



## POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATE (PDRA) OPPORTUNITY

**Exploring the Role of Participatory Gastronomic Experiences in Social Change:  
Engaging with Cape Floristic Region Wild Foods Through a Community of Practice**



**This PDRA presents an exciting opportunity to engage creatively with the indigenous foods of the Cape region, exploring the role of carefully curated and facilitated gastronomic experiences in opening opportunities for active social change.**

### **BACKGROUND**

The Local WILD Food Hub (LWFH) is an initiative that sees the Cape Floristic Region's (CFR) (1) diversity of forgotten and ignored plant foods become known, understood, loved, grown and eaten as a part of daily life. LWFH activities, of which several are based at the Sustainability Institute (SI) in Lynedoch, revitalise relationships with local foods - where they come from, what we know about them, and how to make them readily available to be cooked and eaten. It acknowledges that human health and wellbeing is intrinsically tied to a healthy, functioning planet supported by fair and just indigenous food and biosphere stewardship practices (2).

## THE LWFH COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The LWFH and the SI have been partnering with the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security at the University of the Western Cape since 2023 on hosting a LWFH Community of Practice (CoP). It is a participatory platform that convenes multistakeholder, cross-sector engagements to grapple with the risks, barriers and opportunities for attaining fair and just engagement with local indigenous foods and food environments.

The LWFH CoP's multi-stakeholder gatherings have to date surfaced and explored stakeholder's concerns, prioritising that the evolution of its participatory engagements and focus areas follow an emergent path, while promoting that participants self-organise collaborations where shared visions of change align.

## THE RESEARCH THEME

This research invites a deeper exploration through the lens of [gastronomic landscapes](#) (3), by intentionally engaging curated groups of stakeholders in [participatory gastronomic experiences](#) (4), to explore the role of [pivot-making](#) (5) in social change. We propose that participant reflections that digest the observations and questioning that pivot-making experiences elicit, is where the openings for social change is revealed, in iterative processes guided by carefully curated facilitation.

This work of curating and capturing moments of pivot-making and participants' reflections on such experiences, is one of the most fragile and barely-visible passages in catalyzing social change. It makes the ways of co-curating, observing, capturing and describing what is taking place a crucial role that the research associate will be required to play in this creatively experimental social change endeavour.

## RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

The candidate will engage closely with the LWFH project lead/ Cape wild foods expert in conceptualising, planning, running, reflecting on and analysing feedback from gastronomic experiences that are part of the LWFH CoP's activities .

They will be required to become familiar with the CoP's past activities captured through its reporting, and will synthesize new data from events with past results, understanding that new methodologies are in play.

They will publish at least one journal article on research findings, will share about the project in the CoE-FS, LWFH and SI's newsletters annually, and will contribute to webinars, conferences or presentations as opportunities arise.

They will contribute to CoP steering committee meetings and assist in reporting on the research activities to the committee, stakeholder participants, the SI and the CoE-FS.

## **PREFERRED SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE**

The candidate will have a PhD in the field of food systems or a related social science topic.

Experience in the ethical convening and gathering, storing and analysing of verbal and written participant reflections on multi-stakeholder engagements is an essential requirement.

Event planning and management skills are essential; experience in hosting and facilitating multistakeholder gatherings is advantageous.

An understanding of the challenges of the local food system is desirable, including an interest in its impact on local ecologies and food traditions.

Familiarity with CFR indigenous foods is advantageous but not essential. If lacking, the postdoc will (with guidance from the PI) need to familiarise themselves with the field.

Good written and spoken English are requirements, with some proficiency in written and spoken Afrikaans and spoken Xhosa being advantageous.

## **DURATION**

One year position starting in 2026, with the possibility of extending for a second year.

## **START DATE**

As soon as possible, but no later than end May 2026.

## **REMUNERATION:**

Standard NRF rates for Postdoctoral positions (R320k).

There is a research budget managed by the LWFH for running “Gastronomic Experience” events.

## **RSVP REQUIREMENTS**

Email Loubie Rusch at [localwild@sustainabilityinstitute.net](mailto:localwild@sustainabilityinstitute.net) by 20th April 2026

Please include a letter of motivation and a CV.

## **GRANTOR, MENTORSHIP AND LOCATION OF ACTIVITIES**

The grantor is the NRF, through the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security, University of the Western Cape. Primary guidance will be from the Local WILD Food Hub lead, with links to the Agriculture Nutrition Health Academy at the faculty of Agrisciences, University of Stellenbosch and to Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, UK . CoP activities will mostly be hosted at the Sustainability Institute in Lynedoch.

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## FOOTNOTES WITH LINKS TO FURTHER READING

- (1) The Cape Floristic Region holds an extraordinarily rich diversity of nutrient dense, locally adapted, predominantly winter rainfall plant foods that for millennia supported the wellbeing of local inhabitants through wild harvesting. Post-colonially, however, they have become significantly ignored and erased, and are now nearly completely absent in local knowledge-ways, food traditions, food landscapes and local markets. This profound disconnection has left a blindness to the role of the local plant foods in regenerating and sustaining the health and wellbeing of local communities and landscapes.
- (2) Biosphere stewardship is the active, responsible management and protection of the Earth's ecosystems, designed to maintain their resilience, biodiversity, and life-support functions for present and future generations. It represents a shift from merely conserving resources to proactively managing the entire social-ecological system, acknowledging that human well-being is intrinsically tied to a healthy, functioning planet.
- (3) [Nurturing gastronomic landscapes for biosphere stewardship](#), offers the lens of gastronomy as a helpful conceptualization for further studies. It proposes that a) culinary craftsmanship and innovation that consider locality, diversity and quality, and b) that thinking and acting in line with gastronomic landscapes (farmscapes, restorationscapes and foragingscapes) holds the potential to drive the development of biosphere stewardship, and to contribute to more biocultural, diverse, and resilient landscapes, helping to build resilience and food sovereignty over time.
- (4) [Designing participatory gastronomy: From convivial dialogue to sensory foraging for sustainable futures](#) asserts that curated gastronomic experiences can raise awareness, involve diverse stakeholders, and empower individuals to modify culinary traditions while promoting healthier and more sustainable diets/ gastronomy as a driver of nature-based solutions and landscape stewardship. It gives attention to the operationalization of sustainable gastronomy within specific events.
- (5) Drawing on [When Social Change Happens: Observation of Experience and the Paradoxes of Pivot-Making](#), we propose that the work of curating pivot-making moments in participatory events produces opportunities for observing and reflecting on otherwise unintelligible experience, by bringing them into view from within the experience as well as from close proximity simultaneously, to reveal moments that open up new domains for subsequent articulation and intentional action. This work of making pivots is one of the most fragile and barely-visible passages in catalyzing social change, making the ways of describing it taking place crucial.

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