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The Sustainable Finance Coalition's first conservation finance bootcamp showcased the power of collaboration and shared language

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The Sustainable Finance Coalition (Coalition)—a partnership between Wilderness Foundation Africa (WFA) and World Wildlife Fund South Africa (WWF-SA) —hosted its first Landscape Finance Boot Camp on Oct. 4 with the goal of bridging gaps between conservationists and project funders. After a day of presentations, targeted small group discussions, and networking, guests reported feeling more confident engaging across sectors and were excited to see an emerging platform for showcasing green finance projects.



Saphira Patel Head of Operations Evaluation Unit and Acting Head of the Environmental and Social Sustainability Unit at the Development Bank of Southern Africa presents during the morning session of the boot camp. Courtesy of Stefan Bosch, Sitombe Photography.

While professional development events are often tailored to workers from one sector, the Coalition saw an opportunity to unite individuals from high-powered industries to catalyze green innovation. Ellané Van Wyk, environmental tax services lead at the WFA, said that the boot camp was open to anyone interested in conservation finance, as it was meant to bring professionals from an array of fields into the

same room. Once there, the structure of the boot camp encouraged guests to make connections, gain confidence, and find a shared understanding of environmental work.

The industry-spanning nature of the bootcamp was what attracted Kishaylin Chetty, a senior environmental advisor for South Africa's largest utility distributor, Eskom Holdings SOC Ltd. Chetty saw the event promoted on LinkedIn and hoped it might be an opportunity to learn more about types of market-based incentives and how the utilities sector could leverage them to promote sustainability and conservation.

"I wanted to understand ... how economic instruments could lead toward success in the conservation sector," said Chetty. He was interested in both national and global case studies showcasing this trajectory and "in particular, how these economic instruments could start to change behavior, not just within our organization, but at a policy level as well."

The daylong intensive dove into these topics and more over the course of two sessions. In the morning, guests gathered as a group to hear from business, finance, conservation, and government leaders. Representatives came from the South African National Parks board, the World Wildlife Fund, the Development Bank of Southern Africa, and other high-powered financial, conservation, and entrepreneurship organizations. Discussions centered around green investment and explored banks' perception of conservation projects.



Dr Sue Snyman presents for a breakout group in the afternoon session of the WFA boot camp. Courtesy of Stefan Bosch, Sitombe Photography.

After a lunch break, participants broke into four smaller groups to home in on featured topics. Gray Maguire from the Climate Neutral Group led a discussion on carbon finance; Dr. Sue Snyman, Director of Research at the African Leadership University School of Wildlife Conservation, talked about the biodiversity economy; Libby Dreyer, an independent sustainability consultant, co-hosted a talk on green and impact bonds with Dipak Patel, head of the Presidential Climate Change Commission; and Indalo Inclusive CEO Rest Kanju explored bankable projects.

The intersectional value of the boot camp was reflected in the diverse crowd it attracted. Van Wyk said more guests hailed from financial organizations than from the conservation field. This presented an important networking opportunity, but also bridged gaps that may have previously precluded effective collaboration between business, investment, and green workers. Chetty said that hearing directly from funders was particularly useful because they were able to define technical terms that often preclude effective cross-sector communication. Through purposeful discussions, investors and conservationists began to create a common language and engage in more inclusive dialogue.

Van Wyk said the value of this common language was echoed in feedback from an exit survey. Many of the respondents mentioned feeling more confident engaging across sectors. Several also said they walked away with a better understanding of what a project needs to be successful and a grasp on the building blocks of finance solutions.

In the future, Chetty said he would like to see the diversity of professional representation expanded even further at events like these. While the boot camp welcomed several leaders in high-level government agency positions, he didn't see people directly involved in policy making in the crowd. Players from industry and non-governmental organizations have built the foundation for cross-sector collaboration; now, he said, "it's about how do we start to really capacitate government [agencies] that would be responsible for drafting a lot of these policies and enabling a lot of these market-based instruments to be more effective for all the sectors?"

The day after the boot camp, select participants attended a follow-up session, called the Lion's Den. Modeled after the UK venture capitalist reality show, Dragon's Den, participants in the event pitched green projects to an audience of bankers and investors. BNAqua Solutions and Kusini Water, both social enterprises focused on providing potable water to South Africa made pitches, as did the ecotourism venue Ndou Safari and Euphrysane, an environmental startup that uses invasive alien trees to produce charcoal. An expert panel offered feedback and critique to help pitchers develop their presentations.

While this event focused on financing terrestrial conservation projects, van Wyk said that the Coalition is interested in hosting a similar "blue finance boot camp" to promote marine conservation initiatives within the next year.