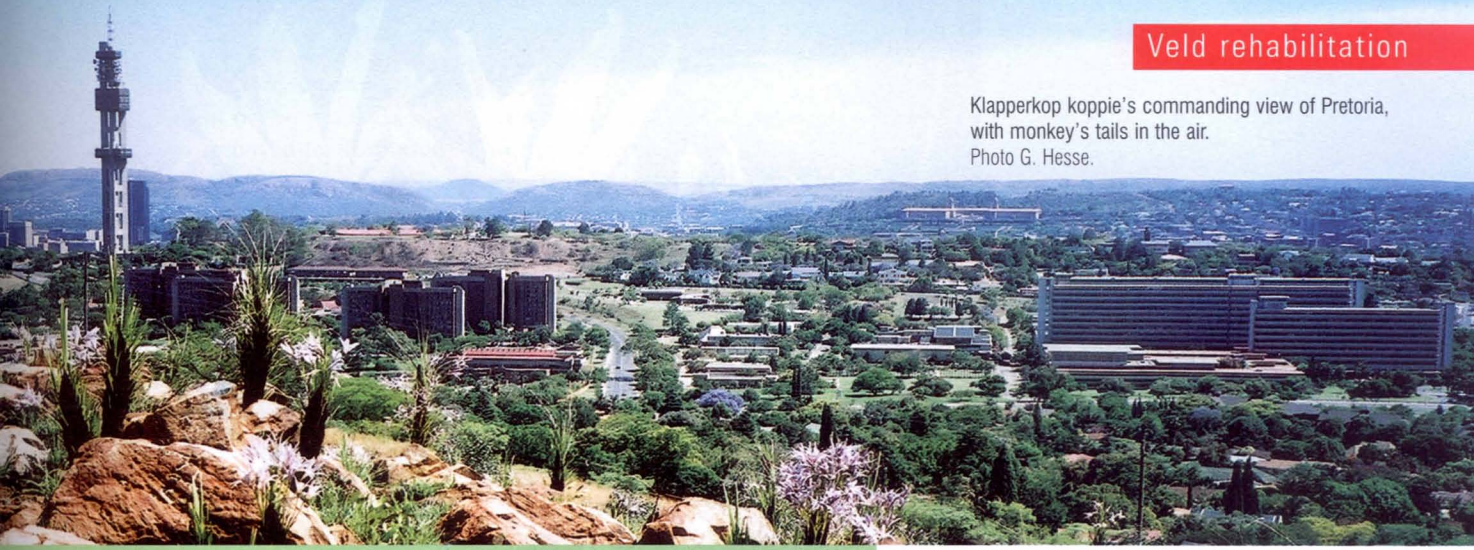


Klapperkop koppie's commanding view of Pretoria, with monkey's tails in the air.
Photo G. Hesse.



Klapperkop resurrected

By Gretchen and Viktor Hesse

Years ago, for Pretoria students, it was quite a romantic outing to drive along Johan Rissik Drive on the Klapperkop koppie to the south of the suburb Groenkloof, to admire the city lights and the illuminated Union Buildings, or watch the fireworks on the 5th of November. The best time was October. To see the entire city clothed in the purple haze of flowering jacaranda trees from a higher vantage point, was something not to be missed. That was before the invading wattles took over, and crime became a serious problem.

Drastic measures had to be taken, and finally the Friends of the Groenkloof Nature Reserve in conjunction with the City Council and the Working for Water Project started clearing the wattles and other noxious weeds. Now, travelling on the scenic drive is not a risk anymore, and one can safely visit the Military Museum housed at the Klapperkop Fort. The fort dates back to the Boer War, and is situated on top of the koppie.

After some early spring rains preceded by a veld fire, the north-facing quartzitic ridges of this area were transformed into a wonderland! The monkey's tails were in bloom! As Sima Eliovsen writes in her book *South African Wild Flowers for the Garden*, 'Few people who have seen what looks like a charred group of stumps in the dry veld can imagine that these produce posies of showy, sweet-scented flowers in early summer after rains'. Competing with the jacarandas, *Xerophyta retinervis* or monkey's tail or bobbejaanstert was surely the winner! Belonging to the family Velloziaceae, of

which there are only two genera and seven species in southern Africa, this fibrous perennial with its dwarf tufted stems, irregularly branched and covered with thick fire-charred leaf bases, has linear-lanceolate leaves in terminal tufts. The lily-like flowers are borne in profusion between the leaves on slender stalks, and are usually pale-blue, lilac or mauve, rarely white. They occur on the rocky koppies around Pretoria and Johannesburg, as well as in North-west Province, Mpumalanga and Swaziland.

Traditionally the stems are used to scour pots, and to make rope for hut- and screen building. Before paintbrushes became available, the Ndebele made use of the fibres to decorate their homes, to clean their teeth and to sweep their yards.

Xerophyta is derived from the Greek meaning 'a plant that loves dry areas' and *retinervis* from the Latin 'a network of veins', alluding to the leaves.

Amongst the rocks there were other interesting plants that caught our eye, especially a few large *Boophone disticha* (poison bulb or kopseerblom) with their round umbels of tiny silvery-pink flowers, *Euphorbia schinzii* (the klipmelkbossie) and *Becium obovatum*, to name but a few. Some of the lovely indigenous trees are thriving again, and we were amazed at the many species we could identify: *Burkea africana*, *Ochna pulchra*, *Rothmannia capensis*, *Rhamnus prinoides*, *Dombeya rotundifolia*, *Lanena discolor*, *Ziziphus mucronata*, *Brachylaena discolor*, *Rhus leptodictya* and the grey-leaved *Rhus zeyheri*, *Combretum molle* and *Combretum zeyheri* the most abundant.

What a wonderful discovery and surely well worth many more botanizing expeditions. It will take years of continued eradication of the invaders to rehabilitate this nature reserve, but future generations will surely enjoy the benefits thereof, as there are plans to fence about 1000 ha and re-introduce antelopes and other wildlife.

Why allow an area to deteriorate to such an extent as rehabilitation later is such a costly and time-consuming operation? But any effort, even if belated, is still worth the trouble, as the result gives so much pleasure.

For information concerning The Friends of Groenkloof Nature Reserve contact Robrecht Tryhou at 082 885 0573.

BELOW: *Xerophyta retinervis* commonly known as monkey's tail or bobbejaanstert. This plant was an impressive 90 cm tall. Photo G Hesse.

