Bead lanyards create work for locals in need

The colourful bead lanyards Wildfire Conference delegates were given for their name badges were made especially by a group of disadvantaged and HIV+ men and women at a job-creation centre in Cape Town.

The 15 crafters are based at African Hope Crafts in Fish Hoek, on the southern Cape Peninsula, and all live in the nearby community of Masiphumelele. The craft centre is run by American missionaries Bill and Anne Eames who moved to South Africa more than six years ago with the sole purpose of creating opportunities for the country's most vulnerable people.

"The Wildfire Conference was a big project for us," says Anne, "it created enough beading to give the whole group an extra half a day of work over six weeks."

The lanyard has seed beads and two hand-rolled, clay beads bearing the conference logo strung on its nylon rope. It is designed so that it can be used as a sunglasses strap after the conference.

CRAFTING A LIVELIHOOD: *Masiphumelele shack dwellers are part of an uplifting project.*

The crafters who made the lanyards work an average of 10 hours a week and are paid per item they produce, says Anne. Each worker is also given a hot meal during the shift along with spiritual and emotional support.

Crafter Veliswa Qubekile, a single mother to her six-month old son Endinako, originally hails from a village near Umtata in the Eastern Cape and says she is working for her child.

"This job lets me spend time with my baby and make enough money to buy food to eat."

Beading has always been part of her life because, in Xhosa culture, it is used for traditional purposes, says Veliswa.

Crafter Avuyise Lumani and her husband, Benjamin, a security guard, and their five-year-old daughter, Leyonela, come from East London and live in a shack in Masiphumelele.

"We came to Cape Town for work but it's not an easy life living in a shack especially in the winter with the rain," she says. Her goal is to learn to drive and to get business management skills so that she can open a business in the Eastern Cape one day.

Anne and Bill Eames, who run the project, are missionaries from the Kensington Community Church in Troy, Michigan.

Bill is a retired engineer and is currently also supervising the building of two homes for orphans in Masiphumelele.

Co-ordinated response to wildfires essential - or havoc will result

Strategies to prevent wildland fire are often fragmented, unco-ordinated and inconsistent, yet climate change means these fires will get bigger and more dangerous in coming decades.

A team of researchers from Mediterranean countries presented a paper at the Wildfire Conference this week pointing out that better communication and co-operation between policy makers, fire fighters, farmers and property owners was essential or wildland fire will wreak havoc in the furure.

Researcher Ana Sebastián-López, and others, introduced delegates to the European Union's Firesmart project which aims to connect communities involved in forest fire prevention.

The main tool of the initiative is a Firesmart website (http://www.firesmart-project.eu) but other activities such as international and local technical workshops as well as personal interviews are also organised.

In their paper the team presented preliminary findings into obstacles preventing the effectiveness of fire fighting measures in four local areas.

Their paper also recommends ways to integrate prevention practices into regular forest management plans.

The areas they researched included the Pinhal Interior Norte region in central Portugal, Valencia in Eastern Spain, south-eastern France, in the metropolitan area between Aix-en-Provence and Marseille, and the Cagliari Province in south-eastern Sardinia. All these areas suffer from regular uncontrolled wildland fires.

They concluded that climate change meant that fire danger, fire occurrence, the length of the fire season, and annual areas burnt are all going to increase. Warmer and drier conditions, especially in areas such as the Mediterranean, are expected to increase the frequency, duration and intensity of fires, and greater amounts of fuel in unmanaged forests will cause more and wilder fires.

The researchers quoted an earlier paper that says the most severe portion of the fire season may shift to later in the summer, resulting in potentially greater fire occurrence. In addition the burnt area is expected to increase by as much as 80% over the next 100 years due to the projected climate warming.

Thanks to the exhibitors

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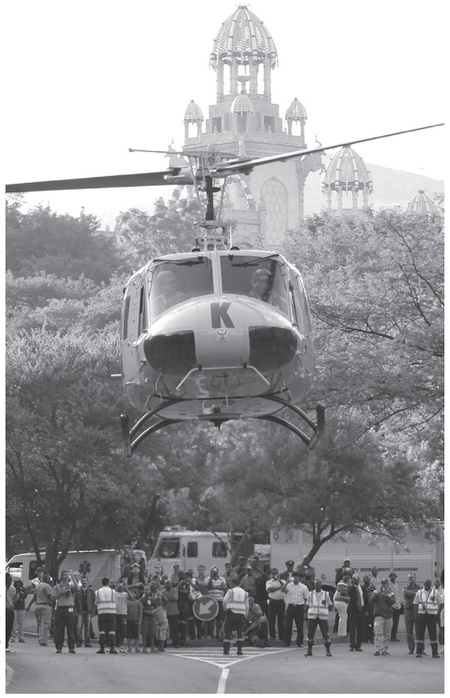

Photography by Bruce Sutherland

HUERAY: *Crowds gasped as a Huey helicopter lifted into the air outside Sun City yesterday evening in a spectacular display of precision flying. The chopper was flown to the Pilanesberg Game Reserve airfield in preparation for the field day to be hosted for delegates today.*

Field day promises a visual feast

by Graham Barlow

After two days of theory, insight and analysis in the conference rooms, today's activities take delegates to the reality of wildfire fighting in Southern Africa: the field day in Pilanesberg Park.

The programme of activities starts at 08h00 with air displays and ground-training exercises. The afternoon's highlights feature demonstrations and prescribed burns, including block burns and an Air Ignition Technique exercise.

The Harvard Display Team kick off the morning with an aerial extravaganza at 09h00 which will be followed by a skydiving demonstration.

Chris de Bruno Austin, joint MD of FFA Operations who is overseeing the fire fighting display, says that 600 tons of fuel are being utilised, and ideal weather conditions are expected for the burns. Cessna spotter planes, Dromader fixed wing bombers, Huey helicopters and eight highly trained Working on Fire ground teams will be operating in tandem under the control of an Incident Commander to demonstrate the effectiveness of joint ground and aerial wildfire suppression.

NOSE: *Hello Huey*

Of course such an intense burn could adversely affect the vegetation of the operational area. To mitigate against this the area was closely examined to ensure the flames would not cause any ecological damage. Obviously the demonstration will be stringently monitored to prevent any untoward problems. The demonstrations promise to give delegates an unparalleled opportunity to observe the efficiency of aerial fire suppression techniques.

Delegates can visit an exhibition of the fire fighting aircraft at the Pilanesberg airport during the course of the day, and meet with the fifteen pilots.

Working on Fire, South Africa's wildland fire fighting job creation programme, is holding a training camp about 19km from Sun City. Delegates will be taken to visit this facility between 09h15 and 11h30 to witness the training methods being used to prepare fire fighters for the fire season starting 1 June 2011. The training includes a physical fitness programme, practical fire fighting exercises, fire safety and survival lectures. The teams will parade at 11h00 – a wonderful example of the discipline that is a vital part of their training.

The day's activities culminate with a boma braai (barbeque), a traditional South African meal with lashings of hospitality and great food.

Buses will leave from the conference foyer for the training camp from 07h30.

We must look after what we have

By Carol Campbell

"We do not have forests to burn, we do not have extra land or water or fishing stocks to waste, we must nurture what we have and create more where these have been destroyed," Duncan Hindle, special advisor to South Africa's minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, told the Wildfire Conference yesterday.

Hindle was speaking on behalf of the country's Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries minister, Tina Joemat-Pettersson who had been scheduled to address the conference.

Over the week discussion has focused on the impact of climate change which is emerging as the most pressing issue facing wildland fire fighters across the globe.

"Climate change is already affecting us in a myriad of ways," Hindle said, "and it's going to get worse before it gets better with wildfire one of the consequences."

Surface air temperature had warmed significantly since the 1950s which was having a direct impact on wildfire. "Climate change is the greatest threat to the sustainable development of our country and will undermine our ability to achieve the Millennium Goals," he said.

Later this year, Durban will host COP 17, the United Nations Framework Convention on climate change.

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Climate change and wildfire – an inflammatory mix

One subject guaranteed to generate interest and controversy at a wildfire conference is the effect of climate change on wildfires. Delegates attending a session chaired by Bill de Groot had their attention focussed on this contentious issue by four hard-hitting presentations.

VICIOUS CYCLE: *Mike Flannigan, the cycle continues*

Adapting to climate change has generated considerable research during the past decade, and the presentations in this session concentrated on both the technical and social aspects of the phenomenon, with an emphasis on the potential effects on international wildfire activity.

Mike Flannigan, of the Canadian Forest Service of Natural Resources, set the scene by discussing the interactions between wildfire and climate change. He presented some disturbing statistics, not the least of which was a statistic that between 350 and 450 million hectares burn globally each year. Some 90% of these devastating fires are started by humans.

Of particular concern to many delegates from countries in the southern hemisphere was the revelation that 70% of these occurrences are in lands below the equator. These fires feed into a vicious cycle, because, as Flannigan pointed out, they release large volumes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. (For example, wildfires in Indonesia generated 700 million tons of CO^2 during 1997-1998 alone.) Higher volumes of carbon dioxide result in general warming. And the higher the temperature, the greater the number of wildfires.

Flannigan's scenario model predicts a potential average annual temperature increase of between 1.6 and a staggering 6 degrees C by the end of this century. With every percentage increase in temperature, a 10% increase in precipitation is required to offset this climatic change. Unfortunately, the rainfall graph is also dropping, and this leads to another potentially catastrophic consequence – an increase in fuel loads. Higher temperatures, lower rainfall, increased wildfire/urban interfaces and enormous increases in fuel loads are a recipe for mega-fires, as Jerry Williams pointed out in an earlier presentation.

The presentations of Guido van der Werf of the University of Amsterdam, Johan Goldammer of GFMC Germany, and Cristina Montiel-Molina, Universidad Aotonoma de Madrid, all added to the concerns voiced by Flannigan. Without exception all four presenters made it clear that this cycle could be controlled, even if reversing the effects was impossible. Control would be dependent on authorities monitoring causative factors, sharing research and systems, and, when possible, taking rectifying action. The trick, they argued, was to motivate the international community to heed the warnings of the experts.

UK fires old as time

by Michael Bruce

The perception that wildfires do not occur in the United Kingdom and that they are a new event, is untrue. Large areas of moorland (rangeland) have been managed with fire by private landowners for hundreds if not thousands of years. The landowners do the burning to improve the habitat for red grouse, a famous hunting bird ... and brand of whisky!

The earliest legislation to regulate muirburn, the traditional term for prescribed burning, was by an act of the Scottish parliament in 1424. The common phrase "as fast as a wildfire" has its equivalent in Scots of "which spread like a moor burne". The first recorded use of this term was in 1716!

The private sector are also heavily involved in the current efforts to suppress wildfires in the UK. It is the landowner, affected by a fire, who generally pays for helicopter support. Moorland owners also often provide experienced staff and specialist all-terrain vehicles and fire fogging pumps. These fire fogging systems, developed over the last 30 years, have the same fire suppression productivity as smaller helicopter based systems.

Landowners, farmers, foresters, gamekeepers and other land agency staff have developed partnerships – wildfire groups – with fire and rescue services to share resources at wildfires. The longest established wildfire groups were first developed in high risk areas. This spring everywhere was a high fire risk area in the UK and big fires broke out in regions normally considered very wet!

There is now an active drive supported by private sector trade associations, the Forestry Commission, the Scottish Wildfire Forum (www.scottishwildfireforum.org.uk) and Fire and Rescue Services to establish more temporary wildfire groups using existing land management organisations as the base. In an era of public sector budget cuts those with the assets at risk may have to do more to protect their own and society's interests – the private sector has a role in fire management.

Spectacular Friday flypast and parade finale not to be missed

by Graham Barlow

Friday's finale, to be held outside the conference centre, promises to provide a fitting climax to the 2011 Wildfire Conference. The terrain lends itself to the visual spectacle that promises to bring the event to a magnificent conclusion. Delegates will have a grandstand view.

The scene will be set by the arrival of the largest South African flag in the world: it will literally drop in on proceedings in the hands of eight skydivers.

This will be followed by an aerial display when the Flying Lion's Aerobatic Team in their Harvards wing their stuff. The Harvard is an iconic aircraft used for many years by air forces around the world – including the SAAF.

Fifteen Working on Fire aircraft – bombers, spotters and helicopters – will then perform a flypast; a unique opportunity to see the unmistakeable yellow flying machines en masse.

This aerial spectacle heralds the arrival of the Working on Fire ground teams for their post training camp passing-out parade. This, too, sets a record, comprising as it does the largest number of fire fighters at a single parade in the history of Working on Fire. The winning teams will receive due accolades, and then the massed teams will raise many a lump in the throat when they sing selected songs plus the National Anthem to close proceedings.

If you missed anything during this incredible conference, make sure it is not this wonderful display.

NOTICEBOARD

Thanks a million!

Suppliers who worked tirelessly to make the Wildfire Conference a success have been singled out by Conference Incident Commander Louis Buys for their commitment.

"I know everyone involved has worked very hard, but I believe special mention must be made of Sindy-Ann Esterhuizen from Workwear Depot (Pty) Ltd in Nelspruit. Conference organisers placed late orders with the company for 2 000 cricket hats, conference shirts and for the printing of logos on 2 000 backpacks for delegates.

"There was much fancy footwork required to meet our extremely short deadlines. Sindy- Ann gave us excellent service, commitment and delivered on time," he said.

He also complimented IT specialists PC Logic for their work in keeping the conference "connected", especially Darrell Cleaver and Kobus van der Merwe. Kudos also went to Marius Smit of Ristar for printing and Craig Hilligan for radio contact communications.

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Layout and Design TW design: contact: Tamzon 083 635 9919 Website: www.twdesign.co.za

Foresters tell why they light up the trees

by Carol Campbell

A South African forestry company, working with the support of an Australian partner, is using low intensity fire in the summer rainfall season to lessen fuel-loads in pine plantations and has already shown the technique can slow and even stop uncontrolled wildfire.

Ben Bothma, Fire Risk Manager for Komatiland Forests, and Mike Cantelo from the Department of Environment and Conservation in Western Australia, told the Wildfire Conference yesterday that by using regular controlled fire burning of a third of the fuel load under trees the intensity of wildfires could be dramatically decreased.

"Our biggest risk is that a fire becomes so big and hot that it gets into the plantation canopy because then there is no stopping it," said Bothma.

This happened in 1994 and again in 2007 when thousands of hectares of plantation were destroyed by wildfire and several people, including fire fighters, were killed.

After the 1994 fires Bothma approached Cantelo for support in the controlled burning of fuel loads.

"It is a huge paradigm shift for a forester to set his plantation alight," said Bothma.

> "The only way we can control wildfire is by reducing fuel loads"

Cantelo was on hand to provide expertise as the pine bed under the trees was ignited, first using manual ignition and in later burns, aerial ignition. In the 2007 fire it was only the 500 hectares of trees in the Spitskop plantation, where Bothma and Cantelo's experiment was underway, that survived the inferno.

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Dr Ben du Toit, from the University of Stellenbosch, the winelands town near Cape Town, is monitoring the health of the trees following the controlled burns.

"The only way we can control wildfire is by reducing fuel loads and it is essential that we do this," said Cantelo.

PLANTED: *Pupils from Mperebere Primary School near Sun City plants much needed shade seedlings on their playground. Helping the children are the partners of delegates attending the Wildfire Conference.*

Unique partnership in Australia proves how fire can be an eco friend to all involved

by Carol Campbell

A partnership between a remote Aboriginal community and Australian authorities in the northern part of that country has provided a novel illustration of how fire can be used to maintain a sustainable eco-system and transfer traditional knowledge to future generations.

In a keynote speech, ecologist Jeremy Russell-Smith outlined details of the Western Arnhem Land Fire Abatement project. This initiative resulted when the Jawoyn Association (a regional Indigenous representative organisation) asked the Northern Territory's rural fire management agency, Bushfires NT, to assist traditional land-owners with fire management problems in south-western Arnhem Land. The project dates back to the mid-1990s.

The initiative was so successful that it was used by Darwin Liqufied Natural Gas Pty Ltd (a subsidiary of ConocoPhillips), to partly offset the company's greenhouse gas emissions from one of its facilities.

It was also awarded Australia's prestigious "Eureka Award" for Innovative Solutions to Climate Change.

In a keynote presentation about the use of fire in South Africa's Pilanesberg Game Reserve, Bruce Brockett from the North West Province's Parks and Tourism Board, described the fire history of the reserve since it was declared a park in 1979.

"The final approach, from 2000 to 2010, has been a laissez-faire adaptive interference fire management approach," he said.

Under this policy prescribed fires were still ignited. From 2000 to 2005 some of these were point-ignitions but these did not spread mainly because of incorrect fuel load and curing, or fire weather conditions.

"More recently perimeter ignitions have been used with small blocks selected for burning. The area burnt by prescribed fires was lower than that for arson and lightning-ignited fires," he explained.

Brockett went on to say that a shift in the fire regime to more frequent and hotter fires accompanied by increased CO^2 emissions had caused increased grass productivity.

Sayings from Africa

"No matter how long a log stays in the water it doesn't become a crocodile."

"A visitor is a guest for two days, on the third day give him a hoe."