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SOUTH AFRICA

biodiversity | food sovereignty | agroecology | social justice

bulletin

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Going beyond practice: Biowatch's first online agroecology course

COVID restrictions, especially those placed on groups and gatherings, have forced a number of different ways of being and doing. One of the innovations at Biowatch over the past year has been the design, development and implementation of an online agroecology course for change-makers and leaders in civil society.

Going beyond practice, this nine-module online course was a deep-dive into why and how we can conceptualise the food system through agroecology. Participants were invited to interactively learn how agroecology builds resilience, diversity, food and seed sovereignty, connections and systems, and secures rights.

Fifty-five participants from South Africa, Lesotho and eSwatini were selected to join the first course run over five weeks October–November last year. As leaders and change-makers committed to catalysing change in their sectors and communities, participants embraced the learning experience designed to:

- Improve general literacy around agroecology.
- Change the discourse around agriculture, food production and the food system, and debunk the myths of the industrialised food system.
- Spread agroecology beyond practice.
- Build relationships with and between potentially allied CSOs and change-makers.



- Inspire and support the transition to agroecology.
- Build a community of learning on agroecology that can support participants as they advocate for the transition to agroecology in their sphere of influence.

Joining Biowatch's own team were presenters from around the world, each an expert in their field. This highly skilled and experienced team ensured course outcomes included an understanding of the challenges in the current industrialised food system and why we need the urgent transition to agroecology; what agroecology is (and what it is not); an insight into agroecological principles and theory of practice; and steps towards building a balanced, equitable food system through agroecology.

We will be running more courses in 2022 – please subscribe to the Biowatch mailing list for announcements. You can sign up on our website: www.biowatch.org.za



Our latest publication is Biowatch Briefing on farmer-led seed systems and securing food sovereignty



in the face of looming ecological and social crises.

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The next *AE Qalisa!* introduction to agroecology practices training for new farmers will take place



in northern KwaZulu-Natal, from 14–17 February.

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From the director

Welcome to 2022 and to a year of agroecology!

We're entering the new year feeling more positive about the COVID-19 pandemic – increased vaccination rates, continued social distancing and masking, and the prevalent Omicron variant all translate to fewer deaths in South Africa as we exit the fourth wave.

We've been blessed with good rains in the eastern part of the country – but good quickly turns to crisis if there is too much rain and if ecosystems are not intact. So many reminders about focusing on the bigger picture.

In 2021 we loved running the online AE course – a demanding and exhilarating process. The nine-module online course was spread over five weeks with participants from across the country and beyond. Biowatch was transformed into “mini-studios” (with tidy offices in front of the camera's eye!). Adding to presentations by Biowatch staff were wonderful presentations by guest presenters from South Africa and across the continent.

We also so enjoyed being part of the November UCT/SKI workshop on the up-coming Seed and Knowledge Justice book (due out later this year) as well as contributing to the many on-line national conversations on the food system.

We're looking forward to building on our highlights from 2021 (some are detailed in this newsletter) as well as working with our SKI (Seed and Knowledge Initiative) partners on farmers' rights in relation to seed.

We look forward to 2022 – it's not that we are not cognisant of the unrelenting extractivism (mining, large-scale monoculture agriculture, gas ...), but we take hope in the nature of our work and the power of ordinary people (see “Hell no!” article opposite) and that there seems to be some respite from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Wishing all our readers the very best for 2022 as together we journey towards environmental and social justice.

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Hell no!

Amazon Warrior, the deceptively named ship that was to undertake a five-month seismic blasting survey off the Wild Coast of South Africa, has quietly departed from the country's waters. This was following December 2021 protests throughout the country against Shell and its proposed seismic survey in an area that is characterised by extraordinary biodiversity, livelihoods and history.

The protests were coupled to two brave court interdicts: the first unsuccessful, but now on appeal; the second by Sustaining the Wild Coast (SWC) and several other communities successful in interdicting Shell from undertaking seismic survey operations until it has obtained environmental authorisation under the National Environmental Management Act. The “Biowatch case”^{*} was cited in the second interdict.

While this is a defeat for Shell on the Wild Coast, other international companies are waiting in line to carry out seismic testing on both our East and West coasts. The fight is far from over.

^{*} To find out more about the “Biowatch case”, a landmark victory in the Constitutional court which clarifies that public interest litigants acting in good faith will not have to fear that costs will be awarded against them, see www.biowatch.org.za/the-biowatch-case/

New publication

Our latest publication is a Biowatch Briefing on farmer-led seed systems – securing food sovereignty in the face of looming ecological and social crises. Farmer-led seed systems can and do make a critical contribution in responding to current global ecological and social threats through adaptation to climate change, enhancing agricultural biodiversity, strengthening food security and sovereignty, increasing dietary diversity, and recognising and honouring indigenous knowledge and the key roles of women. For more information and free download visit our website at www.biowatch.org.za/download/farmer-led-seed-systems/



(Right) Participants learning a number of agroecology practices during an AE Qalisa! (agroecology now!) hands on training.

The very popular introduction to agroecology course is run by the Biowatch Mtubatuba team with support from agroecology farmer demonstrators who share their vast experience with new farmers keen to learn how they can grow healthy, nutritious food while looking after the soil.

The next AE Qalisa! training will take place in KwaHhohho, near Mtubatuba in northern KwaZulu-Natal, from 14–17 February. Please email samu@biowatch.org.za for details.



Young farmers growing agroecology

Young farmers who attended Biowatch's AE Qalisa! trainings and Come and See events in 2021 are already implementing agroecology practices in their gardens and fields, and teaching these practices to family members and neighbours.

During recent after-training follow ups, the Biowatch Mtubatuba team noted that at least 45 farmers from Madwaleni, Jozini, Masibumbane-Mkuze, Mbazwana, Richmond and Amanzimtoti have stopped using chemicals and pesticides and are successfully transitioning to agroecology. They are already producing impressive yields and have improved their household food security. They are also saving as they no longer need to buy inputs or chemicals.

Agroecology is spreading rapidly in these communities, thanks to the enthusiasm of these young farmers, and to the evidence they proudly share when anyone asks "What are you doing differently?"



Biowatch's Good Food Conversations is a podcast about "good food" and a food system that can nourish our bodies and our lives, as well as the web of life we share our gardens, fields and waters with. Recent conversations include:

- *Mvu Ngcoya talks to us about what Cuba can teach South Africa about achieving food sovereignty by shifting from large-scale industrial farms to small-scale agroecology farms. Mvu is an Associate Professor at the UKZN School of Built Environment and Development Studies, an agroecology farmer, and a Biowatch Trustee.*
- *Elizabeth Mpofu, a founding member of the African Women's Collaborative for Healthy Food Systems and the previous General Co-ordinator of La Via Campesina (until July 2021), and Nelson Mudzingwa, the National Co-ordinator of the Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers' Forum (ZimSOFF), talk to us about food-growing knowledge proven by farmers to produce nutritious food while caring for the natural resources that make this possible.*
- *Thombithini Ndwandwe, an agroecology farmer in northern KwaZulu-Natal tells us about the seed and knowledge that she received from her elders, and which she is passing on to her children.*



Representatives from the four South African SKI partners (left to right): Stephen Heyns (rapporteur), Jaci Van Niekerk and Rachel Wynberg, (UCT), Sheila Berry (EarthLore), Vanessa Black (Biowatch), Lindy Morrison (SKI team manager), Method Gundidza (EarthLore), John Nzira (Ukuvuna) and Rose Williams (Biowatch).

SKI South Africa partner meeting

In November 2021, Biowatch was part of a two-day Seed and Knowledge Initiative (SKI) South Africa partner meeting with the three other South Africa partners – EarthLore, Ukuvuna and the University of Cape Town. We felt privileged to be part of a face-to-face meeting as these have been so few during the COVID pandemic – such meetings are extremely productive and treasured! It was an opportunity to get up to speed with the range of work that all four partners are doing, to hear where each of us thought our “greatest contributions to the field of agroecology” were, to identify new areas for collaboration and in particular, to deliberate on our contribution towards the long term future of SKI.

We look forward to joining the other 11 SKI Partners from Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe at the end of January for a consolidated planning meeting.

WHAT'S COMING UP?

- Regional SKI Partners meeting in Johannesburg: 31 January – 4 February
- Biowatch *AE Qalisa!* training: 14–18 February
- KZN Agroecology Platform meeting: 23–25 March

Biowatch Bulletin will keep you updated. If you would like to join our mailing list, please sign up at www.biowatch.org.za or e-mail your details to info@biowatch.org.za

No to corporate food systems!

The Autonomous People's Response to the UN Food Systems Summit (UN FSS) escalated between the pre-summit counter mobilisation in July and the social media storm on the day of the Summit on 23 September 2021. Globally, collectives and organisations published statements and held independent events illustrating the food system we want. Many of these have been collated on the “Food Systems 4 People” web portal (www.foodsystems4people.org/resources-2/).

Biowatch participated in developing an African response to the Summit (www.biowatch.org.za/africa-responds-to-the-un-food-systems-summit/) and the process to critique the African Union's Common Position to the FSS, developed without civil society and which adopted many of the corporate driven FSS narratives including calling for climate-smart agriculture, biotechnology, biofortification of foods, digitalisation and the increased industrialisation of African food systems. Biowatch was among 1006 signatories to a political declaration saying “No to corporate food systems. Yes, to Food Sovereignty” (www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Declaration-EN-2.pdf).

As predicted, the Summit has resulted in a myriad of action tracks to be implemented through voluntary public-private coalitions. The impact of these in co-opting our narratives, redirecting funding and other impacts including on legitimate and accountable policy spaces will need careful monitoring and critique going forward.

