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PRIVATE LANDOWNERS, GOVERNMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL NGO'S JOIN HANDS TO ACHIEVE GREAT GAINS FOR THE CONSERVATION OF SOUTH AFRICA'S GRASSLANDS AND WETLANDS

29th January 2014

Start

A major milestone for the conservation of South Africa's grasslands and wetlands was reached on 22 January 2014 when the MEC for Economic Development, Environment and Tourism, Ms. Pinky Phosa, declared five new protected areas in Mpumalanga.

South Africa's grasslands are poorly represented in formal protected areas and this declaration will now add over 73 000 hectares of important grassland habitat to the network of protected areas within the Province.

The new protected areas are as follows:

- The Chrissiesmeer Protected Environment (60 203 hectares);
- The Kwamandlangampisi Protected Environment, near Wakkerstroom which is extended by 3 094 hectares;
- The Mabola Protected Environment (8 772 hectares), also near Wakkerstroom;
- The Tafelkop Nature Reserve (1 208 hectares); and
- The first community-owned protected environment in Mpumalanga, known as the Mndawe Trust Protected Environment (826 hectares), near Lydenburg.

CEO of the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MTPA), Jacque Modipane, commented: "The protection of these properties under National Legislation, not only secures important areas of grassland biodiversity for future generations, but also enables landowners within these protected areas to work collectively to conserve their land, to implement sustainable land use practices and to safeguard against land uses that could end up destroying the area."

"Furthermore Chrissiesmeer and Wakkerstroom are important tourism hubs within the province and the protection of these sites will enable the continued development of tourism opportunities within these areas."

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The Endangered Wildlife Trust is a non-profit, public benefit organisation dedicated to conserving species and ecosystems in southern Africa to the benefit of all people.

NPO Number: 015-502, **PBO number:** 930 001 777, **Member of IUCN** - The International Union for Conservation of Nature
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In all of these recently declared sites, biodiversity stewardship has been a critical factor in enabling cost effective protected area expansion. It avoids taking land out of agricultural production, and has offered land owners a way to contribute to national biodiversity targets and benefit from incentives under biodiversity stewardship.

This momentous achievement was made possible through the collaborative efforts of Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency, the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), the South African National Biodiversity Institute's (SANBI) Grasslands Programme, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF SA) and BirdLife South Africa (BLSA).

It is the result of long and fruitful partnerships that began as early as 2006 and formed part of the Mpumalanga Biodiversity Stewardship Programme, which aims to secure privately owned land within formal protected areas.

Grasslands host a number of endemic and threatened bird species, while wetlands like the Chrissiemer pans support large populations of water birds.

The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) focuses on the conservation of threatened species and their habitats. Both Wakkerstroom and the Chrissiesmeer Lakes District are proposed Ramsar sites (wetlands of international importance) and provide critical habitat for numerous threatened species. The EWT spearheaded landowner engagements in Chrissiesmeer which culminated in the declaration of the Chrissiesmeer Protected Environment.

“We are excited about this conservation milestone especially in the light of the development pressures these areas face. The EWT would like to extend its appreciation to our partners and to the MEC for her visionary commitment to biodiversity conservation in Mpumalanga,” said Ursula Franke, Senior Field Officer for the EWT's African Crane Conservation Programme.

BirdLife South Africa prioritised the critically important yet, highly threatened grassland biome for conservation in 2010 and, with funding from the WWF Nedbank Green Trust, was able to meaningfully contribute to this partnership and the declaration of the Chrissiesmeer Protected Environment and other sites.

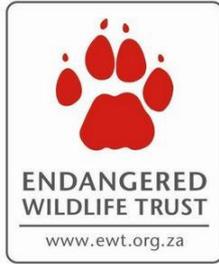
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“These sites all fall within the Grassland Biome and the Chrissiesmeer Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs). Chrissiesmeer pans and surrounding grasslands are immensely important for waterbirds and for threatened grassland birds, such as the African Grass Owl,” said Mark Anderson, CEO of BirdLife South Africa.

WWF-SA began its partnership with the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency in 2006 through Biodiversity Stewardship initiatives within the grasslands located in the Wakkerstroom area, which resulted in the declaration of the Kwamandlangampisi Protected Environment in 2010. The subsequent expansion of this work through these recent declarations is of major consequence given pressures from unsustainable development proposals that threaten this unique area.

Morne du Plessis, CEO of WWF South Africa, congratulated the MEC and the partners for achieving this milestone.

“Not only are these sites places of immense beauty and home to special plants and animals, but their protection also secures and enhances water and food production – our lifeblood. The location of these new declarations fall entirely within South Africa’s Water Source Areas that have greatest strategic value for sustaining our economy”.

“We encourage the continued expansion of these protected areas for the benefit of all South Africans and the environment they live in,” he said.

SANBI CEO, Dr. Tanya Abrahamse, added: “The MEC has displayed great vision in ensuring these important areas continue to play a key role in the sustainable development of the province. Areas like Chrissiesmeer and the greater KwaMandlangampisi Protected Environment are not only important for the biodiversity they hold, they are also critical in ensuring the water security of local communities, the province and the country.”

“To this end, SANBI has been a firm supporter of biodiversity stewardship which enables landowners, in partnership with the state, to manage their land for the contribution it makes towards ensuring healthy intact ecosystems, support human well-being and development.”

Through the Grasslands Programme, SANBI has supported the biodiversity stewardship programme of MTPA and worked with the NGO partners that support stewardship.

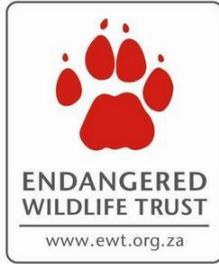
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Notes to Editors:

- The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) is dedicated to conserving threatened species and ecosystems in southern Africa to the benefit of all people. Our Vision is a healthy planet and an equitable world that values and sustains diversity of all life. The EWT was established in 1973 and is registered as a Non-Profit Organisation. The EWT fills the key niche of on the ground conservation action. We identify the key factors threatening biodiversity and develop innovative methodologies and best practice guidelines to reduce these and promote harmonious co-existence and sustainable living for both people and wildlife. We achieve our goals through specialist programmes, and our skilled field staff are deployed regionally and throughout southern Africa. The EWT is a proud member of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the United Nations Global Compact. Visit www.ewt.org.za for further information.
- The Grassland Biome has high avifaunal significance, because it supports about 350 of the 846 bird species, 29 of the 125 Red Data bird species (Barnes 2000) and 53% of endemic bird species (Clancey 1986) occurring in South Africa. Consequently, 50 of South Africa's 122 Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas are in grasslands (Barnes 1998).

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- The national Biodiversity Stewardship Programme aims to sign private and communally-owned land into voluntary contractual agreements that afford legal Protected Area status to sites of critical biodiversity importance outside of State-owned nature reserves and national parks.
- For information on BirdLife South Africa visit www.birdlife.org.za and Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs), visit <http://www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/important-bird-areas>
- WWF stands for the World Wide Fund for Nature. See www.wwf.org.za for more information. Join our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/WWFSA and Follow us on Twitter <http://twitter.com/WWFSouthAfrica>
- The South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) leads and carries out a range of research, planning, mapping and management model development programmes for biodiversity - both flora and fauna - and at species and ecosystem levels. In addition, SANBI is mandated by the Biodiversity Act to provide information and knowledge, and monitor and report on the state of biodiversity of South Africa. SANBI implements the National Grasslands Programme, which is supported by the United Nations Development Programme and funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF). Visit: www.sanbi.org and www.grasslands.org.za for more information.

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