



MEDIA RELEASE

OBITUARY: Dr Roelof van der Merwe

Johannesburg, 24 December 2015: South Africa's conservation community is mourning the loss of one of its most generous but modest and unassuming benefactors, Dr Roelof van der Merwe.

Van der Merwe, a member of the private Charl van der Merwe Trust named after his late father that has donated tens of millions of rands to biodiversity conservation projects over more than a decade – especially those involving seabirds and other marine life – died unexpectedly in his sleep at his home in Waterkloof, Pretoria, on the early hours of Wednesday morning (23 December). He was 57.

The evening before his death, van der Merwe had sent a festive season email message to his friends and acquaintances, urging them to greater conservation efforts in the coming year. "Christmas time in 2015 seems to be rather more gloomy and ominous than in previous years. World-wide there are danger signs flashing and I think, of great concern to all of us, the threat to the natural environment is also growing," he wrote. "However, I am not despondent because I know the calibre of the recipients of this message and I am confident that we will all continue the fight to preserve our natural heritage."

Committing his family's continued support, through the Trust, for conservation efforts, he added: "If you are not already heavily committed to nature conservation we urge you to join the battle to preserve the last wild places and species on Earth. We have no time to lose!"

A shocked Mark Anderson, chief executive officer of BirdLife South Africa, said shortly before van der Merwe's untimely death they had been discussing ways of challenging the government's highly controversial decision to open the Tsitsikamma Marine Protected Area (MPA) to recreational fishing this month.

"Roelof was an unsung conservation hero who did not want praise and recognition. He was a passionate conservationist and deeply committed to efforts to conserve penguins, other seabirds, and the marine environment," Anderson said.

Van der Merwe and his family trust had generously donated huge sums of money to BirdLife South Africa's seabird conservation work, including sponsoring the organisation's Coastal Seabird Conservation Manager position, he added. The Trust was also "Species Champion" for the endangered African Penguin in BirdLife International's Preventing Extinction Programme,

and supported WWF-SA's marine conservation work and EWT's raptor conservation work in the eastern Karoo, as well as conservation work on the Southern Ground Hornbill.

BirdLife South Africa would now do its best to ensure that the threat to the Tsitsikamma MPA was averted as a tribute to van der Merwe's commitment and passion, Anderson said.

Dr Morné du Plessis, chief executive officer of WWF-SA, described van der Merwe's passing as "a massive loss for conservation in South Africa" and particularly for the marine conservation sector. "The Trust funded many important marine conservation projects, but perhaps none as important as that related to the ultimate establishment of Africa's first offshore MPA, the 180,000km² Prince Edward Island Marine Protected Area that was approximately the combined size of the Free State, Lesotho and Swaziland," he pointed out.

Dr Ross Wanless, BirdLife South Africa's Seabird Conservation Programme Manager, described van der Merwe as "a very special individual" and said he had been "really passionate" about marine conservation and BirdLife's marine programmes. "Seabirds were his entry into marine conservation and, like his father who had seen all 22 penguin species world-wide, he was obsessive about the penguin. And as a well-educated scientist himself, he really understood the scientific approach and rationale that BirdLife uses. Many funders want big, quick results and are not that interested in the science, but he understood that good science in order to implement effective conservation action takes time and he was in for the long-term," Wanless said.

Patricia Zurita, chief executive officer of BirdLife International, stated "Roelof was a very committed supporter of BirdLife International's work both in South Africa and through our work around the world. Not only did his family trust contribute significantly, as a Species Champion, to the conservation of the African Penguin, but he continuously found ways of supporting BirdLife's work to improve the status of threatened birds and their natural environment. The entire BirdLife family is deeply saddened by the news of Roelof's passing but is committed to continue with his legacy of love to birds and nature".

The Trust's support for marine work in particular had been extremely carefully chosen, and projects that they funded – like BirdLife South Africa's penguin work and WWF-SA's marine Programme – were among the most influential of all non-government-driven initiatives in shaping fishing, consumer awareness and broad marine conservation work, Wanless added. Since 2002, the Trust has donated more than US\$250,000 (R38 million at today's exchange rate) to BirdLife South Africa's seabird conservation work.

Van der Merwe died a few weeks after another international conservation figure whom he had met and admired: 72-year-old Doug Tompkins, founder of the North Face and Esprit clothing brands and with his wife Kris founders of the Conservation Land Trust, the Patagonian Land Trust, and the Foundation for Deep Ecology. Van der Merwe, on behalf of the Charl van der Merwe Trust, and Tompkins, who died after a kayaking accident in the Patagonia region of southern Chile on December 8, had both received BirdLife International Conservation Achievement Awards in Ottawa in 2013. They were among seven recipients acknowledged for making an "exceptional contribution" to BirdLife International's mission, programmes and conservation priorities.

Van der Merwe trained as a geologist and was on the staff of the Geology Department at the University of Pretoria before taking early retirement to manage the Trust and pursue his

passions of conservation, travel and wildlife photography. However, he remained an Extraordinary Lecturer in the department

An accomplished birder and photographer, he travelled widely in pursuit of his passion, including several times to Antarctica. His favourite poet was Pablo Neruda, aka the Chilean poet-diplomat and politician Ricardo Eliécer Neftalí Reyes Basoalto.

Van der Merwe is survived by his wife Willene, step-daughters Rachelle and Nini, sister Elizabeth van der Merwe (Betsie), and elderly mother Miems.

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Obituary prepared by John Yeld and Mark D. Anderson.

Notes for the editor:

1. Photo caption: Dr Roelof van der Merwe received a prestigious BirdLife International Conservation Achievement Award from HH Princess Takamado, Honorary President of BirdLife International, in Ottawa in June 2013.
2. More information is available from Mark D. Anderson, at ceo@birdlife.org.za or 082-7880961.
3. BirdLife South Africa strives to conserve birds, their habitats and biodiversity through scientifically-based programmes, through supporting the sustainable and equitable use of natural resources and through encouraging people to enjoy and value nature
4. BirdLife South Africa is one of 120 BirdLife Partners, a network of bird conservation organisations around the world.
5. BirdLife South Africa is the largest non-profit bird conservation organization in the country.
6. BirdLife South Africa contact details: Isdell House, 17 Hume Road (cnr Hume Road/Jan Smuts Drive), Dunkeld West 2196, Gauteng; Private Bag X5000, Parklands 2121, Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa; Tel. +27-11-7891122, Fax. +27-11-7895188, e-mail address: info@birdlife.org.za, website: www.birdlife.org.za