



media release

Blending western and traditional medicine for holistic health

Heritage Day 2023

The start of September marks the beginning of Biodiversity Week and Arbor Week, which began on 29 August and continued until 4 September. A special focus is put on the importance of the natural environment and conserving it: plants and vegetation in particular because of all the services that they provide for human needs. Heritage Day, 24 September, is also an important national observance dedicated to celebrating the rich diversity of culture that spans centuries. On this day our people usually dress in their own traditional clothes or assume another culture's identity as an homage, to show respect and admiration. Various celebratory events are held countrywide to commemorate the day, which is important because it serves the purpose of nation building, displaying the beauty of cultural diversity, preserving old values and customs, as well as promoting sentiments of pride, peace, unity, and reconciliation.

The most notable of these traditional customs for years, has been the relationship between the people and the environment, an action and reaction pair in the sense that when the two interact, both are affected. The indigenous people, before westernisation, used to live a life of subsistence farming, planting and foraging in nature for food and medicine. Ensuring plant sustenance and conservation is very important for the following reasons: plants are life – they provide oxygen for us, they serve as a filter for impure freshwater, act as anchors to prevent soil dispersion, and they provide food and medicine for us.

Following are some of the most well-known African herbs used for healing: devil's claw (*Harpagophytum procumbens*), hoodia (*Hoodia gordonii*), buchu (*Agathosma betulina*), cape aloe (*Aloe ferox*) and rooibos (*Aspalathus linearis*). (See this article on traditional medicines that may give relief during COVID-19 that appeared in the NSTF eNews for more information on indigenous medicinal plants). They have been a key feature in indigenous customs for a very long time. To this day, they and various other herbs are the only kind of medicine that some African communities, mostly rural communities, use and rely on because they are easily and affordably accessible. They have been trusted for thousands of years because they are reliable and beneficial, passed down from generation to generation. However, one challenge to their use is that there are no standard dosages. This can result in overuse and adverse effects. Some of the shortcomings in the knowledge of traditional medicine are the biochemical effects of using them together with mainstream medicines. For example: how cancer bush (*Sutherlandia frutescens*), widely used for HIV and TB treatment around Southern Africa has been found to pose the risk of lowering the level of the antiretroviral drug atazanavir in the bloodstream, when the two are used together. See this statement on the use of the plant from the Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA). Evidently, there is still much to be known about herbal medicine by Western medical practitioners, and vice-versa. There is a need for information sharing and to explore how these knowledge systems can come together syncretically and develop holistic approaches to treatment and prevention of adverse conditions.

Investing in tradition: Traditional doctor Mr Ephraim C Mabena is the founding member, Executive Director, and overseer of the Mothong African Heritage Trust (MAHT). MAHT was developed for the Mothong Heritage Site in Mamelodi, Pretoria, which was transformed from a wasteland with a horrid past to a serene botanical garden for the community, with the help of the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI). The Mothong Trust received the Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) Award at the prestigious NSTF-South32 Awards in 2020.



Mabena said: "I wanted to do more than just heal people, I wanted to heal communities and the environment. This was my goal for the Mothong project and for the MAHT". Also, in collaboration with Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), the University of South Africa (UNISA), the University of Pretoria (UP) and the Agricultural Research Council (ARC), the site was used as a hub for technology, innovation and conservation, forming the building blocks to combine science and indigenous knowledge for producing medicinal herbs. In the process, jobs were created too. He says: "The site is also being used as an education centre to promote the necessity of us taking care of our natural resources and environment". See the interview with Mr Mabena, where he explains the importance of learning from each other.

About the NSTF: The National Science and Technology Forum (NSTF) celebrates national Heritage Day, the rich cultural history of our peoples and the bountiful heritage of our natural environment. NSTF is an independent non-profit stakeholder body and network – a civil-society forum of organisations involved in science, engineering, technology (SET) and innovation in SA.

Read about: A previous and related NSTF Discussion Forum held on 'Plant health in SA – threats to biosecurity, biodiversity and food security (10 – 11 June 2021)'.

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About the NSTF

The National Science and Technology Forum (NSTF), established in 1995:

- is a broadly-representative stakeholder body for all science, engineering and technology (SET) and innovation organisations in South Africa
- gathers stakeholders around burning issues of national and global interest, across the public and private sectors, including matters of public policy
- includes a network of professional societies in SET and STEM education (STEM = science, technology, engineering and mathematics) - the NSTF proSET membership sector.
- recognises, awards and profiles the outstanding contributions of individuals and groups to SET and innovation through the prestigious NSTF Awards
- runs and supports collaborative projects and youth outreach, including recognition of top performance in mathematics and science, role modelling, bursary and STEM career information
- runs and supports the STEMulator.org which attracts youth and educators to Explore>Discover>Learn the world of STEM including careers. (Established by NSTF proSET)

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Non Profit Company Registration Number: 2007/029165/08

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