



past 7 000 years and it was possible to track its history for most of that time. It could also be confirmed that in the Western Cape this type of palmiet wetland is absolutely unique. This was an exciting discovery for the environmentalists and strengthened the commitment of government to ensure its survival and complete rehabilitation.

However, the immediate challenge is to eliminate the dense and toxic smoke, which is deteriorating with the increased intensity of the underground fire. All the specialists agree that the most urgent need is to remove the infestation of alien vegetation, which is directly responsible for the continued smoulder. This is extremely dangerous work, however, and will have to be undertaken by a specialist task team. The surface is so hot (between 70° and 300°) that it will melt both vehicle tyres and people's boots. In addition, the surface soil is so friable that one minute you could be standing on firm ground and the next be up to your knees in burning coals. However, it is a matter of extreme urgency that this matter be dealt with; on Friday night a flame reportedly broke through to the surface, which had to be hurriedly extinguished.

Naturally, this operation will also be

highly expensive and no doubt way beyond the capacity of the Camphill budget. A second challenge will therefore be to persuade the National Department of Environmental Affairs to carry the cost of rehabilitating this valuable wetland. What seems clear is that there will be no quick fix and that the children of Camphill may not be able to return to their school anytime soon.

But, in the meantime, what has become of them? Because they clearly could not return to the School in these unhealthy conditions, it became necessary to make longer-term arrangements. For some weeks, the day scholars had been accommodated at the Sandbaai Hall and Jeanne-Marie Botha, the School Principal has now booked the hall until the end of the term in mid-March.

"We are very grateful to have this space," she says. "It has been divided up to accommodate the different classes and, although the circumstances are obviously not ideal, the teachers are doing a great job carrying on with their lessons. Another advantage is that the outdoor space is completely safe for the children to play in." The cost is something else, of course. The School has been given a special rate for the rental of the hall,

but R300 a day is a tough target to meet out of the blue.

Another challenge was finding somewhere to stay for the eight boarders and 17 volunteers plus house-mothers. With the help of Just Property, Jeanne-Marie has found two suitable houses, one in Gansbaai and one in Onrus, and they are all happily installed there until at least the end of April. "Yvette de Jager from Just Property was just amazing," says Jeanne-Marie. "She went way above and beyond the call of duty to help us find suitable premises. We are presently trying to arrange for the office staff to set up shop at the Sandbaai Hall. Then the cooks must organise themselves to prepare meals for the children there, too." Sjoel! "Just as well I have a sense of humour", laughs Jeanne-Marie, "otherwise I would have run for the hills and never been seen again."

In the meantime, back at the ranch, while the environmentalists try to deal with the fire, workmen are hard at work replacing windows and gutters and repairing holes in the roof at the School. Their work is often interrupted by an army of migrant snakes which have happily settled into their new home, undisturbed by its former occupants. We await further developments in this alarming drama.