

SO YOU WANT TO CONSERVE YOUR LAND?

A plea for more conservation options for farmers and private landowners.

by *Mark Botha*, Cape Conservation Unit, Botanical Society

Many people want to conserve their land, and I have tried to provide some insight into the options available and some novel solutions, recognizing the crucial role that private individuals play in conservation. Many animals would not be with us today if it were not for the foresight of several farmers (I recall the mountain zebra, bontebok and Addo elephant) and most of our rarest lowland habitats in the Cape (and elsewhere) have survived because of the commitment of landowners. Further, farmers manage by far the largest areas of threatened habitat in South Africa. Shrinking budgets and other socio-economic priorities have limited the management and expansion of the formal conservation network. There is thus a desperate need for private landowner involvement, especially in the rare and threatened habitats that are under-conserved in formal reserves.

To accommodate the diversity of landowner's needs and to cater for different tenure relationships, ownership scenarios and management objectives, the country must offer a range of options for private conservation. To be effective and understandable, however, the scheme should show national legislative cohesion and form part of a national protected area network. This requires clearer conservation objectives, criteria for inclusion and long-term protection of areas, which, hopefully, will be provided by new legislation on biodiversity that is currently being drafted by the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism. A guiding principle should be that the level of financial (or other) incentives

for conserving must increase in conjunction with the biodiversity value and the long-term protection enjoyed by land.

Opportunities for a new scheme for private reserves

The current suite of options to conserve land was not developed systematically, or co-operatively between the different conservation agencies, and there were very few incentives to encourage the adoption of any. Choosing the correct tool for the job is crucial to the success of a conservation initiative, and currently we have a seriously limited toolbox. The new biodiversity legislation should provide the framework of a Protected Area system that will accommodate private conservation. It is critical that the voice of organized private conservation be heard during public participation on the new legislation. Several provinces may need to publish updated regulations or ordinances concerning private conservation.

Some owners are incorporating biodiversity conservation as an economic venture or as a retreat, yet tightening economies may force many farmers to sacrifice what little natural habitat remains, unless strong inducements are provided to retain those pieces critical to conservation. Fragments of natural veld require innovative management to secure their ecological integrity and this will not be achieved through traditional statutory reserves. In times of limited resources and increasing threats (especially fires and invasive plants) co-management of areas and systems is crucial, and we need robust structures in our biodiversity legislation to accommodate this.

One of the main problems and limitations of existing voluntary schemes are the very low levels of security that they afford biodiversity, with people being able to withdraw at any stage, even after substantial investment of resources from conservation agencies.

An international lesson is the need to approach farm conservation in a building-block manner, allowing landowners to retain rights over land and gradually work towards greater conservation security with those who wish to receive greater rewards. We urgently need to develop a classifi-

cation scheme to assist this, as most people are naturally reluctant to sacrifice any rights immediately, even for the noble cause of conservation. It is also crucial to avoid current problems of subdivision of conservation worthy land for development or inheritance. This can be achieved through creative mechanisms such as transferable development rights and exemption of estate taxes.

Lastly, there is a significant, unnecessary loss of crucial habitat out of ignorance, both biological and economic, that must be prevented by effective and sincere communication and extension personnel.

Categories of Protected Areas

There are many different schemes or designations in South Africa in which landowners could be involved (21 at last count, and most listed in the accompanying table). They are not simple to understand, nearly identical in their approach, managed by different agencies (some national, others provincial, some parastatal, others non-aligned) and in serious need of revision. Government attempted to get around this by adopting the IUCN categories, which has made things even messier, as these overlap, or are not useful for private concerns.

We need to classify protected areas by their importance to biodiversity conservation, and not by who owns or manages them. If we do this, the role of private landowners is greatly increased.

I propose a new scheme, based on regional importance, landowner needs and mechanisms involved, that could be adopted around the country. The names of the designations are unimportant and several existing schemes could be modified to suit this arrangement. Inherent in this scheme is the 'Incentive' approach that should be built in to facilitate its adoption, and the legal framework for restricting landowner rights that would necessarily accompany each step.

Current options for private conservation

Options that apply principally in the Western Cape (but are generally applicable elsewhere) will be discussed in the proposed scheme. Details for other provinces are available from the author on request.

