

MCSA SOUTH CAPE SECTION HISTORY

Celebrating its 10th Anniversary as a Section (Cencom approval of 10 September 2005) - by Dave Jones

Background:

The formation of new Sections in the MCSA has always been a natural process following the founding of the club in Cape Town in 1891 and the subsequent spread of mountaineering as a rewarding activity to other parts of South Africa. Usually new Sections were formed in large urban centres some distance from Cape Town such as the Transvaal Section which formed in 1930 or else by the incorporation of independent clubs also some distance from Cape Town such as the E.P. Section in 1952. But more controversially there have been splinter groups which have hived off to set up business within the operating area of existing Sections, sometimes with success and sometimes not. Because this implied a loss of membership for an existing Section, splinter groups were not always greeted with enthusiasm and often had to work hard to justify their existence. Such was the case with the South Cape when the time came to apply for membership as an independent Section, although controversy and rebellion was never the intention.

The E.P. Section had for some years included the South Cape ranges of the Tsitsikamma, Outeniqua and Swartberg as part of its operational territory. Indeed this Section's only hut is some distance from its Port Elizabeth headquarters and has long offered its members a convenient base for mountaineering activities in the Tsitsikamma. For excursions in the South Cape away from its Formosa Hut, the E.P. Section had frequently made use of holiday homes belonging to its members in Plettenberg Bay, Knysna, Sedgefield and George for overnight accommodation and continues to do so. Use was also made of friendly MCSA members of other Sections resident in the area such as Bill and Di Turner of the Cape Town Section. One South Cape holiday home that was frequently used when they lived in Port Elizabeth and served on the E.P. Section committee was that of Dave and Fay Jones in Sedgefield.

Possibly because of this long history of being prepared to travel and of tapping local resources for overnight accommodation, the E.P. Section has always been open-minded about local groupings of their country members wishing to organise themselves locally. There have been such groups of country members as far distant as East London and Grahamstown who have been given assistance in organising local activities in the past and even for a time a so-called Kouga Sub-Section as recorded in the 2000 Journal. The E.P. Section committee never had any problems with such encouragement as it was seen as "spreading the word" and useful for increasing country membership without in any way trespassing on the territory of other Sections. But history was to reveal that the use of their convenient term "Sub-Section" as well as a formal incursion into the South Cape where many Cape Town Section country members were resident proved provocative. In retrospect this is understandable since the Cape Town Section has historically lost membership on occasion to splinter groups which later became full Sections within a few hours drive of Cape Town.

As an MCSA member since 1965 and a serving member on the E.P. committee as its secretary and newsletter editor, Dave Jones on retirement in 1994 to Sedgefield was well equipped to investigate whether there was scope for local organisation in the Southern Cape. Accordingly, when invited to form a Sub-Section of E.P. country members he agreed to feel the local pulse and set about making contact with MCSA members known to be resident in the area. As it turned out, there were a number of country members of various Sections. Most of them were retired but still active as country members from the Johannesburg, Magaliesberg and Cape Town Sections. When contacted they were found to be hiking in the local mountains as individuals or as members of one of the many local hiking groups. Many proved receptive to the idea of getting together for the more adventurous flavour of MCSA Meets.

The first official meet of the South Cape Sub-Section, as it came to be known, was a typically adventurous outing to BBC cave on the northern flank of Formosa Peak in May 1997. This remote cave had first been spotted from the air by members of the E.P. Mountain Rescue team on a reconnaissance flight by helicopter. A subsequent visit by three bearded E.P. members (Black Bearded Climbers) gave it a name and revealed it to be an ideal base for climbing Formosa. The object of this first meet was to surprise a party from the parent Section who were planning to approach it from Formosa Hut that same weekend, using it as an overnight base for an assault on Formosa Peak the next day. The pioneer South Cape party was Dave Jones, Bill and Di Turner with Des and Margie Herron. Dave, having previously been to the cave, acted as leader. Sadly the outing did not achieve its objective, being defeated by thick bush and illness of one member of the party. They had an uncomfortable overnight, bivouac on steep rocky ground before retreating at dawn. (Only Bill Turner in a pre-dawn, solo recce reached the cave.)

The Early Sub-Section Years:

Encouraged by this glorious failure the party, ironically predominately from the Cape Town Section, decided in an impromptu meeting held in the Turner Kombi on the way home that there was scope for more such adventures. Dave was given the go-ahead to set up a local structure and a founding meeting was called at his Sedgfield home on the 25th June 1999. A small organising committee was appointed and more official MCSA style meets were programmed. The first Co-ordinator as he preferred to be called, was Dave Jones but he was assisted in particular by Frances Doering, ex Cape Town Section, who acted as Secretary/Treasurer. From the beginning administration was kept very simple and Sub-Section subscriptions were thus minimal. Members of all Sections were made welcome as were guests, but some did transfer to the E.P. parent Section. Any new members to the MCSA were enrolled as country members of the E.P. Section. From a core group of about 20, the Sub-Section grew slowly and in its early years always drew up its meets programme in parallel and in consultation with the parent Section.

Because it had so many experienced members to draw on and because it was operating in virgin territory, the fledgling Sub-Section was very soon able to organise its own very full, independent programme with an average of at least one meet every month. Also, and very useful for researching the history of the South Cape Section, hard copy records were kept of every official meet. A useful habit that continues to this day. Examination of the Meet Record Books reveals a great deal of interesting information and in the largely pre-computer age, these early Meet Reports were often hand written. One such hand-written gem by the leader of a meet along the St Blaize Trail records that: "The rain missed us as I had sent an SMS to God who obliged." In order to contain administrative costs, all who joined the Sub-Section either as MCSA members or as guests were asked to provide an email address and this wise habit too has persisted in the South Cape Section. A further habit developed of spending any surplus gained during the year on subsidising the annual Christmas get-together, or else its informal AGM, which was held each year in June.

Controversially, because as some senior members of the club like Bill Turner pointed out, advertisement is not the MCSA way, Dave used his part-time position as a reporter for local newspapers to insert articles on Mountain Club and the South Cape Sub-Section's meets to inform the public and to invite existing members of the club or interested newcomers to make contact. These articles too are to be found glued as newspaper clippings in the Meet Record Books. But the Sub-Section's activities soon became well enough known for such stories to become unnecessary, apart from one or two subsequent press releases to inform the public of procedures to call on MCSA Mountain Rescue services and the Sub-Section's steady growth continued. By 2001 it had progressed far enough to have a regular newsletter, written by the Sub-Section Co-ordinator/Editor Dave Jones. The newsletter recorded in June 2001 that the Sub-Section's annual get-together (AGM) had 16 interested persons attending with a further 12 offering their apologies. Of these 28 interested mountain hikers, 15 were already MCSA members of various Sections.

By the time of the third Annual Get-together in June 2002 the Co-ordinator could report on 12 official meets and 4 spontaneous ones with an average meet attendance of 15. A clear coming of age sign at this same 2002 meeting was the formal election of a committee for the first time. Dave Jones was elected chairman, Frances Doering the secretary, John Atherstone treasurer and Chris Leggatt placed in charge of Search & Rescue. The annual subscription was set at R20. It was reported that there was an emailing list of 72 but it was agreed to prune this as only 34 on the list were actually active hikers. This policy appeared to bear fruit as a formal report on activities for 2002, submitted as was requested each year to the E.P. Section for its 2003 AGM, reported a paid up membership of 70. Of these, 26 were from the E.P. Section, 9 from Cape Town, 4 Johannesburg and even 2 from the Zimbabwe Mountain Club. The remaining 29 had all expressed interest in joining as members of the E.P. Section. A further significant step was the introduction in August 2001 of a monthly social, usually on the Thursday evening before an official meet. Bearing in mind the distances some members needed to travel to attend such socials which were usually held in Sedgfield as the most central point, a pub venue was used so that drivers could have a meal and avoid driving on an empty stomach. The Forest Lodge Pub offered us use of a back room for these meetings, but when this became no longer available the Sub-Section moved to the Knysna Sports School and Peridots restaurant and then the Sedgfield Bowling Club where the full Section still meets. The Bowling Club has convenient space and a good bar, but the task of providing a snack before hitting the road fell on the Lady Burgers as they came to be known. A valuable service that they still provide every first Thursday of the month.. It was reported to the 2003 AGM, that attendance at these socials averaged 25 persons. Some meet reports continued to be hand-written but in December 2004 the first colour photo appeared in the Meet Record Book, together with a typed report that was easily circulated by email as a sign of things to come.

The Honeymoon ends

Significantly, at each Annual Get-together (AGM) held by the Sub-Section the option to apply for full Section membership was aired but always rejected as an unnecessary complication in a Sub-Section that was free of formality and running well. Then perhaps rashly at the request of the parent Section a separate Sub-Section report was prepared for publication in the Journal of 2003. The E.P. Section saw no harm in this as it was proud of the growth of its lusty infant which was contributing both to membership of its own Section and making MCSA activities more readily available to all members resident in the Garden Route. But certain other senior Sections, Cape Town in particular, read this as a rebel move and questioned whether such a move is allowed in the MCSA where its constitution makes no mention of "Sub-Sections". The E.P. Section stoutly defended its actions pointing out that it is normal in any MCSA Section to have sub-committees for one purpose or the other and that its South Cape Sub-Section was no more sinister than this. It was intended only to encourage growth in the club. Clearly the argument was not put persuasively enough to satisfy the critics and in the Journal of 2004 the South Cape's report was firmly re-labelled as coming from the "South Cape Group".

Matters came to a head in 2004 when the E.P. Section Chair was asked to bring his rebel Sub-Section leader along to the routine second Cencom meeting of that year so that they could explain themselves. Ironically, matters did not turn out as planned because the E.P. Chairman at the time, Serge Smetryns, missed his flight leaving the South Cape Chair, Dave Jones, to face the music alone. Able to provide clear evidence of significant growth of MCSA membership through the Sub-Section's activities and of no pressure being brought on existing members of other Sections to jump ship, formal Cencom permission was given to apply for full membership. This was on condition there was proof of viability and a proper constitution based on the standard MCSA model, neither of which was to prove any problem for the South Cape committee. Indeed other circumstances rather quickly drove the Sub-Section along the road to maturity whether they liked it or not.

The first was an unfortunate freak accident in Kaaimans Gorge when a professionally led kloofing party was swept away by a flash flood in January 2005 (See MCSA Journal, 2005, pp 102 – 104). Three of a party of four foreign tourists, led by a professional guide, were swept away by the flood and their bodies later found still in life-jackets but trapped under rock ledges. The sole survivor was located and rescued by a remarkable team effort of the S. Cape Mountain Rescue Team. Metro Rescue and a brave kayaker who paddled up the swollen river. The family of one of the deceased, Floris Holsheimer from the Netherlands, were shocked to discover that there were no effective official emergency teams to cope with such events and that it was amateurs who had to react with their own equipment and do their best. In gratitude for the fast reaction under Andrew Hoy who was in charge of MCSA Mountain Rescue in this area and the rescue attempts made, they donated 10 000 Euros to the Sub-Section, as a memorial to their son in order to fund rescue equipment. Overnight, informal book-keeping in the Sub-Section came to an end and proper bank accounts, with all of the required reporting to SARS became necessary. This was all very competently handled by the treasurer at the time, Geoff Ditchfield.

The second growing-of-age event was the hosting in August 2005 of the Annual MCSA Dinner, at the Wilderness Protea Hotel on behalf of the parent Section and at its request. This required considerable team effort and far more formal committee work than the happy-go-lucky years of Sub-Section organisation had required, but the job was tackled with great enthusiasm and a very successful event was the result. Perhaps it was curiosity about the "rebel group" or the excuse to visit the Garden Route for a bit of local climbing that did it, but a very good turnout of 80 members was the result with useful profit to go into the kitty of a new Section.

Formal Recognition as the 14th MCSA Section

In accordance with the Cencom directive of 2004, the Sub-Section committee set about drawing up an acceptable constitution based on a standard MCSA model and borrowing from the E.P. Section's constitution. This process went very smoothly and demonstrated the strength of Sub-Section where many of its supporters were seasoned members of the club who had retired with committee experience in their previous Sections. The contributions made by Demos Anastassiades and Hugh Williams, both ex-Johannesburg and both sadly deceased, as well as that of Bill Turner of the Cape Town Section were particularly noticeable. The draft constitution for a full Section was formally adopted by the Sub-Section at a Special General Meeting called on the 25th August 2005 and then duly approved by Cencom at a regular meeting of 10th September 2005. The founding membership is on record as 46 members with a further 8 guest members from other Sections.

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The first AGM of the South Cape Section, which in accordance with the standard MCSA form of constitution had to move from June to a date at the beginning of the year, was held in Peridot's Restuarant in Sedgfield on

Thursday 2nd February, 2006. Hugh Williams was elected as the Founding President with Dave Jones as the first Chairman. A strong committee which had served the Sub-Section so well was elected and the membership entitled to wear a distinctive, once-off, order of MCSA golf shirts with the wording "South Cape Founder Member" was confirmed. (These golf shirts still appear at functions and meetings, proudly worn by the Section's surviving Founder Members, but are all now looking a little faded.)

The South Cape Section finds its feet

Growth in membership of the newly formed Section continued with additional impetus given by its formal recognition so that the official report printed in the 2007 Journal records 72 members. The growth has slowed in subsequent years but remains strong very largely because the South Cape is a favoured destination for people seeking an active retirement. South Cape membership is an attractive option for retirees from other Sections or those new to the MCSA. There is every sign that this favourable situation for growth will continue and the 2013 Journal records a South Cape membership of 109 paid-up members, but it does have its down-side. While the South Cape Section remains very viable and very active the average age of its membership strongly reflects its largely retired-persons' composition. Younger potential members in the area are often too busy setting up their own businesses to have the time to become involved and there are a host of other outdoor activities such as Trail Running, Mountain Biking and Adventure Events to tempt them. This situation is not likely to change in the foreseeable future and is not helped by a strange shortage of good climbing sites in the heavily bushed and friable rocks of the local mountains.

Since the South Cape Sub-Section had modelled its activities very closely on the normal MCSA pattern no real change was necessary once it became a full Section. Interesting guest speakers for the monthly club-nights at the Sedgefield Bowling Club remained easy to find and there is normally a turn-out of around 30 members in spite of the wide spread of the Section membership from Mossel Bay in the west to Plettenberg Bay in the east and the need for many to travel. The rich variety of mountain terrain in close reach with no significant security problems remains a prime asset and the Section is able to organise and offer an interesting meet nearly every week-end with excursions further afield and even into the working week because the bulk of its membership is comfortably retired. Volunteers to lead these meets are easily found as are members prepared to serve on committee, but very wisely the Section has continued with the old Sub-Section's determination to keep meetings and administrative formality to the minimum. The Section does have a small archive collection housed in a cupboard at the Bowling Club but so far has not taken on the responsibility of acquiring property or of building huts. This may come in time, but access to the local mountains has remained easy because of close co-operation with management of The Garden Route National Park and private land-owners. Much of this co-operation is based on mutual respect and on the MCSA being able to offer skilled mountain rescue personnel if needed.

Chairmanship of the South Cape Section was relinquished by Dave Jones in 2009 when he was elected National President, although he filled the South Cape President's position for 2010 with Andrew Scott in the chair for an interim period. But there was no shortage of skilled and experienced persons ready to take over in a permanent capacity with Bill Turner taking the guiding role as President in 2008 and Bill Uren acting as a very wise chairman, very often taking the lead in all of the most energetic meets, from 2010 until 2013. Bill was assisted in his role by President Dave Barnes who had been one of the founding members and a very early recruit into the Sub-Section. Greg Devine, bringing all of his past experience in the MCSA including his spell as the Johannesburg Section Chair when he trans-located his business to the South Cape, took over as Chairman in 2014 and because of his experience has acted without a President.

Highlights of the first ten years of the South Cape Sections existence are difficult to identify because there were so many activities including even a trip to Malawi in 2007 to climb Mnt Mulanje and to hike with the Malawi Mountain Club. Also a Section outing to the Western Cape in 2008 to introduce members to the many club huts that can be used in reciprocity in close proximity to Cape Town. Some significant South Cape events do stand out as they required the full organisational capacity of the Section. These were the hosting of two very successful National Mountain Rescue Exercises from a farm near Saasveld as a base in 2007 and again in 2009, both being a natural progression from the joining up with the South Cape Section of a previously independent S&R team under Andrew Scott in the Plettenberg Bay area. Andrew and his team provided the technical back-up for the exercises, while a team effort of members and the Lady Burgers provided all of the logistics needed at the base camp. Finally worth mentioning is the very successful organisation of the MCSA National Camp in 2013 from a Sedgefield base while arrangements to host the National Dinner in 2015 are well under way.

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CHRONOLOGY OF THE SOUTH CAPE HISTORY:

Prior to 1994 The E.P. Section frequently organised meets in the South Cape mountains using their Formosa Hut as a base of else holiday homes belonging to its members and even the homes of members of other Sections.

1994 – 1997 Encouraged by the committee of the E.P. Section, Dave Jones on retirement to Sedgfield in 1994 made contact with other MCSA members living in the area and helped to organise local meets. Articles were submitted to the local press with an invitation to members and those interested to make contact.

May 1999 The first meet recorded in the S. Cape Meet Record Books was held to BBC Cave – Formosa.

June 1999 A founding meeting was held and Dave Jones appointed Co-ordinator. Attended by 12 hikers.

June 2001 The annual get-together attracted 16 with a further 12 offering apologies. 16 were MCSA members and a regular newsletter was in circulation.

August 2001 Regular monthly socials started, each first Thursday in a local pub.

June 2002 The third annual get-together recorded that 12 official meets had been held during the year with an average attendance of 15. A committee was elected with Dave Jones as chairman. Subscription was set at R 20, paid by 70 members by the end of 2003, of whom 40 were MCSA members from Cape Town, Johannesburg and E.P. Sections with 2 from Zimbabwe.

MCSA Journal 2003 At the request of the parent Section a separate S.Cape Sub-Section report was submitted and published. The legitimacy of the Sub-Section came under scrutiny.

MCSA Journal 2004 A separate activities report was again submitted by the parent Section and was again published but was re-labelled as from the “South Cape Group”.

September 2004 The E.P. Section continued to defend its right to organise Sub-Sections if it so wished and its Chair was asked to bring the S. Cape Chairman to a Cencom meeting to explain further. Permission was given to apply for full Section status conditional on proof of viability and a proper constitution following MCSA guidelines.

January 2005 A kloofing tragedy in Kaaimans led to a donation of Euros 10 000 in memory of the deceased, Floris Holsheimer from the Netherlands, intended to help equip the S. Cape S&R teams.

August 2005 Hosting of the MCSA Annual Dinner for the E.P. Section and at its request. Attendance 80.

25 August 2005 Special General Meeting held to confirm and accept a draft South Cape Constitution.

10 September 2005 Constitution accepted by Cencom and full Section status accorded with 46 Founder Members with a further 8 guest members from other Sections.

2 February 2006 First AGM of the South Cape Section. Hugh Williams elected President, Dave Jones Chair.

May 2007 South Cape party travels to Malwi to climb Mnt Mulanje and to hike with Malawi Mnt. Club.

Sept. 2007 South Cape hosts the MCSA National Mountain Rescue Exercise from a base near Saasveld.

MCSA Journal 2007 Official South Cape report records 72 paid up members.

Jan/Feb 2008 South Cape party visits the Western Cape for a tour of all the MCSA huts near to Cape Town

Sept. 2009 South Cape hosts a second National Mountain Rescue Exercise from the Saasveld base.

April 2013 South Cape hosts the National Camp from a base at the Swartvlei Caravan Park.

MCSA Journal 2013 Official South Cape report records 109 paid up members.

May 2015 South Cape celebrates its 10th anniversary by hosting the MCSA Annual Dinner.