



## CONSERVATION FRIENDLY FARMING: RECOGNITION OF OUR CUSTODIANS

28<sup>th</sup> January 2015

*Start*

The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) has developed an exciting new approach to the custodianship programme and is proud to announce a new process to acknowledge the conservation contributions of members of the farming sector in South Africa. Custodianship was introduced in the country in the early 1990s as a tool to recognise and acknowledge landowner contributions to conservation, and the process has recently undergone an overhaul to address emerging biodiversity challenges and facilitate long lasting collaboration between landowners and conservation officials.

The South African Constitution recognises the direct relationship between the health and wellbeing of humankind and the persistence of the natural environment and the biodiversity therein. With increasing pressure on the environment based on growing human populations and struggling global economies, the conservation community continually explores ways of efficiently and effectively implementing conservation actions for the benefit of people and the environment. The reality is that an incomplete network of nature reserves and other formal protected areas in South Africa means that only a small proportion of our biodiversity and the natural resources upon which our human population relies, is formally conserved.

Much of our most threatened biodiversity exists within our production landscape (community and privately owned farmland) and as such it is imperative that we develop ways of securing these assets.

South Africa has a deep heritage in commercial farming, cultural resource use and living on the land and it is this heritage that has resulted in our farming community having a general respect and pride for the biodiversity assets that occur within their respective properties.

"Many of these landowners go to great lengths to voluntarily take care of the environmental assets that they govern and it's these voluntary activities that contribute significantly to what we as conservationists are trying to achieve and hence we would like to acknowledge and encourage further contributions of this kind." says Dr Ian Little, EWT's Threatened Grassland Species Programme Manager.

Dr Ian Little, explains, "The key changes from the old custodianship process are the expansion from a two tiered award system to a three tiered system where landowners can aspire to be acknowledged

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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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as Conservation Champions the ultimate prize." Custodians are recognised for their efforts in conserving a threatened species in its wild habitat; this could be for a landowner, farm manager or even someone who doesn't own or manage a property but contributes of their own accord to species conservation. A Conservation Champion on the other hand not only contributes to the conservation of a particular species but rather, conserves a variety of species and their habitat. He continued "This third tier acknowledges landowners who implement exemplary conservation focused management (based on sound ethics) and are recognised as leaders and act as role-models in their communities in terms of their overall commitment to conservation on their land, over and above taking care of key species." Custodians are identified by the issuing authority or can be nominated by their peers within the community. There are currently a handful of species custodian programmes running in South Africa including those for Oribi, Riverine Rabbits, Blue Swallows, Cranes, and two new programmes will be the Sungazer and midlands chameleon custodian programmes. All of these except the latter are run by the EWT, which will be coordinated by the KZN Midlands Conservancies Forum. While there is no direct financial reward associated with this programme, the recipients will receive general management support and will enjoy wide recognition of their efforts. This is a matter of pride for the land and species for which farmers are the ultimate stewards.

New custodianship boards will be dated and issued for a five year period. This ensures that the recognition and communication between the issuing authority and awardees are maintained, and also ensures that the boards are not left to deteriorate through weather damage over many years. The intention is that the actions of these dedicated landowners will positively influence their neighbours and communities at large for the overall conservation of biological diversity and its associated resources.

### Who is eligible?

The first level is the Certificate of Recognition. These certificates are issued to any individual, community or company who has committed a significant amount of time and effort to the conservation of a species or its habitat and have proven to be an asset to the relevant conservation teams working towards the conservation of that species. These certificates are issued by the overseeing conservation body and can be issued to anyone regardless of whether they own property or have the respective threatened species on their land.

Custodian Boards are issued to individuals who own or manage land on which the relevant threatened or endemic species occurs, these individuals are also referred to as species custodians. Only those individuals who directly contribute to the conservation of the relevant species and its habitat are eligible for a Custodian Board. The board recognises the individual's conservation efforts and is

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displayed (optionally) at the entrance to the relevant property where these outstanding conservation efforts are being implemented.

Conservation Champions will be awarded based on an individual's exceptional efforts towards undertaking conservation on private land. Custodians and champions are nominated by a conservation official or their peers but, in exceptional circumstances, landowners can request custodianship or champion status in which case their management practices and conservation ethics will be assessed by one of the relevant conservation extension officers according to the specific criteria outlined for the species in question. Conservation Champions need to not only implement steps to conserve the threatened species on their land but should go above and beyond this in their efforts to ensure that all aspects of habitat conservation are exemplary and should further contribute to conservation efforts in the general area in which they live. These individuals should be role-models in terms of how members of the public voluntarily contribute to the preservation of all of our biodiversity assets.

The EWT would like to encourage our partner conservation agencies to initiate custodianship programmes and to thank all the landowners out there who are contributing to the greater conservation effort and making our jobs easier.

For more information and to see board designs and eligibility criteria see [www.ewt.org.za](http://www.ewt.org.za).

*End.*

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