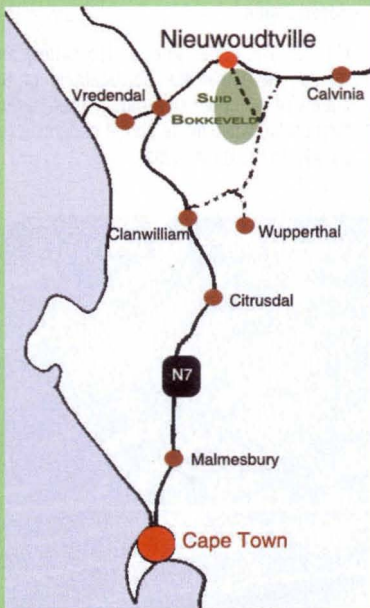


Poor man's cup of tea no longer

Wild rooibos (*Aspalathus linearis*) is now an internationally renowned choice health beverage



Drieka Kotzé, local harvester and member of the Heiveld Co-operative, Suid Bokkeveld. Photo: Rhoda Louw.



The Suid Bokkeveld, Northern Cape. Reproduced with kind permission from the Heiveld Co-operative from *Heiveld Organic Rooibos Tea: Produced with Pride*. Map: Bettina Koelle.

by **Rhoda Louw**, Leslie Hill Institute for Plant Conservation, Botany Department, University of Cape Town and **Philippa Huntly**, environmental writer

For centuries veld tea or 'wild rooibos' has been harvested from the leaves of *Aspalathus linearis*, fermented and brewed as tea. These days most rooibos comes in tea bags, and is produced in vast plantations. The rooibos that most of us are familiar with was selected from wild rooibos early in the twentieth century, and is a fast growing sub-species of *Aspalathus linearis* that produces prolific amounts of seed, and dies after fire.

The wild rooibos of the Suid Bokkeveld is slower growing than the cultivated variety, and re-sprouts from the roots after fire. It produces relatively little seed. Long regarded as the 'poor relative' and not highly valued because of the hard work involved in harvesting it, most wild rooibos is blended with cultivated rooibos to enhance its flavour and colour.

Veld tea has long been an important resource for the poor. According to Oom Koos Paulse of the Suid Bokkeveld, during the fifties when the 'coloured people had nothing', the tea sustained them when they could not afford to buy

coffee, and he remembers his mother sending him out into the veld to harvest veld tea.

Members of rural communities in the Suid Bokkeveld of the Northern Cape organised themselves into a small-scale producer co-operative during 2000. Before 2002 when the Heiveld Co-operative launched wild rooibos on the market as a unique niche product, veld tea had no unique value in the trade or amongst consumers. Four years later, what used to be the rural 'poor man's cup of tea' is now a choice health beverage internationally, having found particular favour in the European market.

What is rooibos?

Rooibos (*Aspalathus linearis*) is a fynbos plant species endemic to the Cape Floristic Region. In its wild state its natural distribution is only along the western and southern coastal interior of South Africa. It is one of 278 species in the genus *Aspalathus*. The cultivated rooibos on which the national industry is based was selected in the Cederberg Mountains and propagated from seed.

All brands of rooibos available in South African supermarkets (and even many in health shops) are produced from cultivated rooibos.

According to local harvesters in the Suid Bokkeveld, wild rooibos is harder and more resistant to drought, pests and diseases than its cultivated counterpart. There are also notable differences in the lifespans of wild and cultivated rooibos – the wild bush can live up to between fifteen and fifty years while the cultivated plants only live for about six to twelve years. Since 2003, prolonged dry spells in the Suid Bokkeveld region have caused declines in the productivity of rooibos plantations, and cultivated plants are now ploughed up after four to six years.

Threats to wild rooibos

As local and international markets for Rooibos continue to grow, more land is converted to plantations for cultivated rooibos. Over-grazing and alien plant invasion are also problems in certain areas where natural populations occur.

Climate change is a growing threat. Although drought is characteristic of the area, the 2003-2006 drought was the most severe in living memory. Changes in the weather appear to be conforming to the climatic predictions for the area: declining average annual rainfall, higher average temperatures and changes in rainfall patterns, all of which impact on the plants' natural life cycles.

The uncontrolled harvesting of wild rooibos is also a major threat in some areas. Growing market demand for rooibos has encouraged some producers and harvesters to over-exploit the wild tea. Unsustainable harvesting practices include cutting too much off each bush, and cutting individual bushes too often. In this economically marginalized region where the main source of income is gained from seasonal labour, there is significant economic pressure to over-harvest rooibos from the wild.

Research can help

In response to these threats, a proactive organisation of small-scale rooibos producers and harvesters in the Suid Bokkeveld region, the Heiveld Co-operative, asked for research to be done into the sustainable harvesting of wild rooibos. The farmers and harvesters wanted to examine their local practices to ascertain the best way to achieve sustainable production. In collaboration with a local NGO, the Environmental

Monitoring Ground (EMG), the Heiveld Co-op approached the Leslie Hill Institute for Plant Conservation at the University of Cape Town's Botany Department. Initial funding for the research was secured from the South African Netherlands Programme for Alternatives in Development (SANPAD) and subsequently from the Table Mountain Fund (WWF). MSc. student Rhoda Louw carried out research on the sustainable harvesting of wild rooibos tea in the Suid Bokkeveld region with support from local NGOs EMG and INDIGO development & change.



RIGHT: Daniel Fortuin harvesting cultivated rooibos in the Suid Bokkeveld. Photo: Timm Hoffman.

BELOW: Local rooibos harvester Klaas Paulse.

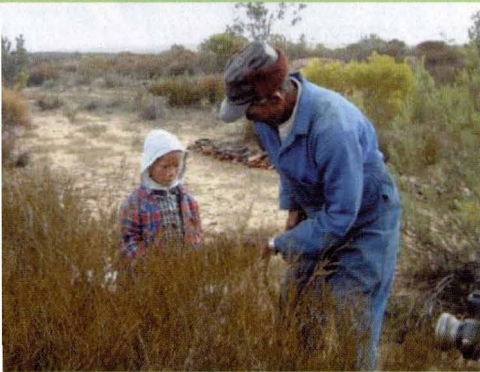


TOP: Fellow researchers. Small-scale rooibos producer Koos Koopman from Heiveld Co-operative (left) and author, M.Sc. (Botany) student Rhoda Louw (right) did research into sustainable harvesting practices for wild rooibos in the Suid Bokkeveld, Northern Cape.

BOTTOM: Heiveld Co-operative member Koos Paulse shows how wild rooibos was traditionally plucked by hand for household use. Photo: Timm Hoffman.



“Unlike cultivated organic rooibos, wild rooibos is not just healthy for the consumer: it is good for the environment as well.”



ABOVE: Hendrik Hesselman with grandson Angelo harvesting wild rooibos with a sickle on a farm in the Suid Bokkeveld. Photo: Bettina Koelle.

BELOW: Wild rooibos (foreground) in the Suid Bokkeveld has a darker colour than cultivated rooibos (background). It is common practice in the Heiveld to plough around existing wild plants when re-planting cultivated rooibos in plantations. Photo: Rhoda Louw.



BELOW: A handful of the real stuff: wild rooibos after cutting. Photo: Timm Hoffman.



Rhoda's conclusions were based on the rich knowledge of local harvesters as well as from the scientific field observations and experiments on rooibos farms in the Suid Bokkeveld. Mr. Koos Koopman and Mr. Koos Paulse were key participants in the research, and offered their time, knowledge and advice during monthly fieldtrips. In the process, Rhoda and the local harvesters were able to learn from each other, and the final results were a collaborative effort. Their field research indicated that re-growth and reproduction of wild rooibos tea are affected by how low to the ground the plants are harvested, in which season they are harvested and the plants' natural life cycles. Their recommendations for sustainable harvesting of wild rooibos in the Suid Bokkeveld region include:

- Harvesting once every two years in normal years, and less frequently during years of drought.
- Harvesting wild rooibos during summer, as winter harvesting may cause the plants to produce less seed and deplete the plants' underground nutrient reserves. Plants harvested in autumn were most affected by pests.
- Harvesting 60-70% of the bush, or less during periods of drought stress or where plants grow in an arid area.


The results were shared with farmers and local harvesters at meetings and other community gatherings. Participating farmers were often asked to present their findings at these occasions and at relevant conferences too. The 'participatory action research'

approach proved most successful and steps were taken to conserve the rooibos by the producers and their organisation. Participation in the research also helped local harvesters to manage and market their product more effectively.

Certification and commercial success

The key to the commercial success of the Heiveld Co-operative's marketing of wild rooibos has been the organisation's commitment to sustainable farming practices and social justice. The product is certified organic and biodiversity friendly by Naturland, a private international standard. Nothing artificial is used, and the harvest areas are maintained in pristine state. Unlike cultivated organic rooibos, wild rooibos is not just healthy for the consumer: it is good for the environment as well. The Heiveld Co-op has reached a niche market of consumers who are willing to pay more for quality food from a healthy environment, and now supplies wild rooibos to a range of shops and supermarkets in Britain and France. In South Africa, Heiveld Wild is becoming increasingly popular.

The Heiveld's products are also certified by the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation, indicating that the product has been harvested and produced in a socially just way. This means that all who participate in the production of a fairly traded product are ethically treated and can earn a fair income. By ensuring higher producer prices for high quality rooibos the Heiveld Co-operative enables its members to improve their livelihood conditions and at the same time promotes sound management practices of wild rooibos and its natural habitat.

Educating consumers to choose products that are produced sustainably is a daunting task, but the Heiveld's experience shows that it is possible to persuade consumers to support environmental conservation and sustainable development. 

Acknowledgements

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