

Clearing Table Mountain

The Friends of Silvermine are waging a successful war on aliens

by **Philippa Huntly**, Table Mountain Fund



ABOVE: Chris Walker, a stalwart member of the Friends of Silvermine, has been expertly clearing alien invasives on Table Mountain for many years. Photo: Sandy Barnes.

The Friends of Silvermine Nature Area is a volunteer group dedicated to the conservation and restoration of the Silvermine section of the Table Mountain National Park in Cape Town. The indigenous fynbos of Silvermine has a great variety of plant species, many of which are rare and endangered. They face the ever-present threat, like most of the indigenous vegetation in the Cape Floristic Region, of being swamped by invasive alien vegetation that needs constant monitoring and removal in order to keep it in check. Some of the more common alien invasives include pine, hakea, Port Jackson and wattle.

The Park authorities, however, have made good progress in the war against alien vegetation. This is most noticeable at Silvermine where the large pine trees that previously dominated the landscape have been removed. The eradication of alien vegetation is seldom, if ever, a once-off job. It is an ongoing exercise, and a costly and time-consuming one at that. This is where volunteer groups like the Friends of Silvermine come in. Working with the approval and support of the Park, hack groups have succeeded in significantly reducing alien vegetation through a planned programme that includes monitoring and removal of re-growth.

Eight years ago Sandy Barnes and fellow members of the Friends of Silvermine approached the Table Mountain Fund (a trust fund managed by WWF-SA) for financial assistance in their alien clearing efforts. Apart from patience, time and a strong back, alien clearing also requires some basic tools. The Table Mountain Fund made a donation to the Friends of Silvermine for the purchase of basic equipment such as chain saws, handsaws and loppers. Over the years the Friends of Silvermine and the Table Mountain Fund have built a close relationship based on mutual confidence and sound administration, and is currently one of the longest standing projects funded by the Table Mountain Fund.

The dedication and sheer physical strength and effort required to go onto the mountain day after day for years on end is truly admirable. Sandy Barnes, chairperson of the Friends of Silvermine, has stressed that the success they have had in getting on top of the alien situation is due to the relentless efforts of the individuals involved. She describes with great reverence how she was inspired as a youngster by Alf Morris, the master in charge of the Mountain Club at Wynberg Boys High School. Alf has inspired many young-

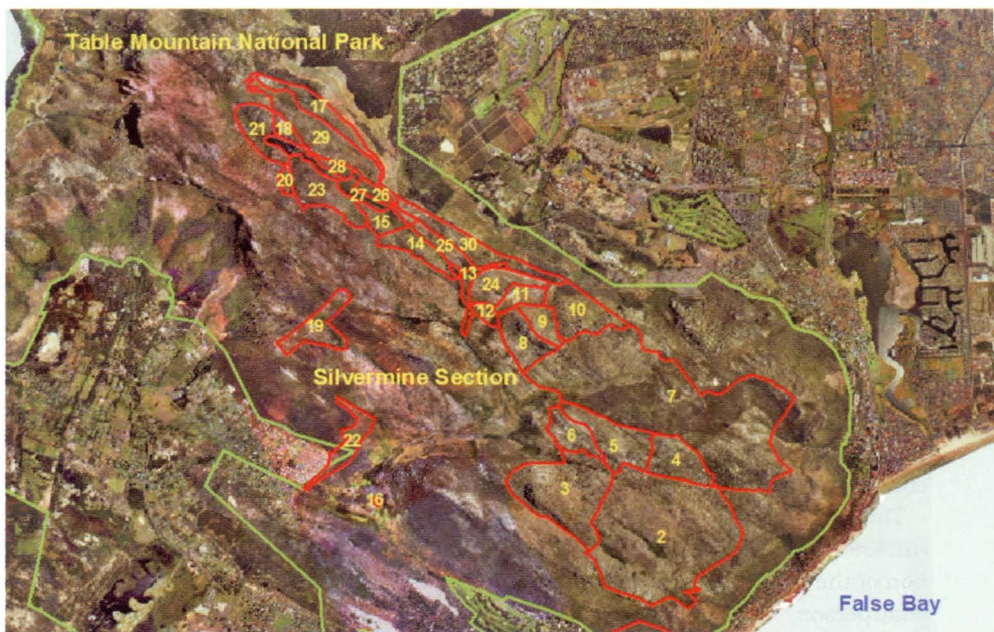
sters from this and other schools. He instilled a love of nature and concern for environmental issues. Today, well into his eighties, he is still regularly on the mountain, walking and as always, rooting out and hacking back alien vegetation.

A significant recent success in the war of the aliens is the clearing of Tokai Ridge of large pine trees. Looking at the size of the trees that have been removed and the steepness of the land, it is remarkable that this project was undertaken at all – let alone executed most successfully by a volunteer group. A walk there today reveals how quickly the indigenous fauna is recovering. According to Julia Wood (botanist and manager of the Table Mountain Fund) the fynbos seed bank would have remained dormant during the time that the area was dominated by pine trees. Once the pines were removed the indigenous flora was given a chance to recover, which it is now clearly in the process of doing.

An example of indigenous fauna making a comeback is that of the rare marsh disa *Disa racemosa* which has made a re-appearance at Silvermine after a thirty year absence. The comeback of the marsh disa, along with seven other indigenous orchid species, is attributed to the removal of pines that take up so much ground water. A seasonal wetland has re-appeared in one of the previously pine infested sectors. The Silvermine area was well known for its orchid diversity prior to the ill informed planting of pine trees some thirty-five years ago.

The success of the Friends of Silvermine must in part be put down to their organizational skills, sound administration and financial management. They have clear a set of objectives: to identify and prioritize infested areas in the reserve using a map system, to set attainable goals and organize teams of volunteers or individuals and to develop new volunteer teams.

The aerial photograph shows how Silvermine has been divided up into numbered plots. Individuals or groups take responsibility for a plot. Their goal is to clear it of alien invasive plants and then monitor and prevent re-growth. A total of 550 ha has been adopted through the adopt-a plot-scheme. The idea has been spread through word of mouth and the media, resulting in new individuals and volunteer groups (such as schools and societies) offering their services to the Friends of Silvermine.



ABOVE: Aerial photograph of the Silvermine area with plots demarcated and numbered. Individuals or groups agree to adopt a plot and take responsibility for ridding it of alien growth. As many as 550 hectares have been adopted through the scheme.

LEFT: Ray Cowan takes a break from the thirsty business of clearing alien vegetation in the Silvermine section of the Table Mountain National Park. Photo: Sandy Barnes.

BELOW: Individuals or groups adopt one of the plots shown on the aerial map, thereby taking responsibility for clearing it of alien invasive plants and then monitoring it to prevent re-growth. Many schools have enthusiastically taken up the idea by offering their services to the Friends of Silvermine. Photo: Sandy Barnes.



The Table Mountain National Park (TMNP) authorities acknowledge the good work done by various volunteer groups. Andrew Brown, TMNP's Biodiversity Programme Manager says that the various volunteer groups have made a significant contribution to the removal of alien invasive plants on Table Mountain. More than four percent of the surface area of Table Mountain National Park is maintained by volunteer groups, and the work done by the Friends of Silvermine has been particularly effective and their efforts over the years are applauded.

The main reason for the success of the Friends of Silvermine is the dedication of the members, starting with their chairperson, Sandy Barnes. The first thing that is strikingly evident about

Sandy is that she really cares deeply and personally about environmental issues. That and the fact that she is not in the least daunted by the size of the problem she is tackling. Be it alien clearing, saving wetlands, opposing the recent rash of golf estates and countless other inappropriate developments, Sandy is there – opposing and protesting. A good example of what civil society can do if it is informed and educated. Talking to her about alien clearing is inspiring. She describes it as an obsession. We had a fascinating conversation about how people see the landscape in different ways. An artist will see form, shape and colour; a farmer arable land; a geologist will be reading the dominant rock types, and so it goes on. Hackers see places they

haven't got to yet, or a re-growth, or a beautiful stand of proteas marred by the insidious presence of a wattle shrub. Sandy describes how she cannot ignore the presence of an invasive alien plant on the mountainside. If she can't get it out, then and there, she makes a mental note of where it is and will return later, better equipped to do the job.

For more about the remarkable regeneration of this area after clearing operations, see the article 'Rich rewards' on page 4.



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RIGHT: Tokai Ridge was covered in large pine trees. The Friends of Silvermine undertook the enormous task of clearing it, and a walk there today reveals how quickly the indigenous fauna is recovering (above). Photos: Sandy Barnes.

