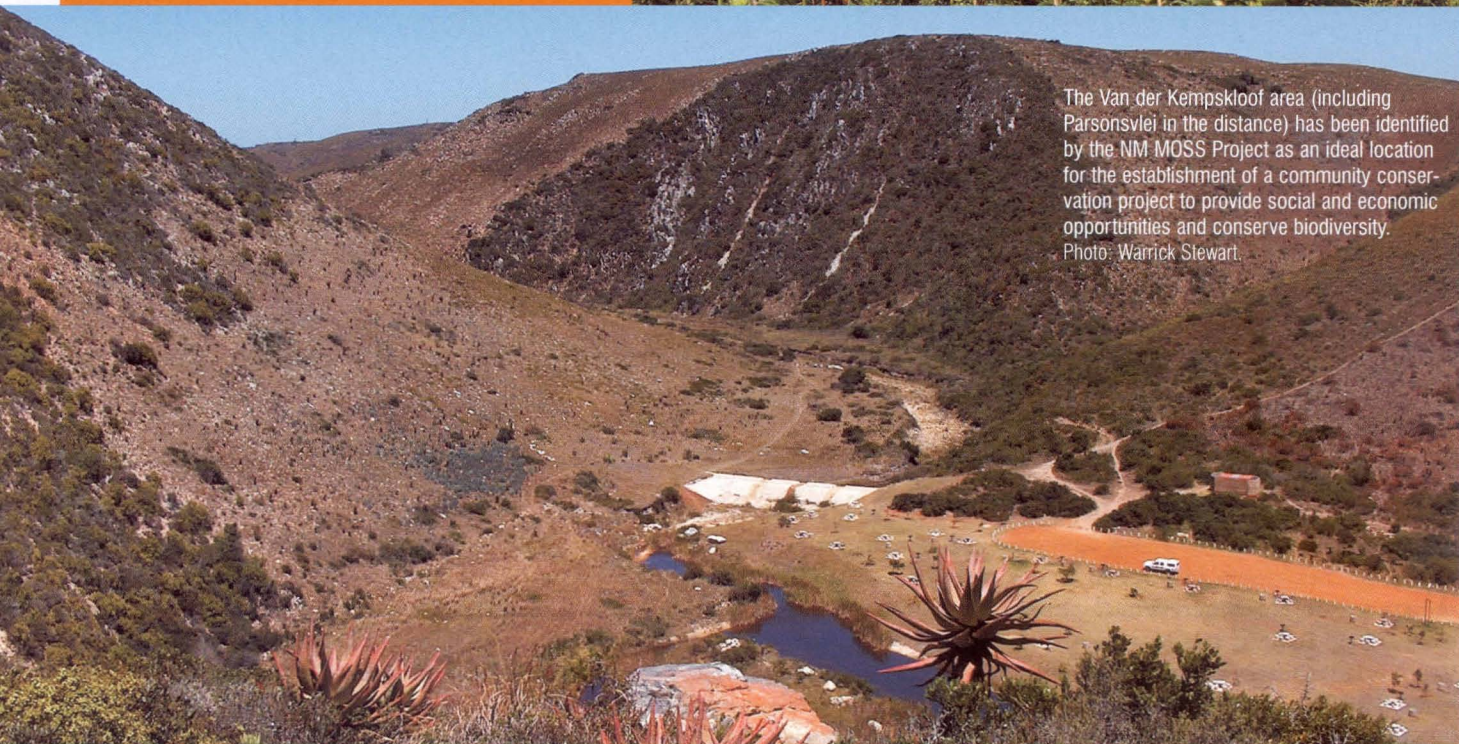


Five-biome city

A conservation plan for the people and other creatures of Nelson Mandela Bay*



Erica cerinthoides is one of the many charismatic species that will be protected by the re-zoning of municipal properties to Public Open Space in the greater Baakens Valley.
Photo: Warrick Stewart



The Van der Kempskloof area (including Parsonsvele in the distance) has been identified by the NM MOSS Project as an ideal location for the establishment of a community conservation project to provide social and economic opportunities and conserve biodiversity.
Photo: Warrick Stewart

by **Warrick Stewart**, Biodiversity Conservation Unit, Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa and **Julia Wood**, WWF-SA The Table Mountain Fund

As the only city in the world to harbour five biomes, Nelson Mandela Bay* has to be one of the most under-rated areas of natural splendour in South Africa, if not the world. It is an area of convergence of the Fynbos and Subtropical Thicket Biomes, home to the largest mobile dunefield in South Africa, and contains two of the most threatened fynbos vegetation types in all of the Cape Region, namely Algoa Grassy Fynbos and St Francis Dune Fynbos.

Algoa Grassy Fynbos and St Francis Dune Fynbos vegetation types were identified by Cape Action for People and the Environment (C.A.P.E.) as requiring urgent conservation. It was in light of their conservation status and the need for a scientifically rigorous conservation plan for Nelson Mandela Bay, that the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Open Space System (NM MOSS) Project was launched in January 2001 in an ambitious attempt to secure the protection of the remaining priority natural vegetation remnants and ecological processes of the 'five-biome city'. The project was established

as a partnership between the Biodiversity Conservation Unit of the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA), The Table Mountain Fund an associated trust of WWF-SA (TMF), the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality, the Mazda Wildlife Fund and the Terrestrial Ecology Research Unit of the University of Port Elizabeth.

The completion of the conservation-planning component of the project in early 2003 resulted in the identification of the conservation status of the remaining vegetation remnants and ecological processes in Nelson Mandela Bay. This information has been integrated into the municipality's Spatial Development Framework (SDF) and Integrated Development Plan (IDP) to inform land-use decision-making, and to guide the expansion of the Metropole's protected area system.

Plans for the Bethelsdorp area

Detailed plans for the expansion of the municipality's protected area system are being developed with further support from TMF, and include the re-zoning of remaining natural

areas within the Baakens River Valley and surrounds to Public Open Space, to afford these areas with formal legal protection. One of the other priority sites is the Van der Kemp skloof/ Parsonvlei area adjacent to the low income residential area of Bethelsdorp. Bethelsdorp is steeped in historical and biological importance, being home to the first mission station in the Eastern Cape (established in 1803), Algoa Grassy Fynbos and a diverse array of species of special concern, from plants through to things slimy. The establishment of a community conservation project (including a potential public-private conservation area of close to 2 000 ha within Van der Kemp skloof and incorporating Parsonvlei) has been proposed and is currently under development by the WESSA Biodiversity Conservation Unit and TMF. The development of a community conservation project at Van der Kemp skloof will draw on the experience of the highly successful Cape Flats Nature Project (which will be featured in the next issue of *Veld & Flora*).

The biodiversity of the 'kloof' is under severe pressure from over-grazing by communal stock farmers, extremely frequent burning of the fynbos to increase the carrying capacity of the area, the expansion of mining operations for 'red gravel', illegal hunting and alien invasive plants. A management plan for the sustainable use of the area for educational, recreational, conservation and economic purposes is urgently needed, and will serve as a precursor to the development of the community conservation project for the area, with the co-operation of its residents.

Bethelsdorp is also home to a large wetland, 'Varsvlei', which borders a number of schools, and serves as the ideal outdoor classroom. The diverse ecosystems of the area could provide wonderful opportunities for children to discover the amazing natural treasures that lie on their doorstep. An educational outreach programme will therefore be a major component of the com-

munity conservation project, and has already been launched with support from the RARE Programme of the CEPF, a programme that aims to increase public awareness of the biodiversity importance of the area.

By involving interested Nelson Mandela Bay communities in the protection of their natural treasures, the NM MOSS Project hopes to help bridge a small portion of the divide between

economic and social development and biodiversity conservation. We hope to instil in others a fresh understanding of the close 'web-of-life' in which we all live.

*The area of Nelson Mandela Bay consists of the former Transitional Local Councils of Port Elizabeth, Uitenhage and Despatch, the former Local Councils of Seaview and Blue Horizon Bay, portions of the former Western District Council and portions of the former Transitional Local Councils of Uitenhage and Port Elizabeth. The official name of the Local Governing Institution remains the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality.

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Walmer grassy fynbos, a sub-type of the Algoa grassy fynbos broad habitat unit, is home to a number of conspicuous species, including *Watsonia pillansii*.
Photo: Warrick Stewart.



WESSA Biodiversity Conservation Unit's vision is to catalyze the establishment of a secure system of conservation areas, representative of all habitats and ecological processes in the Cape Floristic Region. It is currently supported by TMF, CEPF and the Mazda Wildlife Fund. For further information on the NM MOSS Project and WESSA Biodiversity Conservation Unit please contact Warrick Stewart at email wstewart@wessa-bcu.co.za or telephone 041 585 1157. The Table Mountain Fund is a Capital Trust Fund run under the auspices of WWF-SA and is designed to provide a sustainable source of funding to support biodiversity conservation within the Cape Floristic Region. For further information on TMF contact Julia Wood at email jwood@wwf.org.za or tel 021 762 8525 or visit www.panda.org.za.