

## A NEW CONSERVATION UNIT FOR BOTSOC

Building on a history of successful conservation interventions in the Cape region, and in recognition of the need for a dedicated team of conservation professionals to support the activities of the Society, the Flora Conservation Committee recommended the establishment of the Cape Conservation Unit (CCU) within the Botanical Society. The mission of this unit is **'to promote and make substantive contributions to the conservation of the Greater Cape Floral Kingdom through strategic interventions identified in the Cape Action Plan for the Environment (CAPE) and similar plans for other parts of the Kingdom, including Namaqualand, Bushmanland and the Thicket Biome.'**

The CCU will concentrate exclusively on conservation issues in the Greater Cape Floral Kingdom, an area of some 200 000 km<sup>2</sup>, comprising habitats of exceptional local and international significance that span two widely recognized biodiversity hotspots: the Cape Floral Kingdom (Fynbos Biome) and Succulent Karoo Biome, and three Centres of Plant Diversity. The area supports more than 12 000 plant species, 80% of which are endemic, and is home to approximately 2 300 *Red Data Book* plant species. It is variously threatened by human impacts such as alien plant invasions and land transformation mainly for agriculture, mining, and urbanization.

Conserving all of this is a tall order for any conservation agency and the CCU intends collaborating with others to get the job done. The CCU will pay urgent attention to priority areas that possess outstanding conservation value and which are especially vulnerable to threats (e.g. renosterveld on the Western Cape lowlands).

The CCU's primary guiding principle is to work pro-actively to meet the challenges currently facing conservation in this country. We have identified four directions as most suitable interventions by the CCU for conserving the Greater Cape Floral Kingdom's biodiversity within constraints imposed by South Africa's current economic and institutional capacity:

### Systematic conservation planning and prioritisation of areas

Rare and threatened habitats and processes within the Greater Cape Floral Kingdom will be the CCU's target in drawing up flexible conservation plans.

### Implementation of conservation plans

It is important to recognize the significance of the 'implementation stage', as it is crucial to the success of conservation measures. Effective mechanisms for translating recommendations from the planning activities into practice must be found. The development and facilitation of incentives for conservation initiatives on private land is an example of such a mechanism.

### Policy and legislation

The emergence of new national and provincial environmental policies and legislation has created a number of opportunities for conservation of biodiversity, and has placed renewed emphasis on the critical need to underpin economic development with sustainable utilization. We will endeavour to inform this process and contribute to the development and critical evaluation of policy and legislation. The focus will be on legislation that directly affects biodiversity conservation and sustainable use of our flora.

The CCU will also perform an important watchdog role in monitoring the implementation of and adherence to such policies, including South Africa's obligations under the International Convention on Biodiversity, ratified in 1995, and other international agreements.

### Advocacy and education

An aim of the CCU is to promote the conservation of indigenous vegetation as a biologically, economically and socially viable form of land use. To this end the unit will strive to create greater awareness among the public and decision-makers regarding environmental issues - including new laws and policies. The Unit will, therefore, actively disseminate project findings and other relevant information through the popular press.

In November we welcomed Wendy Paisley onto our staff. Wendy has many years of experience in the plant conservation world and has joined us as Administrator in the Cape Conservation Unit. Amrei von Hase will join the CCU in January 2001 as Conservation Ecologist on our Cape Lowlands Programme.

Should you wish to find out more about the Cape Conservation Unit or any of its programmes please write to <botsocsa@gem.co.za> or Private Bag X10 Claremont 7735.

## CAPE ACTION PLAN FOR THE ENVIRONMENT (C.A.P.E.)

The results of the world's most comprehensive regional conservation plan to date went on show at the Baxter Theatre this spring. The 2-year Cape Action Plan for the Environment (CAPE) initiative concocted a recipe for conserving the Cape Floral Kingdom and the products were displayed at a one day conference held at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town on 26 September 2000. The conference went off extremely well with over 550 people attending the day's presentations.

Minister of Environment, Valli Moosa opened the conference stating that CAPE was indeed a world first in planning for biodiversity conservation within a holistic framework and he wanted to see the other provinces following suit. Minister Moosa added that if South Africa were selected to host the Rio +10 Environment and Development summit in 2002, CAPE would be a flagship project.

It was indeed a landmark occasion for those who have been involved in conservation of the fragile Cape Floral Kingdom, and all the hard work and an unprecedented team effort paid off. The international donors were impressed not only by the level of scientific rigor and cross-discipline integration, but by the passion and commitment that South Africans have for their environment. Cathy McKinnon of the World Bank remarked, 'I refer to South African conservation scientists as Darwin's finches, who have been isolated for so long, that they evolved advanced mechanisms to overcome life's difficulties...'

Prior to the conference the international donors were shown aspects of the Cape Floral Kingdom. BotSoc conservation staff, Mark Botha and Kristal Maze, were part of the tour, and had the opportunity to present their conservation projects.

After the conference, the Director-General of the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Dr. Crispian Olver, chaired a discussion with various international funders and conservation non-government-organizations. Significant interest was shown in the Action Plan that was presented, and during the next six months, a formalized Working Group will finalize project proposals and negotiate with donor agencies. This should culminate in February or March next year, and we will keep *Veld & Flora* readers informed of progress.

## UPDATE ON THE CONTROVERSIAL LAND TAX

Opportunity for public comments on the Municipal Property Rates Bill has now closed. There is a lot of controversy and speculation around the possible effects of such a tax. This piece of legislation, as reported on in two previous issues of *Veld & Flora*, will have significant consequences for private conservation and the status of conservation-worthy habitat.

The Botanical Society lead a series of submissions aimed at providing security for land with high-diversity in the face of threats from municipal rates, and using provisions in the bill to encourage sound land-use management and private conservation in general. We promise to be vigilant regarding this and related legislation to ensure that biodiversity conservation is suitably encouraged.

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