

Beyond the Wild Harvest

A Story of Knowledge, Care and Connection in Honeybush

Emerging from the Wild Harvester Collaboration



Final Report: July 2025

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<https://www.abs-biotrade.info/partner-countries/south-africa/resources/>

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Overview of Process – Wild Harvester Collaboration

Over a three-month period, we hosted five gatherings with Wild Harvesters and local community members—many of whom are involved in nursery work or combine Honeybush harvesting with other seasonal livelihoods such as alien species clearing, timber work, or farming vegetables. These sessions focused on exploring how Wild Harvesters are experiencing and responding to their current realities, particularly in relation to the precarity of seasonal work and their

participation in the Honeybush industry.

We approached this from a bio-cultural intelligence perspective¹, paying attention to the interwoven dynamics of place, plant, people, and land.

Economic and ecological dimensions were brought into the dialogue, including pricing, negotiation, and how people are navigating the shifting terrain of income generation, resource access, and seasonal opportunity.



1. *Bio-cultural intelligence* (or *eco-cultural intelligence*, as we relate to it) speaks to the interdependent functioning within ourselves, between people, and with the natural environment. It recognises the deep connections between cultural practices, livelihoods, and ecological systems—acknowledging that ways of living, working, and knowing are shaped by, and help shape, the dynamic interplay between people, place, land, and the more-than-human world (e.g., plants, animals, weather systems, ecosystems, and ancestral presence).

Inspired by the early framing of *The Wild Honeybush Landscape* by Gillian McGregor², we asked:

How do Wild Harvesters see themselves within the Honeybush system?

This question was not about finding fixed answers but about opening a generative space for participatory sense-making—where Wild Harvesters could reflect on their own positioning, relationships, and lived experiences in relation to the broader system.

As the conversations unfolded, Wild Harvesters themselves prompted richer conversations:

- *What enables Wild Harvesters to continue doing this work?*
- *Where do they experience connection, constraint, or change?*
- *What does it mean that Wild Harvesters are holders of knowledge?*
- *What futures do they hope for or fear?*



From these stories, examples, and exchanges, three predominant themes surfaced:

1. **Embodied Knowledge and Skill of Wild Harvesters**
2. **Tending to Local Markets**
3. **Pricing and Partnering**

These themes reflect the grounded perspectives of Wild Harvesters while also being shaped through conversations with others who have insight into the different biocultural economic aspects of Honeybush³. The conversations act as an evolving way to shape a better way to navigate together.

These themes form the basis for a living set of knowledge-sharing and sense-making tools. These tools are not designed to oversimplify, but to support deeper understanding and action in a system marked by ecological uncertainty, social complexity, and the need for ongoing relational work. Refer to the appendix for a more detailed summary of the Wild Harvester Collaboration.

Throughout the process, the facilitation team brought certain perspectives into the space—particularly those shaped by rights-based frameworks, legal orientations, and a concern for the health and resilience of living systems.

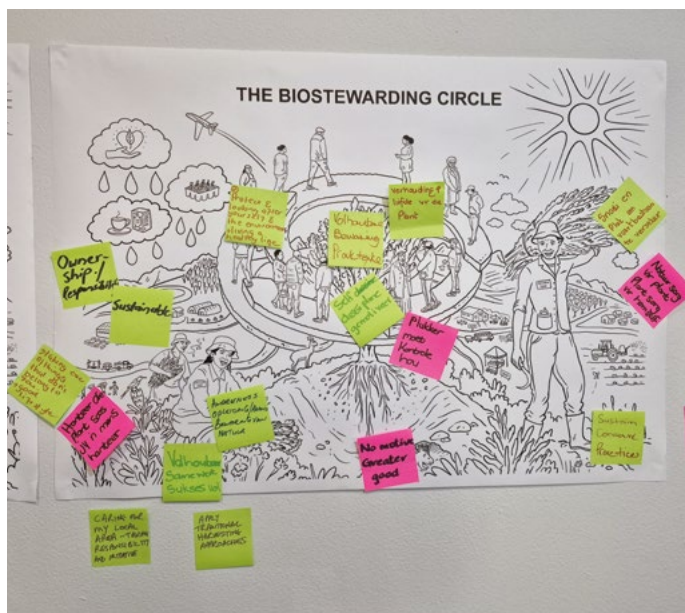
2. Gillian Kathleen McGregor, *Aspects of the Sustainability of the Wild Honeybush Industry* (PhD diss., Rhodes University, 2024).

3. The themes also draw on insights shared during panel conversations with experts spanning ethnobotany, sustainable livelihoods, conservation science, policy, and biotrade. Participants included Dr. Neil Crouch (ethnobotanist, SANBI), Dr. Gillian McGregor (PhD researcher, Rhodes University), Matt Sephton (Honeybush industry and sustainability specialist), Dr. Rhoda Malgas (researcher and lecturer, Nelson Mandela University), Cyril Lombard (biotrade advisor, GIZ/ABioSA), and Natalie Feltman (Director: Biodiversity Economy, Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment).

Momentum and Meaning-Making: What Resonated Most

Momentum gathered around certain topics that clearly resonated with Wild Harvesters. These weren't abstract themes—they were grounded in daily experience and the practical realities of making a living while working with the land.

We explored what the system might work *with*—not as a set of external interventions, but as pathways already in motion and ready to be nurtured. In a system as alive, interdependent, and continuously adapting as this one, next steps cannot be taken in isolation. They must be shaped *in conversation, in practice, and with care.*



As we take what has surfaced back into the broader Honeybush system, we hold a simple yet significant intention:

To make visible what matters and to support movement where the will already exists.

What emerged from the Wild Harvester Collaboration was a set of tools designed to support inquiry, deepen understanding, and spark practical action—tools that Wild Harvesters and stakeholders can use and carry forward on their own. These include:

- **The Bio-Stewarding Circle** – a means to invite dialogue around care, continuity, and custodianship.
- **The Wild Honeybush Landscape** – a framing that situates wild harvesting within a dynamic social, ecological, regulatory, and economic context.
- **What Shapes the Price of Honeybush?** – inviting inquiry into how value is perceived, created, and distributed across the system.
- **The Knowledge and Skills of the Wild Harvester** – the place-based practices that sustain the work and carry ecological and economic meaning.
- **Relational Agreements** – a set of guiding principles that support trust, reciprocity, and shared accountability in relationships across the Honeybush system. Rather than fixed contracts, these agreements create space for ongoing negotiation, mutual recognition, and adaptive response—rooted in respect for people, land, and practice.



Introducing each Sense-Making Aid:

To support shared understanding and meaningful use, each sense-making aid is introduced by:



Where it came from

What patterns, stories, or tensions from Wild Harvesters and supporting Stakeholders brought this into view?



What it is in service of

What does it help make possible or support—rather than trying to fix?

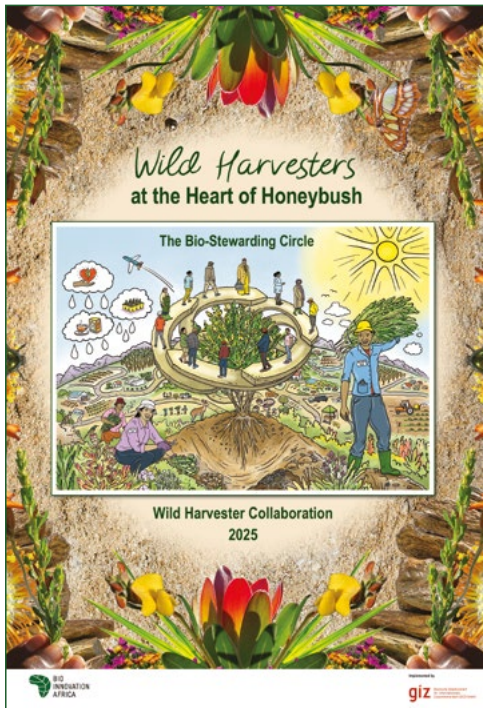


How it can be worked with

How might it be used, adapted, or explored by different stakeholders in the Honeybush system?



The Bio-Stewarding Circle



“The Bio-Stewarding Circle⁵” is the framework we arrived at by weaving together aspects of the stories and experiences which Wild Harvesters shared. This document supports the continuation of the most important themes— Embodied Knowledge and Skill of Wild Harvesters • Tending to Local Markets • Pricing & Partnering —and invites further inquiry and conversations with others.



What it is in service of

The Bio-Stewarding Circle provides a basis to engage with the important themes that are currently relevant to Wild Harvesters in a way that more of us could be adding to the conversation. At the same time, this sense-making aid invites opportunities to develop relationships between and with Wild Harvesters.

Where it came from



Our original intent was to explore the value of a “Charter” to support Wild Harvesters in the Honeybush Industry.

We explored the history of charters⁴ and discovered that it was missing the mark for what would make sense and be supportive to Wild Harvesters. In talking with Wild Harvesters, we discovered that they were at the stage of just trying to understand the context of their work, they were addressing current challenges of making a living, and specifically they were wanting to act on possibilities to grow and strengthen the local Honeybush market.



4. The concept of a “charter” has often been used as a formal declaration of shared principles, rights, or intentions—ranging from foundational political documents like the Magna Carta of 1215 (which curtailed monarchical power and introduced early legal protections) to more recent community-based charters and declarations. In development settings, charters are typically meant to express collective commitments, shape governance, or assert rights. But these tools often assume a certain level of institutional readiness or agreement—conditions that don’t always reflect the lived realities of emerging or marginalised groups. Indigenous cultures offer a different approach. Rather than codifying principles in written form, many have long practiced oral covenants, relational governance, and customary law to uphold stewardship, justice, and collective responsibility. For instance, Southern African *indaba* practices rooted in the spirit of *Ubuntu* (I am because we are). These forms are often more dynamic, deeply place-based, and woven into daily life. Through our own exploration, we came to see that a conventional charter could too easily impose a fixed, external framework. What was needed was something more grounded—capable of growing with the evolving context Wild Harvesters are navigating. The Bio-Stewarding Circle emerged from that recognition: a situated and living framework shaped by the stories, insights, and priorities of those working closest to the land.
5. Albert Kamphuis developed the InnovationCircle, a living systems-inspired framework for ongoing reflection, inquiry, and adaptive action. In a similar spirit, the Bio-Stewarding Circle cultivates a shared attentiveness to what is emerging—offering a rhythm of care-taking that keeps us in relationship with unfolding realities.



How it can be worked with

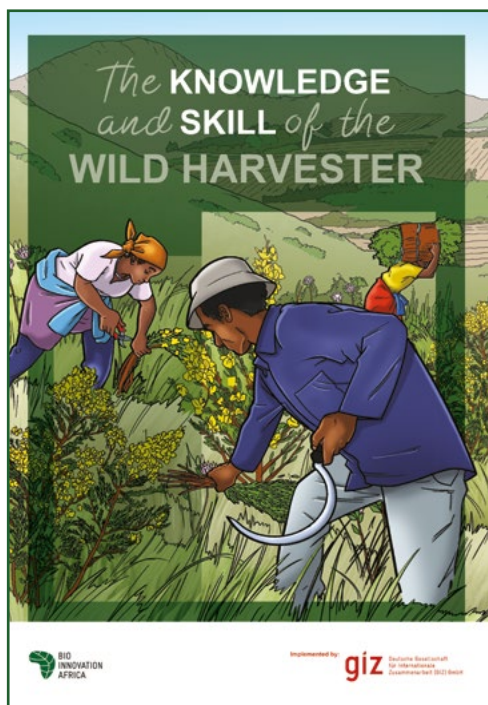
Scenario 1: A Wild Harvester shares the conversation of Johann Tea that is captured in the Bio-Stewarding

Circle with a B&B Owner. The conversation opens up the possibility of providing guests with Honeybush Tea from the local area. Currently guests were drinking imported tea, that had been shipped from South Africa and returned. This engagement is prompting a conversation that goes beyond the transaction of selling tea. It is nurturing the connection and interdependence between local people, place and plant.

Scenario 2: A conservationist is presenting to a general audience who have little knowledge of Honeybush or conservation and how related this is with their purchasing habits and the local market. This booklet provides a way in to understand the complexity and importance of Honeybush, and the people involved, which includes us as consumers.



The Knowledge and Skill of the Wild Harvester



This document is a bridging of scientific knowledge and indigenous knowledge systems.



What it is in service of

The Wild Harvesting Team themselves may not know each other and other stakeholders may not know who the Wild Harvesters of Honeybush are. This document is a recognition document to acknowledge, appreciate and learn from their role.

Also, most people know very little about wild harvesting. This booklet is designed to be a visual record and accessible for people with little or no prior knowledge. It can function as a marketing style booklet for Honeybush tea as well, providing a link between the tea, the Wild Harvesters and the role they play in the responsible sourcing of the tea and the conservation of the Honeybush landscape.



Where it came from

This document was born out of a conversation with Professor Neil Crouch. Professor Crouch made the statement that Wild Harvesters were perhaps the most stable element in the Honeybush system. Market dynamics remain uncertain and volatile, yet Wild Harvesters have reliably and consistently been taking great care in their role of stewardship.

The Honeybush Industry has been working with the Sustainable Harvesting Guidelines since 2017 which was compiled by Dr. Gillian McGregor. The value of this document rests on Dr. McGregor's dedication and valuing of the local ecological knowledge of local Wild Harvesters.

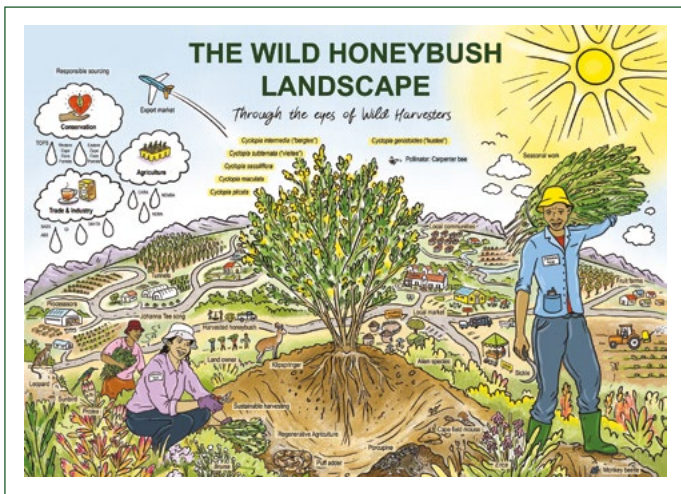




Scenario 2: A Wild Harvester is invited by a nursery to show them how to harvest Honeybush sustainably. The Wild Harvester can share their experience which the nursery workers can learn from. The Knowledge and Skill of the Wild Harvester booklet serves as an engaging orientation for newbies, so they can appreciate what is involved. This is a visual precursor to a more in-depth understanding captured in the published Sustainable Harvesting Guidelines of Honeybush.



The Wild Honeybush Landscape



How it can be worked with

Scenario 1: A Government Official working within Honeybush is meeting a local community, this document is used to meet people where they are at and as an alternative to beginning the conversation with regulations and requirements.

Scenario 2: A processor is visiting a new area to see if they can start sourcing Honeybush there. They meet with a local Wild Harvester Team and landowners. Instead of jumping into talk about prices, volumes, or market standards, they use The Wild Honeybush Landscape as a starting point. Together, they explore how harvesting currently works, what Honeybush means to people in the area, and what challenges are showing up. This helps build shared understanding and opens the way for a more relational way of doing business.



Where it came from

The Wild Honeybush Landscape was used by Dr. Gillian McGregor as she engaged Wild Harvesters, landowners and processors in the Honeybush Industry. Building on this, we wanted to evolve it further as a sense-making aid so more people could come into the conversation.

From an epistemic justice⁶ perspective, the Wild Honeybush Landscape facilitates a conversation where everyone has a place at the table. Often conversations about the industry limits voices that are critical to the health of the system.



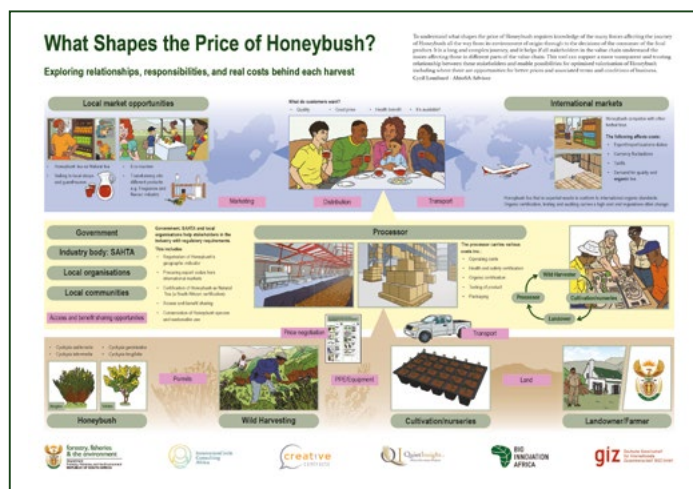
What it is in service of

The Wild Honeybush Landscape is a conversation opener inviting people to participate and engage. It prompts people to share lived experiences, that is beyond theory and opinions about the market. This is critical for trust building, problem solving and the survival of Honeybush.



6. Epistemic justice refers to the recognition of people as credible knowers and meaning-makers within a system. It includes *testimonial justice*—fairly hearing and valuing the knowledge of others—and *hermeneutical justice*—ensuring that people have the conceptual tools to make sense of their own experience (Fricker, 2007). In this context, testimonial justice involves taking seriously the lived expertise of Wild Harvesters—for instance, their insights into sustainable harvesting or local trade—while hermeneutical justice is supported by tools like *The Wild Honeybush Landscape*, which offers shared framing rooted in what Wild Harvesters themselves named. Many things could be said about the Honeybush system, but what is captured here reflects and supports the perspectives of those who often lack access to formal platforms and whose voices are rarely heard in industry dialogue.

What Shapes the Price of Honeybush?



How it can be worked with

Scenario 1: A Wild Harvester and processor refer to the checklist on their phone as they speak about details of their interaction and the costs involved.

Scenario 2: A processor and a group of Wild Harvesters could put heads together and explore the different pathways afforded by local markets versus export markets alone. Exploring the distribution of natural tea becomes more accessible in talking about the local market and potentially reframing the conversation that may be overly focused on organic certification and international trade.



Where this came from

During our meetings with Wild Harvesters various questions and understandings related to pricing were shared. Questions included: “What determines the price of my bundle?”, and “Where is money lost?”, “Should I be paying for testing Honeybush before supplying?”, “What should I be taking into account when I negotiate a price per bundle?”



What it is in service of

This sense-making aid supports becoming more concrete and specific when talking about what is happening in the industry. It is designed to stimulate thinking beyond a simplistic value chain by inviting more nuance and keeping the framing of a dynamic living system.

Specifically, it provides a useful checklist to support the Wild Harvester and processor or landowner during pricing conversations.



Relational Agreements



This is a practical and values-based tool that supports long-term relationships in the Honeybush sector. Designed with the realities of wild harvesting and small-scale trade in mind, it helps people define shared purpose, clarify roles, surface risks, and build mutual understanding from the start. Rather than locking parties into rigid terms, it recognises that relationships evolve—and gives a flexible, transparent structure to navigate change, accountability, and trust over time.



Where it came from

We started this collaboration inquiring into whether a visual contract would be a support to Wild Harvesters as they sold wild harvested bundles of Honeybush for money. In a conversation with Matt Sephton who has insight into the norms and ways of working we began to rethink the idea of a contract. Matt gave us insight to what it really takes to build trust. The kind of trust that is necessary for fair and sustainable work together. He told us that it could take months or years of conversations with a farmer, to simply build this trust.

Matt further emphasised how different the agreement norms were between the Eastern Cape Province and Western Cape Province. In listening to Wild Harvesters talk about their experiences in making agreements and negotiating price, they confirmed that everything was verbal.

Wild Harvesters also shared that they would take on work, rather than lose the job. So, they would side-step some of the important details that would need to be clear, such as who pays for transport, how clean the bundles need to be, and what the payment timeframe is. In support of this Robert de Rooy from Creative Contracts spoke of something that is different than a formal contract and would be more supportive, introducing the concept of a Relational Agreement⁷.



7. Stewart Levine. *The Book of Agreement: 10 Essential Elements for Getting the Results You Want*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002.



What it is in service of

In the Honeybush sector, much of the work happens through trust and informal agreements. A relational agreement is as its name implies focused on more than a transaction, it is focused on the relationship. This agreement is a practical tool to make expectations visible, clarify roles, and create space for open conversation. It was developed to help Wild Harvesters, buyers, landowners and others talk through what matters, what each person will do, and how to handle changes or challenges in a fair way.



How it can be worked with

Scenario 1: A Wild Harvester sits down with a farmer they have already been working with and uses this document to begin the conversation of important topics to be discussed. For example, as suggested in the Relational Agreement they both talk about their concerns and fears.

Scenario 2: A Wild Harvester wants to approach a processor to buy processed Honeybush tea, so they can begin selling directly to the local market. The Relational Agreement document supports both parties in exploring the ins and outs of this possibility. For example, they may try out the terms of this agreement for a short period. Then come together again and revisit their experience and to decide what needs to be adjusted to continue working together.



Friends of Honeybush

As the Wild Harvester Collaboration unfolded, people across the Honeybush system began to see what it might make possible—from local organizing and cultural affirmation to policy alignment and sector support. These reflections, offered by those already working in relationship with the land, with harvesters, and with the broader system, point to the living potential of what has been co-created.

What follows are perspectives from those who, in different ways, are walking alongside—processors, cultural leaders, government actors, and sector champions—each offering a glimpse of what they see from where they stand.



From an indigenous perspective, “Johanna tee is lekker tee.” The love for honeybush and for nature shines through in the perseverance of the Wild Harvesters. Their dedication is shown in their hard work—braving difficult weather, facing dangers, climbing steep mountains—yet still completing their tasks and rising the next day to do it all over again. They play a vital role in the value chain. The work of the Wild Harvesters is carried out by a few very courageous individuals.

Edna Platjies

The Honeybush Industry, although third down the line from a Sector-Wide Access and Benefit Sharing Agreement on Traditional Knowledge associated with the use of the plant species, continues to birth ground-breaking prospects to reveal the power of the Nagoya Protocol as it builds on the essential elements that embrace a transitioning nation. Regardless of the small pocket of land where honeybush naturally occurs, this industry’s transitioning awakens new ways of thinking and working together that reunites place, plant, people and land, i.e., a relational agreement! Truly novel to this setting. I am excited to continue this journey.

Natalie Feltman



From the fynbos vegetation communities where honeybush grows in the wild, to the teams of harvesters who crop the plants and deliver to custom-built processing plants - the honeybush industry is uniquely South African. Sustainable use and wise management of the resource by stakeholders with knowledge and experience of using the honeybush resource is key to the success of this industry.

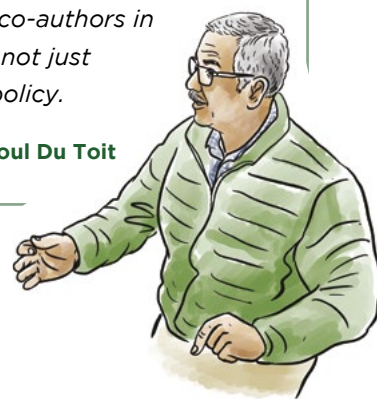
Gillian McGregor



Wild harvesters are not informal labourers—they are guardians of ecological wisdom and cultural continuity.

Sense-making aids should elevate their voice as co-authors in sustainability, not just recipients of policy.

Raoul Du Toit



Continuing with What Emerged

The current GIZ BIA Wild Harvester Collaboration (February – June 2025) is ending, but the work continues—through the conversations it has sparked, the relationships it has strengthened, and the questions that remain alive in the living system.

Each sense-making aid—be it the Bio-Stewarding Circle, the Wild Honeybush Landscape, or the Relational Agreements—can be returned to over time, taken up differently in new contexts, and shaped by those who engage with them. Their value lies in how they are worked with, not in prescribing what to do.

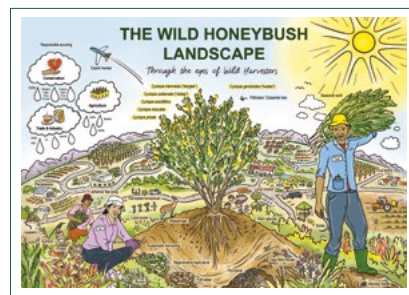
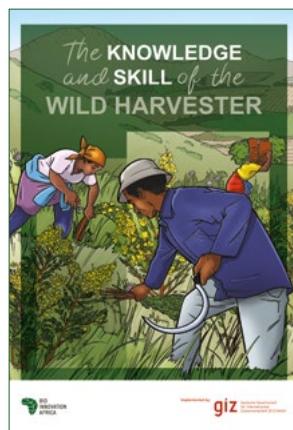
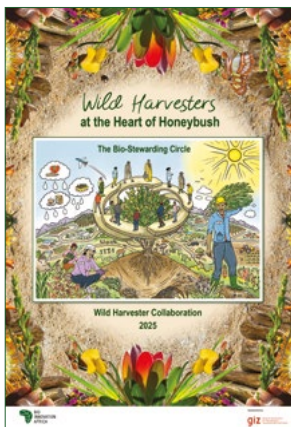
As we step back, we leave behind a set of resources—not as answers, but as companions for shaping and creating possibilities.

How to Work with the Sense-Making Aids

Rather than asking “How do I use this?”, try asking:

From where you are now, ask these three questions:

- What becomes visible when I sit with this?
- What small thing could I do to try out and learn from directly?
- Who could I explore this with?



These sense-making aids do not offer closure. They offer ongoing entry points—to re-engage with complexity, deepen understanding, and support movement where readiness already exists.

This is not the end of the conversation only a change in who continues it, and where.

Appendix: Overview of the Wild Harvester Collaboration

This collaboration formed part of the **GIZ BIA** and was designed to open up momentum for practical and systemic shifts that strengthen the standing of Wild Harvesters in the Honeybush sector. It ran over a focused six-month period (January–June 2025) and was delivered by a facilitation team contracted by GIZ, working alongside the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) and the South African Honeybush Tea Association (SAHTA).

Rather than seeking quick solutions, the collaboration took a different path: one that recognises the Honeybush sector as a living system—shaped by relationships between people, plants, land, markets, and policies. The focus was on listening deeply, learning together, and creating the conditions for more inclusive participation and future collaboration.

How it Was Carried Out

To guide the process, a panel of experienced resource people was formed, bringing insights from biodiversity, conservation, trade, cultural practice, and community development. SAHTA, represented by **Raoul du Toit**, supported as the community liaison partner. The team also worked closely with **Edna Plaatjies**, a local leader trained during the GIZ ABioSA Community Engagement Pilot, who joined as a host and co-facilitator.

A series of gatherings, interviews, and workshops created space for Wild Harvesters, value chain partners, researchers, and government actors to reflect together and explore possibilities for change.

Wild Harvester Collaboration – Engagement Process



Key steps included:

- Jan 2025 – Expert interviews: Matt Sephton, Gillian McGregor, Neil Crouch, Cyril Lombard
- Feb & March – Wild Harvester Gatherings in Thornham and Misgund
- March – Sector dialogues and processor interviews
- May – Follow-up Gatherings in George and Thornham
- June – Final Sense-Making Workshop in Wilderness

What Emerged

The collaboration highlighted the often-overlooked knowledge and contribution of Wild Harvesters—those whose work is deeply tied to the land but whose voices are not always present in decision-making.

While the Honeybush industry is still small, with around 30 full-time equivalent Wild Harvester roles, the social, ecological, and cultural value of this work is significant. The collaboration helped make this visible and created pathways for stronger relationships, better recognition, and new forms of organising.

One important outcome was the **self-formation of the Honeybush Guardians Forum**, a platform initiated by Wild Harvesters themselves to support one another and engage more directly with other actors in the sector.

Tools for Continued Use

To support ongoing learning and action, a set of sense-making aids was created. These tools are not instructions, but living resources—designed to be picked up, adapted, and used by different groups over time:

- **The Bio-Stewarding Circle** – A way to talk about care, continuity, and custodianship
- **The Knowledge and Skill of the Wild Harvester** – Celebrating place-based practices and lived expertise
- **The Wild Honeybush Landscape** – A shared view of the broader system shaping wild harvesting
- **What Shapes the Price of Honeybush?** – A conversation starter about value and fairness
- **Relational Agreements** – A guide for building trust and working together

All are available on the joint **GIZ BIA, ABioSA** and **ABS Capacity Development** Initiative <https://www.abs-biotrade.info/partner-countries/south-africa/resources/>, and can be used to spark reflection, guide decisions, or support partnerships.



May
Gathering in Eastern Cape
Thornham



June
Gathering in Western Cape
Wilderness

Final Note

This *Beyond the Wild Harvest* report brings together what emerged through the collaboration—but it is not the end of the story. The work continues through the relationships that have formed, the tools that remain in circulation, and the questions that still invite exploration.

At its heart, this project was about recognising that lasting change in complex systems starts by listening differently, working relationally, and staying open to what can grow from shared ground.

