

WESSA launches LEAF programme for schools

WESSA has launched a new environmental education programme for schools called LEAF (Learning About Forests). The international programme encourages learners and communities to take ownership of creating healthy surroundings by engaging with their local forests and planting indigenous trees. Learners on the programme also plant food and fruit forests (vegetable gardens and fruit trees) as outdoor classrooms, to support existing structures in schools and communities.



The programme was launched earlier this month at the Pretoria National Botanical Gardens with the introduction of the #OurForestsAreOurFuture campaign to a number of teachers, learners, local government representatives, nurseries, other NGOs and the Gauteng Environmental Education Forum. The campaign is a joint initiative of the WESSA LEAF programme and Johannesburg-based NGO School Forest Project, who will supply one hundred trees to the ten schools from Eersterus, Mamelodi and Tshwane East participating in the LEAF programme in 2018. SANBI will provide all children from these schools with free access to the garden for the duration of the project.

Important role of forests

Speaking at the event, special guest and 50/50 presenter Bertus Louw said that 40% of South Africa's forests have been destroyed and that a programme like LEAF can make a big difference in rebuilding a biome that is crucial to our survival. The learners were entertained and inspired by Louw's stories of the different forests he has visited across the globe, where he has seen the important role forests play: from providing us with basic furniture and creating outdoor shaded spaces for enjoyment, to protecting us from natural phenomena such as tsunamis.

Participants at the launch had the opportunity to engage in several different activities in the indigenous forest of the Pretoria National Botanical Garden. These included a demonstration of the process of planting trees endemic to the Pretoria area from seeds; investigating quadrants of the forests to determine their biodiversity using technology, science and maths; and taking a closer look through magnifying glasses at the special adaptations of leaves. At the medicinal plant section of the gardens, the teachers told the learners about the plants their parents used to cure certain ailments, and highlighted the important role plants still play in the medicinal field today.

Project-based learning

Says WESSA LEAF programme manager Cindy-Lee Cloete: "Any school can register to participate on the LEAF programme and it therefore has the potential to reach 12.5-million learners and 125,000 teachers across South Africa. The

strength of the programme is in its project-based learning, and the Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) approach to learning about forests. The programme helps learners, teachers and communities identify practical solutions for local and global issues, enabling them to make decisions and take ownership and responsibility for their future. This is real learning today for the real world tomorrow.”

Schools participating on the LEAF programme can select to explore a variety of LEAF themes and aspects based on the needs of their own school and community. Learners will have the opportunity to reconnect with their natural surroundings through hands-on activities and forest excursions, and will be inspired to use, appreciate and protect our forests as they explore the relationship between our everyday lives and our natural and social environment.

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