

SA's Bird Atlas Citizen Science Project and COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

Impact of strict lockdown measurements on maintaining the bird species data

The effects of the COVID-19 lockdown are still ongoing and have resulted in major setbacks in many areas including citizen science projects in South Africa. The Southern African Bird Atlas Project, SABAP2, is such a project which was severely affected by the strict lockdown regulations.


The SABAP2 project is a large-scale citizen science project which relies on volunteers to be mobile to collect information on birds sighted or heard in order to map bird species distributions in Southern Africa. Volunteers utilise a BirdLasser birding app to select a geographical 'pentad' on a map and record all the bird species seen within a set time frame, in order of

species seen. The data collected can be submitted either as a full protocol or ad hoc list. The former entails at least two hours of active bird watching over a maximum of five days, and the latter entails information on bird species encountered in a lesser time frame. This information helps to determine the conservation status of bird species; correctly assigning red-list status and establishing important Bird and Biodiversity Areas; and forming the basis for informing environmental impact assessments.

To determine the impact of lockdown on the project, researchers from the University of Cape Town compared four years (2017-2020) of citizen activity between February to May. The [study](#) found that

the number of citizen scientists submitting data during Lockdown Level 5 declined, compared to previous years, however, ad hoc lists had the least decline, which indicates that volunteers were still eager to contribute to the atlas project, despite the challenging conditions. On the other end, there was a sharp decline, about 70%, in the number of full protocols lists submitted and only 20% of the number of pentads was surveyed, compared to the same period in the previous three years.

The researchers suggest that the two lockdown campaigns launched on the BirdLasser birding app played a major role in maintaining the flow of information and saw 1 100 South Africans submit data during Alert Level 5 and Level 4 lockdown periods. In addition, the Lockdown Garden Surveys initiative attracted bird enthusiasts stuck at home to contribute data on bird counts sightings in their gardens to contribute to research about the impact of lockdown on biodiversity.

The growing interest in citizen science projects globally and in South Africa speaks to an emerging subtext within the global pandemic. The slower pace of life enforced by the pandemic increased awareness of citizens about the need for the company of living things and other forms of life within immediate surroundings. In view of this, the researchers argue that practical and innovative solutions, as well as a strong citizen science community are required to ensure that projects such as SABAP2 remain viable and funding of conservation management and research. 

Volunteers were still eager to contribute to the atlas project, despite the challenging conditions.

Two campaigns launched on the BirdLasser birding app played a major role during lockdown.

Strong citizen science community required to ensure that projects such as SABAP2 remain viable.