■ Friends of Blaauwberg Conservation Area Sue Ballinger, Roy Fuller-Gee, Eddie Brown and Fred Metcalfe.

■ Rubbing shoulders with an eland, Fred Metcalfe, of the Friends of Blaauwberg Conservation Area.

Friends groups bolster urban conservation

KAREN WATKINS

Cape Town is the most bio diverse city in the world with 3 250 plant species in an area smaller than London.

This is according to Dalton Gibbs, founder member of the Westlake-based Cape Town Environmental Education Trust (CTEET). Mr Gibbs, is also a City of Cape Town biodiversity manager and was a guest speaker at the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA) Big Friends Group (BFG) get-together at Rondevlei Nature Reserve at the weekend.

Networking was interspersed with talks on urban conservation introduced by Wessa committee member Phil McLean, who is also chairperson of the Friends of the Liesbeek.

Mr Gibbs spoke about the importance of being in touch with ward councillors and building relationships.

He talked about the threats to open areas – the City's 17 nature reserves and the Table Mountain National Park – from urbanisation; land invasions; light pollution, which affects pollinators and the life cycles of creatures; alien invaders; noise pollution; too frequent fires and too few fires.

Mr Gibbs stressed the importance of the Friends groups and said the declaration of False Bay Nature Reserve as a Ramsar site in February had been the culmination of about 15 years of work and the realisation of a dream that had started with a group of people in a lounge in Zeekoevlei.

> "We want roads, but we must keep green areas and biodiversity corridors ..."

Mr Gibbs said we could not allow politicians to change the landscape for the benefit of one species – man.

"We want roads, but we must keep green areas and biodiversity corridors, places in the city where humans don't come first, where they can sit quietly and enjoy nature. It will be more important in the future as we become more disconnected to nature," said Mr Gibbs.

Peta Brom, from UCT's Animal Demography Unit, called for volunteers to participate in her PhD project researching monkey beetles.

With September to December being the time that they mate, she said it was a good opportunity to observe wildlife in small-scale urban habitats and possibly find some of the 90-odd monkey beetle species.

■ Ricardo Downes, of the Gantouw Project, with Roy Fuller-Gee, of the Friends of Blaauwberg Conservation Area.

Bernelle Verster, a bioprocess engineer from Lakeside, gave a light-hearted glimpse into her passion for sewerage and sanitation in general.

She believes there is money to be made from human waste and encouraged people to pee in their gardens instead of buying fertiliser.

She spoke about the potential of urban spaces to have many functions and regenerate the social and environmental value of a place.

Trafalgar Park was an example of that, she said. A substantial park with a rich cultural and archaeological heritage in Woodstock and District Six, it was being developed to drive the vision for the beautification of the area through landscaping and heritage upgrades.

She encouraged people to move away from the "laager" mentality of going off-grid and instead work together to combine urban design and living with nature.

In her own neighbourhood, she plans to launch a Dream Zandvlei Friends group in the near future to achieve this.

But it was five charismatic eland that stole the spotlight for many.

Gantouw Project manager Petro Botha, who won an award last year for introducing eland as a veld management tool to conserve endangered strandveld in urban reserves, invited the Friends to meet the team.

When they were introduced into Rondevlei in 2015 the animals were about five months old, 1m high, skittish and in poor condition. Now they are twice as tall, have gleaming coats and four of them are friendly. The fifth is camera shy.

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