

SONTULI ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION CAMP

PROJECT UPDATE – OCTOBER 2025



Situated along the Black iMfolozi River in the Hluhluwe–iMfolozi Park, the Sontuli Environmental Education Centre (Sontuli) provides an inspiring setting for environmental learning and community engagement.

Originally built in 2014 as an education camp, Sontuli's infrastructure had deteriorated over time and was no longer fit for purpose. ECOStudy has undertaken a comprehensive renovation to modernise the facilities, meet current safety and environmental standards, and ensure full accessibility – creating a world-class environmental education centre that inspires and educates future generations..

After months of careful planning and design, construction began on 15 July 2025. Given that the Centre is located within a protected area every stage of the project has been developed in close consultation with Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, ensuring compliance with environmental regulations and minimising ecological impact

Because of its remote, off-grid location, the new facility is designed to be self-sufficient, featuring sustainable power and water systems to support long-term operations. Renovations will be completed by December 2025, with the first participants scheduled to arrive in February 2026.

Fence Line and Security Gates



The first priority was to secure the site, as the existing fence was damaged and ineffective. We approached **Mike Speirs** of the **Conrite Group**, who generously donated both the materials and the full installation of a new, secure perimeter fence system. **Roy Greenwood** was tasked with implementing this daunting job, for which we are extremely grateful.

Members of the local communities were employed to clear the fence line, and installation was completed in June 2025.

The double-fence system consists of an inner fence (left-hand side in the image below) designed to keep the children safely within the area and away from the electrified perimeter fence, and an outer electrified fence (right-hand side) to deter both wild animals and unauthorised individuals from entering. A four-metre passageway between the two fences allows for clear visibility and effective monitoring of any potential intrusions. The area is kept free of vegetation to serve as a firebreak.

Our sincere thanks to the **Conrite Group, Stafix, Nemtek Electric Fence Products, the Hendok Group and Afrimat Limited** for their exceptional generosity and support in securing this vital infrastructure.



Water Supply

The next critical requirement was a reliable water supply. We had been relying on the generosity of Ezemvelo to fill our tanks using their water tanker. We are very appreciative of the Ezemvelo team for their support and willingness to accommodate us within their already demanding water delivery schedule.

We enlisted the help of **Mike Boucher**, a local water diviner, who identified a promising underground water source approximately 300 metres along the road from the camp. Situated at the pin identified with GPS coordinates in the image below.



Richard Duckworth drilled at the indicated spot and struck water at a depth of 110 metres.

Gabriel Reddy of **Inkhulu Plastics** donated the pipe to connect the borehole with the water tanks.

We were fortunate to discover a strong and reliable flow, more than sufficient to meet the Centre's water requirements. However, due to the high fluoride and salt content, the water requires treatment.





To address this need, **Styger Kruger, Clinton Saunders** and the team at **Green Chain Group** have designed a custom purification and wastewater treatment system that ensures all water meets health and safety standards.

Green Chain are specialists in sustainable off-grid water solutions and have designed a dual-container system that purifies potable water and treats wastewater for reuse. Treated greywater is directed to toilets, garden taps, and fire hoses, while potable water is supplied separately to kitchens, showers, and basins. The system minimises water loss to below 20%, conserving resources and protecting the surrounding ecosystem.



Our sincere thanks to **Container World** for their generous donation of the two containers needed to house the water treatment system, and especially to **Sandy Watt** for facilitating this contribution.

We would like to thank the following companies for offering substantial discounts on their products:

WET Technologies – Rodgers Makari – discount on filtration system

Water Components SA – Allan Ross-Watt – discount on water treatment system

Elsumo Pumps – Ross Heiberg and Gerhard Bosman – discount on the water pumps



Design and development

While site establishment was underway, **Elserie Pretorius of TCRPV Architects** finalised the refurbishment and layout design. The aim was to create a space that is functional, sustainable, and visually inspiring – a setting where learning feels alive and connected to nature.

The renovations to the Centre include:

- Extending and upgrading the kitchen to cater for 120 people per meal
- Installing a roof over the amphitheatre, ensuring it can be used even in the hottest conditions
- Replacing all existing roofs with structures strong enough to support solar panels
- Constructing a new, hygienic ablution block to replace the old unsanitary facilities – BOXA
- New staff accommodation, including a communal lounge – BOXA
- Adding a guard house and secure entrance gate – BOXA
- Establishing a fully equipped workshop – BOXA
- Installing a reliable power supply system
- Developing a sustainable water supply and filtration system
- Creating covered pathways and parking bays
- Paving the driveway and parking areas



The professional team of

- Architects – **TCRPV** (Philip Thornhill & Elserie Pretorius)
- Quantity Surveyors – **MHS Consulting** (Mark Seymour & Bevan Naidoo)
- Engineers – **Ark Engineering** (Leon van Zyl)
- New Buildings – **BOXA Possibilities & Sustainabuild** (Anthony Lewis & Angus Fleming)
- Solar Power System – **Energenic/Tekton** (Walter Mullins & Melissa Mussett)
- Water Purification Plant – **Green Chain Group** (Styger Kruger & Clinton Saunders)
- Main Contractor – **F. Verbaan Construction** (Grant Verbaan, Grant Fenton & Chris Sevastides)

The project team has been exceptional in their understanding of the project's unique requirements and in tackling the challenges associated with working in a remote, off-grid environment.

Their dedication, professionalism, and collaborative spirit have been instrumental to the project's progress. We are especially grateful to **TCRPV Architects** and **MHS Consulting**, who have significantly reduced their professional fees, as well as to the wider team who have offered discounted rates and continued support to help make the Sontuli refurbishment a success. We would also like to thank **Chris Sevastides** of Verbaan for his invaluable help in introducing us to suppliers and assisting with securing donated and discounted materials.



Ezemvelo Involvement and Support

At every stage of the project, the **Ezemvelo Park Management Team and Park Ecologist** have played an active role, ensuring that all activities comply fully with the regulations governing operations within a protected area. Ezemvelo's support has been invaluable, and we are deeply grateful for their unwavering commitment to the project. They have successfully navigated challenges, provided guidance, and ensured that the project progresses smoothly.

Our special thanks to the entire team including:

Sihle Mkhize (CEO), **Vuyiswa Radebe** (Head Biodiversity Conservation Operations), **Amos Tembe** (Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park Manager), **Senzo Menyuka** (iMfolozi Park Manager), **Sphe Mbongwa** (Park Ecologist), **Sibonelo Zulu, Hlengiwe Nzuza and Dennis Kelly** (Section Rangers), **Jetros Mthiyane and Snothile Gama** (Community Conservation), **Sam Mtshali** (Mpila Camp Manager), **Ncamsile Khumalo** (Trails Manager), **Mrs Makhathini** (Centenary Centre Manager) and the many support staff whose assistance has been invaluable.

Donor Support

To fund the refurbishment of Sontuli, we have approached a broad network of donors, partners, and suppliers for both financial contributions and in-kind support. The response has been extraordinary, with many individuals and organisations contributing materials, equipment, professional services, and funding to bring this vision to life.

We are deeply grateful for the remarkable generosity, belief, and commitment shown by all who have supported the redevelopment of Sontuli.

The **Ken Collins Charity Trust**, **The Inglis Family Trust**, and **Colin and Mark van Heerden of Truda Foods** were the first to offer financial backing, soon followed by **Jeremy Carr of Access World** and **Andrew Dunn of DNi**. Their early confidence and willingness to open their networks to us laid the foundation for ECOSTudy's success, and we remain profoundly thankful for their support.

Additional financial contributions have been received from **JT Ross Charitable Trust**, **Raj Balmakhun of Newlyn Investments**, **Chris Seabrooke of Sabvest Finance & Guarantee Corporation**, and **JP Coppez of FR Waring**, each playing a vital role in sustaining the project's momentum.



We also owe a huge thanks to the **Stellantis Motor Corporation** who have supported us from the outset with the use of a **Peugeot Landtrek**.

This is a truly awesome vehicle and we would not be where we are today without wheels!

A special thank you to **Michael Whitfield** and **Deidre du Plessis** for their ongoing support.





We also extend special thanks to **Jason Burke of ARB Electrical Wholesalers**, whose exceptional generosity has made a remarkable impact. ARB has donated all **410 solar panels** required to power the photovoltaic energy system, as well as given or discounted all light fittings, switches, cables, and wiring – an extraordinary contribution that has significantly reduced project costs and ensured the Centre’s long-term sustainability.

Simply BATHROOMS

and plumbing suppliers

Scott Paget has kindly donated all the sanware for the Centre.

His incredible generosity has ensured that the facilities are fully equipped with products of the highest standard.



Construction Progress

Building commenced on the 15th July 2025 with the major works due to be completed by 19 December 2025.

Verbaan Construction began with the demolition of the old structures, including the thatched A-frame huts and the ablution block. The process was carried out with great care to ensure that all reusable materials were salvaged. These materials have been handed over to Ezemvelo for use within the Park or for donation to local communities, ensuring that nothing of value goes to waste and that the project continues to benefit the surrounding area.



Work soon started on the extension of the kitchen, and the new staff and guest washrooms.



We gratefully acknowledge the following companies for their contributions to the **kitchen build**:

ARB Electrical – Jason Burke – donated and discounted all electrical components

NWT Tiling – Craig Starling and Stanton Hulley – have donated all the tiles. A special thanks to **Janina van Zyl** who has worked closely with Elserie on the tile selection and procurement.

TAL – have donated all the tile adhesives.

Paragone Aluminium – Jose da Costa – servicing of all the windows free-of-charge

Ascot Site Solutions – Rhett Bellamy designed the kitchen free-of-charge and donated equipment

GB Refrigeration Services – Graham Berman donated the walk-in fridge and freezer room

Just Refrigeration – donated the under-counter fridges

Simply Bathrooms – Scott Paget – donation of sanware for kitchen and washrooms

Contract Hardware – Shawn Emmett – has donated the ironmongery

Richmond Plumbing – Chris Bezuidenhout – discount on plumbing supplies

Hi Tech and Roofco – Ajay Bodall and Ismith Akoo – discounted the roof sheeting and installation

Alugant Gutters – Leon Grobler – discounted all the gutters and downpipes

BBC Catering – supplied equipment at cost price

Build-it Ulundi – discount on building materials

Brasco – Kane Herbert – discount of the extraction system over the cooking area





The kitchen is now at roof height and the new roof will soon be on.



The amphitheatre provides an ideal space for performances, discussions, and outdoor learning. However, the lack of a roof has often limited its use due to extreme heat or inclement weather — on particularly hot days, even the concrete seating becomes too hot to sit on. To make the space more functional throughout the year, we are installing a full roof over the entire area.

Our sincere thanks go to **Macsteel**, for generously donating the steel required for the wide-span structure, and to **Palram**, for their significant discount on the roof sheeting. Their support has made this important enhancement possible.



MACSTEEL
Pursuing Reinvention



BOXA Rapid-build Units

The new buildings have been constructed using innovative **BOXA** rapid-build units, expertly erected by **Sustainabuild**.

These units are purposefully designed to minimise environmental impact and maximise efficiency. Manufactured off-site from sustainably sourced timber, they are assembled on-site without the need for concrete or water.



Elevated on steel support rods driven into the soil, the structures minimise ground disturbance while maintaining stability. Each precision-engineered wood panel is pre-fitted with electrical and plumbing infrastructure, ensuring quick assembly and consistent, high-quality workmanship.

Close collaboration with **Anthony Lewis, Angus Fleming, St John Townshend** and **Wesley Mantle** has been key to refining the design to meet Sontuli's unique operational and environmental needs. Their expertise, patience, and commitment to the project have been invaluable, and we are sincerely grateful for their support.

Manufacturing of the units began earlier in the year, with the first truckload arriving on-site on 13 August 2025. The installation process was remarkably efficient, a testament to the precision and sustainability of the BOXA system.

The following companies have been extremely generous in their donations and discounts reducing the cost of building the BOXA units.

ARB Electrical – kindly donated and discounted all the electrical requirements – wiring, switches, lights, fans etc required in the buildings.

Merensky Timbers – **Johan de Graaf** donated a significant amount of the saligna wood required to make the panels.

Simply Bathrooms – **Scott Paget** has donated the sanware for all the bathrooms and ablution block

Contract Hardware – **Shawn Emmett** – has donated the ironmongery

Harscan – **Malcolm Harris** donated all the water piping

Natal Associated Agencies – **Richard du Plooy** donated and offered a significant discount on the special paints required for these buildings.

Alugant – **Leon Grobler** discounted the gutters and down pipes for all the buildings.

Belgotex – have donated the special vinyl and installation of the flooring for the new ablution block



MERENSKY

Simply
BATHROOMS
and plumbing suppliers

CONTRACT
HARDWARE



harscan
Fluid thinking

Natal
Associated
Agencies



ALUGANT
SEAMLESS ALUMINIUM GUTTERS

Belgotex®

The following sequence of photographs follows the installation of the BOXA buildings, over a period of **ten days**:







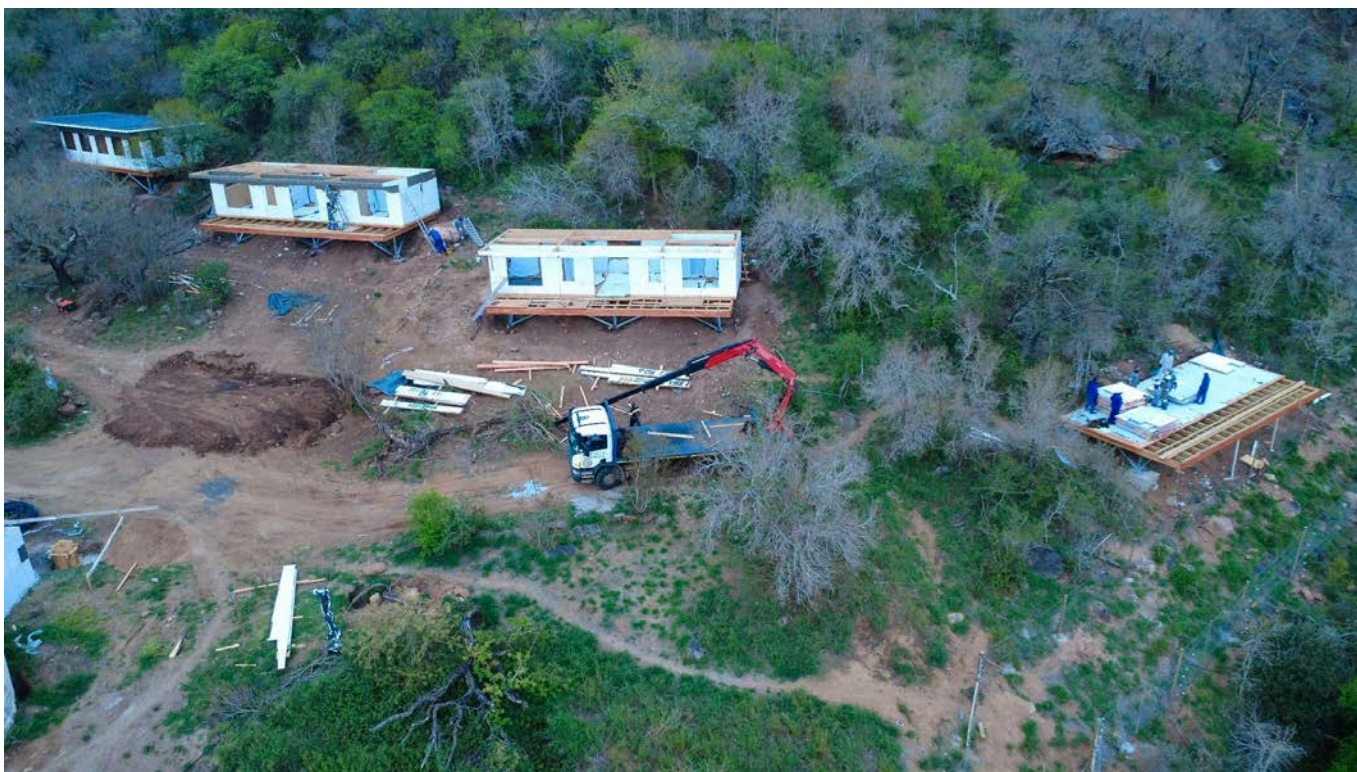
The interior of a staff bedroom. Each member of staff will have their own bedroom and bathroom



A semi-completed unit. It still needs another coat of paint, the deck and stairs.



10 October 2025 – The staff accommodation area



10 October 2025 – Left to right – the office, the managers unit, Jakes Hut and the KCCT Hut.

The Dormitories

All dormitory roofs have been replaced as the original roofs lacked the structural integrity needed to support the solar panels. We are sincerely grateful to **Hi Tech Roofing** for undertaking the work at a discounted rate and to **Roofco** for their generous reduction on materials.





Two of the dormitories have been converted into wheelchair-accessible units. As the game drive vehicles will be fitted with hoists, we will be able to accommodate wheelchair users on ECOSTudy adventures.

Our sincere thanks to the following companies for their generous contributions towards the **refurbishment of the dormitories**.

ARB Electrical Wholesalers – Jason Burke – donation and discounting of all electrical supplies
NWT Tiling – Craig Starling and Stanton Hulley – have donated all the tiles. A special thanks to **Janina van Zyl** who has worked closely with Elserie on the tile selection and procurement.
TAL – for the donation of all the tile adhesives.
Simply Bathrooms – Scott Paget – donation of sanware for the bathrooms
Paragone Aluminium – Jose da Costa – has serviced all the windows free-of-charge.
Contract Hardware – Shawn Emmett – donation of the ironmongery
Natal Associated Agencies – Richard du Plooy – donation and discount of paint
Richmond Plumbing – Chris Bezuidenhout – discount on plumbing supplies
Hi Tech and Roofco Ajay Bodall and Ismith Akoo – discounted the roof sheeting and installation
Alugant – Leon Grobler – has discounted the cost of the gutters and down pipes.
Plascon – discount of paint
Build-it Ulundi – discount on building materials



Security

Safety and security are a priority – keeping children in, and animals out. Access will be controlled via a staffed guardhouse, with the entrance monitored at all times by a security guard and cameras.





Energy Supply

As Sontuli is not connected to the Eskom power grid, achieving energy independence has been a key priority. To meet this need, **Walter Mullins, Melissa Mussett** and **Stian Frey** of **Energenic and Tekton**, specialists in efficient energy solutions for remote environments, have designed a fully off-grid solar power system tailored to the Centre's requirements.

The system will operate entirely on solar energy, supported by high-capacity, Freedom Won long-life batteries and a backup generator to ensure an uninterrupted power supply. All components are housed within a secure, climate-controlled container, protecting them from dust and moisture, reducing maintenance requirements, and extending the system's operational lifespan.

The solar power system is currently being assembled off-site and is scheduled for installation at the end of October 2025.

We extend our sincere gratitude to:

- **Energenic/Tekton – Walter Mullins and Melissa Mussett** – discounted products and technical expertise. have been extremely helpful
- **ARB Electronics – Jason Burke** – have very generously donated all 410 solar panels and discounted supply of wiring and cabling.
- **Freedom Won** for the donation of some of the batteries required for the system.
- **Stiebel Eltron** for their contribution and discount of hot water pumps and instant water heaters.



The site on 10 October 2025



The cleared area at the top of the site is where the water purification plant will be situated. Water will gravity feed down to the buildings.

Support of the Royal Household

Situated in the heart of Zululand's rural communities, the success of ECOSTudy depends on the active support and participation of local residents. The Park is bordered by ten Traditional Authorities, all of whom will benefit from ECOSTudy. **Schools** for the programme will be selected from these ten Authorities to ensure inclusive community engagement. As far as possible, we will **employ** staff from the surrounding communities. Local businesses will be prioritised for the **procurement of goods** and services, ensuring that the project contributes directly to local economic development.

His Majesty King Misuzulu kaZwelithini Zulu – King of the Zulu Nation

ECOSTudy is honoured to have the support of His Majesty, King Misuzulu.

His Majesty is firmly committed to safeguarding the province's rich biodiversity and natural resources, recognising their vital importance to both ecological balance and the long-term well-being of local communities. His endorsement greatly strengthens ECOSTudy's mission to advance environmental education and conservation in the region.



His Majesty recently visited the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park, where he was shown a display by the anti-poaching Canine Unit.

Here he is seen with members of the Canine Unit and **Mr Senzo Menyuke**, to the left and **Mr Sihle Mkhize** to the right.



We are also privileged to have the support of **HRH Prince Zuzifa kaMangosuthu Buthelezi**, Chairperson of the Zulu Kingdom Council and trusted advisor to the Zulu Royal Household. As the son of the late Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Prince Zuzifa holds significant influence in the region and his backing lends invaluable credibility and support to the Sontuli project.



We were honoured to host HRH Prince Zuzifa, HRH Princess Michelle and members of the Tribal Council at Sontuli. The Prince expressed his appreciation for the opportunity to visit Sontuli, witness the site's development, and gain a clearer understanding of ECOStudy's vision and goals. Both he and his entourage were very impressed with the progress made, and he has reaffirmed his commitment to helping ensure that ECOStudy becomes the success it is destined to be. The Bishop, who was part of the entourage, pledged his own support as well as that of the church.

This was the message that we received from Prince Zuzifa later that evening:

"Dearest Gareth & Susan

No words can aptly express our gratitude for today, the warmth of the hospitality was unbelievable..

Thank you, thank you! 🙏

We left feeling we can't wait for the first batch of kids to kick off this very worthwhile project!

A presentation will never do justice to such an initiative as compared to visiting physically.

My whole entourage asked me to convey their gratitude to both of you.

ECOStudy is phenomenal! It should enjoy much wider support.... We must see to that!!!

His Majesty and myself will jointly support this wonderful project"

Government Support

Although ECOSTudy operates as an independent initiative, separate from government entities, the support of key public stakeholders is crucial to the success of the project. We are therefore grateful to have the endorsement of **Reverend Musa Zondi**, the KwaZulu-Natal MEC for Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs. Rev. Zondi recognises ECOSTudy's potential to deliver meaningful social, environmental, and economic benefits for the province.

Dr Mavuso Msimang has been a champion of ECOSTudy since inception. His wise counsel and guidance has been invaluable to the development of the project..



L-R: Gareth Pyne-James, Dr. Mavuso Msimang, The Hon Rev Musa Zondi MEC, Susan Pyne-James



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, TOURISM
AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE

EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Organisational and Fiduciary Support



We are deeply grateful to the Ewing Trust for their invaluable fiduciary support in establishing the ECOSTudy Trust. Without their guidance and belief in the vision, ECOSTudy would not have been able to get off the ground. Their continued oversight and fiduciary support provide a solid foundation for good governance and accountability.

Our special thanks to **Iain Ewing, Michelle Brown, Tyla Hooper** and the rest of the amazing team at Ewings who have provided unwavering support.



ECOSTudy Trust has recently entered into a strategic partnership with the **Wildlands Conservation Trust, known as WILDTRUST**, who have kindly taken us under their wing and now manage the financial, organisational, and administrative aspects of ECOSTudy.

WILDTRUST is a well-established and highly respected South African conservation organisation, known both locally and internationally for its integrity and impact. Founded in 1989 as the Natal Conservation Trust, it later merged with the Wildlands Trust in 2004 to form WILDTRUST as it is today.

This partnership provides ECOSTudy with invaluable institutional credibility, professional expertise, and operational stability – all at no cost to the project. This means that every rand donated goes directly towards delivering our programmes and making a tangible difference on the ground.

We are extremely grateful to **Dr Roelie Kloppers** (CEO) and **Dr Shanitha Singh** (Executive Director: Finance, HR & Corporate Services) for facilitating this partnership and for their invaluable guidance and commitment to ECOSTudy. The WILDTRUST team has been instrumental in the development of ECOSTudy, and we could not have achieved this without their dedication and collaboration.



Operational Support



Catering, Cleaning and Security

To ensure the Centre runs smoothly and ease the load on ECOSTudy, we have partnered with **SERVEST**, a leading facilities management company. They will manage the catering, cleaning, and security - ensuring nutritious meals, high hygiene standards, and cost savings through their expertise. Regular checks, including food testing and surface swabs, will ensure that all standards are consistently maintained at the highest level.

Andrew Stevenson and **Patrick Blakeway** have been very helpful by assisting us with the planning of the kitchen and other key areas. Their expertise has been invaluable for our designs.

Insurance



The comprehensive insurance for the Centre's assets and public liability is being handled by **SATIB** and underwritten by Lloyd's of London at a very competitive rate. Our sincere thanks to **Brian Courtenay** and **Nadia Coward** for their guidance and efforts in reducing the premium while ensuring we are well covered and our risks are minimised.

Legal Advice

Patrick Dewes has provided legal counsel and guidance. He has been a keen supporter of ECOSTudy since its inception and we are grateful for his continued support.

Patron Emeritus - Russell Collins

Quite simply, this project would never have happened without the support and guidance of this wonderful human. We are forever in his debt.

