

Programme 8: Biodiversity Stewardship

What is Biodiversity Stewardship

Biodiversity stewardship is an approach to entering into voluntary agreements with private and communal landowners to protect and manage land in biodiversity priority areas, led by conservation authorities in South Africa. It recognizes landowners as the custodians of biodiversity on their land.

The Northern Cape Biodiversity Stewardship Programme is a conservation initiative led by the Department of Agriculture, Environmental Affairs, Rural Development and Land Reform (DAERL). It enables private and communal landowners to partner with government and conservation agencies to protect ecologically significant land. The emphasis is on a living working landscape which keeps people in the landscape and promotes an ecologically and economically productive landscape. This programme is part of a national strategy to expand South Africa's conservation footprint beyond state-owned protected areas, aligning with the National Protected Area Expansion Strategy (NPAES) and the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP).

To Note, protected areas are defined as geographic areas that are formally protected by the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act (Act 57 of 2003). They are managed mainly for biodiversity conservation, and contribute to the protected area estate.

Conservation areas are areas that are not formally protected by the Protected Areas Act but are nevertheless managed at least partly for biodiversity conservation. They contribute to the broader conservation estate.

Purpose

The Biodiversity Stewardship programme aims to:

Partner with landowners and other land stewards in order to:

- Secure biodiversity-rich areas through formal and informal agreements.
- Support sustainable land use that benefits both people and nature.
- Enhance ecosystem services such as water regulation, soil fertility, and climate resilience.
- Empower landowners and communities through conservation-linked livelihoods.
- Contribute to national and global biodiversity targets, including the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

Why It Matters in the Northern Cape

The Northern Cape is home to:

- The Succulent Karoo, one of only two arid biodiversity hotspots globally.

- Encompasses over 40% of South Africa’s land area, yet is underrepresented in formal conservation.
- Unique and endemic species, including the Namaqua chameleon, Karoo lark, and rare succulents.
- Critical Biodiversity Areas (CBAs) and Ecological Support Areas (ESAs) that maintain ecological connectivity and resilience.

The province faces increasing pressure from mining, agriculture, and climate change, making stewardship a vital tool for landscape-level conservation.

DAERL Support

The DAERL strives to support landowners who wish to enter into formal agreements under the Biodiversity Stewardship Programme through:

- Ecological Assessments: Expert evaluation of biodiversity value and conservation potential.
- Legal Support: Assistance with drafting and registering stewardship agreements.
- Management Planning: Development of site-specific conservation and land-use plans.
- Training & Capacity Building: Workshops on sustainable land management, restoration, and monitoring.
- Facilitating Access to Incentives: Potential tax benefits, eco-certification, and when available, conservation funding.

Stewardship Categories

Category	Description	Legal Status
Conservation Area	Informal recognition of conservation-friendly land use. No legal declaration.	Non-binding
Biodiversity Agreement	A formal agreement between the landowner and conservation authority to manage land for biodiversity.	Contractual
Protected Environment	Declared under Section 28 of the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act (NEMPAA). Allows	Legally binding

	for sustainable land use while protecting biodiversity.	
Nature Reserve	Declared under Section 23 of NEMPAA. Offers the highest level of protection. Often includes a management plan and zoning.	Legally binding
Special Nature Reserve	Reserved for areas of outstanding ecological value, declared under Section 18 of NEMPAA. No commercial activities allowed.	Legally binding (strictest)

National and Provincial Impact

The Government collaboration with NGO's and landowners across the province's has resulted in:

- ✓ “According to SANBI and DFFE reports from 2018–2022, over 1.5 million hectares being secured nationally through stewardship agreements, with more than 59,000 hectares assessed for formal protection. Updated figures are expected to be published in the next national biodiversity report.”
Stewardship contributes to South Africa's green economy, through job creation, eco-tourism and adventure tourism
- ✓ Biodiversity Stewardship contributes to sustainable agriculture and land use management. The Biodiversity Stewardship success stories across SA have demonstrated the importance of the overlap between agriculture and conservation and collaboration between these two sectors
- ✓ Biodiversity Stewardship success stories have highlighted the importance and valuable role of NGO partners working in the conservation and agricultural landscapes across SA.

Alignment with National Goals

The Northern Cape Stewardship programme was developed in alignment with:

- DFFE's Biodiversity and Conservation mandate to ensure sustainable use and restoration of natural resources.
- SANBI's role in spatial biodiversity planning and ecosystem-based adaptation.
- South Africa's commitments under the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework.

Biodiversity Stewardship is an evolving concept that is growing worldwide. Therefore, besides aligning with National Goals, the Northern Cape Stewardship Programme participates in the relevant Provincial and National forums as well, in order to strategically align with the other Provincial Stewardship Programmes and to implement the most recent developments in the Biodiversity Stewardship space.

Celebrating our Partners

The Northern Cape Stewardship Programme was launched nearly 20 years ago through collaboration with and the generous support of Non-Governmental Organisations. Over the years, this collaboration, together with the participation of willing landowners, has resulted in several success stories, which demonstrate that conservation and sustainable agriculture are a win-win collaboration.

Word Wildlife Fund South Africa & the Lesley Hill Succulent Karoo Trust (https://www.wwf.org.za/our_work/initiatives/fynbos_succulent_karoo/).

The WWF-SA Land Programme, with funding made available through the Lesley Hill Succulent Karoo Trust (LHSKT), has been working in collaboration with the DAERL, other NGOs and SANParks, to assist with Protected Area expansion in the Succulent Karoo Biome in the Northern Cape

The investment by the WWF in the Northern Cape has been considerable and includes support for Provincial Biodiversity Stewardship staff, operating costs, land purchases, and Biodiversity Stewardship agreements with willing landowners.

The WWF-SA has also assisted with protected area expansion through property purchases and includes 53% of the total combined area of the Oorlogskloof, Goegap and Avontuur Nature Reserves, and investment in projects in various regions in the Northern Cape. The investments in the various regions have taken place through structured stewardship projects with the DAERL, as well as through projects with other NGOs that have run in parallel with the WWF/DAERL Stewardship projects.

Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) (<https://ewt.org/what-we-do/conserving-habitats/drylands-conservation-programme/>)

The EWT is dedicated to conserving threatened species and ecosystems in Southern and East Africa to the benefit of all. To achieve this, their strategy focusses on three strategic imperatives which are Saving Species, Conserving Habitats and Benefitting People. The EWT focus area in the Northern Cape

encompasses the Drylands Region, including the Karoo and Namaqualand (<https://ewt.org/what-we-do/conserving-habitats/drylands-conservation-programme/>). The EWT Drylands Conservation Programme focuses on this region. The EWT is also piloting the use of servitudes as a stewardship tool, a first in the Northern Cape Province. An exciting sustainable land use project, launched by the EWT, is the Karoo forever Project that showcases numerous projects and online training for commercial and communal farmers (<https://karooforever.org.za/en/>).

Wilderness Foundation South Africa (WFA) (<https://wildernessfoundation.co.za/>)

Wilderness Foundation Africa is an African-based conservation NGO that protects and sustains landscapes through its agile and innovative approach to conservation. The WFA Protected Area Programme focuses on the establishment, development and management of new wildlife reserves and ecosystem rehabilitation, with an emphasis on corridors and linkages between protected areas. It was under this programme that WFA, through WWF/LHST funding, has contributed to the Northern Cape Protected Areas Expansion Strategy (NCPAES), working in parallel with the WWF/DAERL Stewardship Programme.

Over the past 10 years, project highlights include the WFA Northern Cape Land Project facilitating the declaration of five new provincial nature reserves, including four reserves created to protect the Northern Cape's unique 'mountain islands or inselbergs as part of the [Karrasberge Protected Area](#). The [expansion of the Namaqua National Park](#) also benefitted from the WFA NC Land Project with the declaration of the Gys Wiese Protected Environment (PE) adjacent to the Namaqua National Park, which now stands at 170 000 hectares. Another reserve is awaiting declaration and three more are under negotiation. An [ecological corridor linking the Tankwa National Park with the Cederberg](#) was established, as part of a long-held dream that started in 2008 to connect these two great wilderness areas. Also initiated during the 5-year period under review is the Sneekop Protected Environment (PE) outside Kamieskroon, which extends conservation across the N7 from the Namaqua National Park into the Kamiesberg.

A further eight sites are also under negotiation. Once completed this will contribute a total of 70 000 ha to the PA estate in the Northern Cape.

Conservation South Africa (CSA) (<https://www.conservation.org/south-africa>)

CSA Envisions an Africa where growth and development are catalysed through the sustainable stewardship of nature. Their vision is to restore and secure key reservoirs of nature across South Africa for the benefit of all; to work with communities, government, and the private sector; To

actively engage in the management of Africa's rangelands and oceans; and to promote planet-positive economies that support food and climate security, and biodiversity conservation.

CSA works with national, district and local government, local communities, civil society, and the private sector to implement sustainable landscape management strategies to restore degraded ecosystems while supporting the creation of green enterprises, green jobs, and green skills. Their focus is on vulnerable households with an emphasis on rural women, youth and small-scale farmers and fishers. Their work in the Northern Cape has spanned over the Kamiesberg, Leliefontein, Steinkopf and coastal communities.

Conservation Outcomes (<https://www.conservation-outcomes.org/what-we-do/>)

This innovative organisation is working to establish biodiversity-based economic ventures on private and communally-owned conservation and protected areas, in an effort to secure critical biodiversity and contribute to meaningful rural economic development. In order to support biodiversity and empower rural futures, Conservation Outcomes works alongside landowners, communities, and government to establish and manage protected areas outside of traditional state reserves. Their work helps conserve vital biodiversity while unlocking long-term socio-economic opportunities. Conservation Outcomes is also working with the Northern Cape to implement Stewardship Offsets, a conservation tool which can be used to mitigate development footprints in the landscape, when all other mitigations to prevent biodiversity loss have been explored.

Local Success Stories with pioneering landowners

Goegap Nature Reserve Buffer Zone - In partnership with local landowners, DAERL has facilitated the expansion of conservation efforts around Goegap Nature Reserve near Springbok. Through stewardship agreements, adjacent farms now serve as buffer zones, protecting rare succulent species and enhancing ecological connectivity.

Karoo Gariep Nature Reserve - The Karoo Gariep NR in the Upper Karoo region is a shining example of how biodiversity conservation and eco-tourism can go hand in hand. Through stewardship partnerships, the nature reserve protects critical habitats for species such as the one and only remaining Hippo in the Northern Cape and supports sustainable tourism initiatives that benefit local communities. It demonstrates the value of integrating conservation with economic development in arid landscapes.

Grasberg Protected Environment: Promoting Diversified Land Use

Located on the iconic Bokkeveld Plateau, the **Grasberg Protected Environment** spans 2,696 hectares of rich biodiversity within an internationally renowned Biodiversity Hotspot. As a typical commercial livestock farm in this marginal farming region, Grasberg has embraced eco-tourism to remain economically resilient while safeguarding its natural veld.

Home to three distinct vegetation units and vital transition zones, the property neighbours the Avontuur Nature Reserve, further enhancing its conservation value. Recognising the need to diversify income streams and reduce pressure on the land, the Grasberg stewardship initiative actively supports the ethos of a *living working landscape*.

Through the WWF-DAERL Stewardship Project's Technical Assistance Fund, the farm is expanding its eco-tourism offering and enhancing sustainable management with drone surveillance. This will strengthen anti-poaching efforts and improve livestock management in remote terrain. Grasberg Protected Environment stands as a prime example of how stewardship and innovation secure the future of agriculture and biodiversity together.

Strandfontein Protected Environment: The Northern Cape's Coastal Stronghold

Stretching across 12,258 hectares of pristine West Coast wilderness and 20+km's of coastline, the **Strandfontein Protected Environment** is a commercial sheep farm that has successfully diversified into eco-tourism. Visitors can enjoy remote bush camping along an unspoilt coastline that hosts rare and critically endangered species.

This property is among the last truly untransformed coastal landscapes in the Northern Cape, making it a priority for conservation. Supported by the WWF-DAERL Stewardship Programme, a comprehensive veld assessment is planned to inform sustainable livestock management within the Farm Management Plan, ensuring that grazing practices align with conservation priorities.

Strandfontein Protected Environment exemplifies how responsible stewardship protects fragile coastal ecosystems while securing long-term sustainability for local agriculture.

Papkuilsfontein Protected Environment: Where Conservation and Agriculture Thrive Together

Nestled on the Bokkeveld Plateau next to the Oorlogskloof Nature Reserve, the **Papkuilsfontein Protected Environment** covers 6,000 hectares of sheep farmland interwoven with rooibos tea production and vibrant eco-tourism. Identified as a candidate Protected Environment through extensive biodiversity surveys, Papkuilsfontein is a showcase of how conservation and agriculture can flourish side by side.

Backed by funding from the Endangered Wildlife Trust and supported by the DAERL Stewardship Programme, the property has hosted one of the region's most comprehensive biodiversity assessments to date, listing over 1,000 species—many critically endangered, endemic, or newly identified.

To diversify tourism offerings, Papkuilsfontein now features the Northern Cape's first *Via Ferrata*, introducing adventure tourism to complement its natural attractions and lessen pressure on sensitive areas. By growing sustainable eco- and adventure tourism, the farm balances conservation management with viable agriculture—an inspiring example of the *living working landscape* in action.

Avontuur Nature Reserve: Conserving Critical Bokkeveld Sandstone Fynbos

Located just 15 km north of Nieuwoudtville, the **Avontuur Nature Reserve** spans 1,300 hectares across the Bokkeveld Plateau—an area of global botanical significance. This unique reserve was purchased by WWF to protect the last extensive stretch of Bokkeveld Sandstone Fynbos in the North Bokkeveld, securing a vital refuge for countless plant and animal species found nowhere else on Earth.

Managed by **Avontuur Sustainable Agriculture (NPO)**, the reserve demonstrates how conservation and sustainable agriculture can go hand in hand. Conservation farming practices have been implemented to help the veld recover from historic overgrazing, while still allowing for responsible agricultural production that supports local livelihoods.

The reserve's diverse habitats are home to an exceptional array of fauna and flora, including several unique species endemic to this land alone. Avontuur Nature Reserve stands as a testament to how innovative stewardship protects irreplaceable biodiversity while showcasing sustainable land use for future generations

Get Involved

Are you a landowner or community member in the Northern Cape who would like to support conservation efforts? Visit the links we have shared to see what is happening in your area and learn more about our partners who are collaborating with the Northern Cape to protect our unique natural heritage.

- Broaden your knowledge and implement sustainable land use management practices in your farming activities.
- Investigate humane and biodiversity friendly options and implement these in your livestock and predator management activities.

- Share your successes and knowledge with your neighbours and the organisations working in your landscape
- Consider the Biodiversity Stewardship agreement options if you want to ensure the long term conservation of the critically important biodiversity on your farm. and become a guardian of South Africa's natural legacy.
- All landowners and land users are stewards of South Africa's natural heritage and can implement and improve sustainable management and more conservation focused actions. Whether you apply the principle to your backyard in a town or city, your community or to a farm. All positive conservation actions, big or small, contribute towards a cleaner and safer environment for all and a sustainable future for today and the generations to come.

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