would usually prioritize a piece of equipment or travel expenses over such services. Therefore, in some cases we would be able to pay for such services, in others (probably most) not.

I realise that the experiences we have been getting at Buffelskloof have been a form of "charity" – we have received much more than we paid for. Because of the excellent facilities at Buffelskloof, its habitat and species diversity and the excellent input we receive from John during our visits, I would like to say that we would continue our visits to the facility should the costs of the use of the facilities significantly increase. In reality, budgetary constraints would probably mean that we would have to seek alternative/closer venues for many/most of our field activities at Buffelskloof.

Best wishes,



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