

Project on the Agulhas Plain receives international funds

Mr Mick D'Alton, Vice Chair of the SMA landowners' association

The signing on Monday, 9 February 2009 on the Agulhas Plain of a funding agreement between South African National Parks (SANParks) and a group of landowners has cleared the way for a financial boost of €2 million for conservation on the Agulhas Plain.

The grant by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU) was made available following a submission by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) of an application, jointly prepared by the UNDP, the Agulhas Biodiversity Initiative (ABI) and the newly formed Nuwejaars Wetland Landowners Association.

The project will focus on measures to adapt to climate change, protect wetlands, reduce emissions from deforestation and improve the area's biological carbon bank. It will be implemented within the Special Management Area of the Landowners Association.

The Special Management Area (SMA) is the culmination of four years of joint planning by 20 landowners on the Agulhas Plain, including the Elim Community, and ABI. The aim is to ensure sustainable development and biodiversity conservation within defined zones, with the ultimate vision of establishing a new protected area while providing benefits for all the inhabitants of the region.

The Nuwejaars River wetland area consists of a mosaic of isolated patches of high potential agricultural land separated by stretches of rare and endemic lowland fynbos and wetlands on the northern boundary of the Agulhas National Park. A globally significant biodiversity hotspot, it is threatened by both climate change and development pressure.

The funds will be used to establish an effective fire management system, control alien plants and turn them into carbon storing products. In addition, wetlands and their associated natural habitats will be restored to ensure effective flood control.

Land management practices that promote the sequestration of carbon will also be promoted throughout the designated agricultural areas in the SMA. Such practices will include minimum tillage, use of natural compost to enhance the soil fertility, re-vegetation of cleared wetlands and marginal lands with indigenous plants, and maintaining adequate buffer zones between the designated conservation and cultivation areas in the SMA.

Mr Etienne Fourie, Park Manager of the Agulhas National Park, said the project was strongly supported by the Park and its staff. "It will ensure that environmental conservation of the patterns and processes on the Agulhas Plain remains both intact and integrated into the regional conservation ethos".

"By diversifying agricultural activities, we can reduce the carbon footprint of production activities," said Project Coordinator Rory Allardice. "An integrated fire management strategy is also essential to maintain carbon reservoirs. In addition, the SMA will contribute 44 000 hectares of land to the protected areas estate in South Africa. This includes Zoetendalsvlei, the largest natural body of fresh water in southern Africa with an outlet to the sea. Mr Tertius Carinus, Coordinator of ABI, pointed out that the SMA is regarded as a potential national model for integrated land use management and the conservation of private land. This model may be promoted by SANParks in their off-reserve drive for conservation of natural areas in private hands.

The project will be undertaken in accordance with integrated bioregional planning principles and is supported by the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism.

Background information:

- 37% of the Agulhas Plain – an area of 270 000 hectares of coastal lowland fynbos at the southern tip of Africa – is under legally binding conservation status. At least 40% of this surface area is on privately owned productive landscapes, reinforcing the important role of the agricultural sector to conservation.
- The Agulhas Biodiversity Initiative (ABI), one of several landscape initiatives in the Cape Floristic Region, integrates and coordinates efforts to minimise the further loss of threatened natural habitat on the Agulhas Plain. ABI is implemented by a number of partners who have agreed to work together and pool their resources to conserve the biodiversity and ecosystems of the Agulhas Plain. The ABI programme supports the Cape Action for People and the Environment (C.A.P.E.), another GEF-funded programme.

For more information, contact:

- Mr Rory Allardice, Project Coordinator, on tel. 082 929 9904 or e-mail roryallardice@telkomsa.net.
- Mr Tertius Carinus, ABI Project Coordinator, on tel. 082 908 2794 or e-mail tertiusc@sanparks.org.
- Mr Mick D'Alton, vice Chair of the SMA landowners' association, tel. 082 695 9835 or e-mail mandidalton@xsinet.co.za.
- Mr Nik Sekhran, UNDP Regional Technical Adviser, on tel. (012) 354 8003 or 082 964 2384, or e-mail nik.sekhran@undp.org