

With the support of SANBI’s Rhodes University-based Eastern Cape co-ordinator, Ms Vathiswa Zikishe, UCPP established a dedicated CREW group (Custodians of Rare and Endangered Wildflowers) in late 2018. CREW groups consist of volunteers, and are located in several parts of the country, especially in high biodiversity areas, with the aim of recording threatened and vulnerable indigenous plant species and contributing to their protection and improved conservation status.

This group was established to bridge the huge data gap in the endemic-rich southern Drakensberg region, and the Eastern Cape province as a whole, to afford the region a higher biodiversity status that could be more nationally recognised. This was also seen as a first step in establishing data for the stewardship biodiversity assessment of a 70 000 ha proposed watershed stewardship project fostered by a Green Trust investment and led by ECPTA with GEF-5 support. This also promoted awareness and education around the importance of biodiversity, engaging citizen scientists in plant monitoring activities, and supporting the battle against illegal harvesting of medicinal plants.



**Figure 1: aspirant UCP botanists with CREW national co-ordinators and professional botanists at Mount Currie Reserve near Kokstad**



**Figure 2: plant identification course involving Ecofutures candidates**

The UCPP CREW group is led by Dean Ricketts from DEDEAT, and has

had several successful gatherings since its informal start in February 2018: this included five expeditions in the mountainous watershed area and foothills of the upper uMzimvubu catchment, and a trip to the Rhodes area to join the Rhodes gang on a pressing course (led by botanist Kate Grieve, hosted by active local botanist Brendan Cole). Vathiswa facilitated a plant identification course in Matatiele (including use of microscopes to support identification: SANBI donated a field microscope for the group to use), as well as training in pressing and preserving of specimens for herbariums.

An introductory course on the use of the *iNaturalist* app and website was run by its co-designer, Dr Tony Rebelo, in Kokstad: an iNat project for capturing findings in the uMzimvubu watershed area was established on the iNat site. Over 3000 observations have now been uploaded, with a staggering 1236 species recorded in

the project footprint, by 78 observers – this includes participants not directly part of the UCP group, but whose observations fall within the project footprint.



**Figure 3: endangered *Eucomis shiiffii* (miniature Eucomis) found near Ramatseliso’s Pass border post area, at over 2000m altitude.**



**Figure 4: field forays with Elsa Pooley's invaluable flower guides**

Despite the drought conditions due to late rains, outings in December 2018 and January 2019 in the proposed watershed park target area above the 1800m contour north of Matatiele still revealed a lot of endemic and two endangered species. A plant collection permit allowed samples to be gathered and pressed, and taken to the herbarium to be positively identified and recorded. This included two endangered species (*Alepedia* endemic to this richly diverse mountain area).