



Mail & Guardian Greening the Future AWARD for the Cape Critical Rivers Project

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The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) is pleased to announce that the Cape Critical Rivers project - a partnership between the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), CapeNature, Freshwater Research Centre (FRC) and the Department of Environment and Nature Conservation – Northern Cape (DENC) – is the winner of the prestigious Mail & Guardian **Greening the Future Award in the Biodiversity Stewardship category**.

The project works on integrated and holistic solutions in the beautiful but threatened rivers of the Cape Floristic Region to address the problems facing freshwater conservation. These rivers have a high biodiversity value - they support 17 threatened fish species, have myriads endemic species, and support National Freshwater Ecosystem Priority Areas.

These streams in the area are under tremendous pressure as their waters irrigate the hub of the fruit and wine industries, supply domestic use, and their sensitive ecosystems have been disrupted by alien invasive fish species and habitat loss – presenting a real conservation challenge.

"The project has raised the conservation bar through a multi-faceted approach which has led to increased awareness of the conservation importance of our rivers and the development of innovative tools to keep the water in the rivers for the ecosystem's benefit. We have worked with farmers to enhance water use efficiency and undertaken high-impact interventions to safeguard species hovering at the edge of extinction," explains Christy Bragg, the EWT's Drylands Conservation Programme Manager and Co-manager of the Cape Critical Rivers Project.

River catchments are impacted by landscape-scale and multi-sector issues, therefore the solutions must be multi-disciplinary and holistic. "The reason for the success of the Cape Critical Rivers project is the great value of undertaking conservation in partnership. Partners bring a diversity of skills and experience to the problems facing freshwater conservation," says Christy Bragg.

One of the success stories of the CCR was the development of a Biodiversity Management Plan (a conservation tool formally recognised by the Department of Environmental Affairs to provide a multi-stakeholder framework for the implementation of species-directed conservation actions) for the Critically Endangered Barrydale Redfin and the recently-gazetted Biodiversity Management Plan for the Endangered Clanwilliam Sandfish.

The team also conducted the third-ever system-wide Clanwilliam Sandfish survey, where only 50 sandfish were recorded. However an important finding on this trip was the first-recorded sandfish spawning site, in

the Biedouw River. The team then successfully rescued 380 Clanwilliam Sandfish juveniles from certain death by predation of alien invasive fish and desiccation in drying river pools in the Biedouw.

The project has also produced a freshwater fish fieldguide (available to stakeholders on request) and generated increased awareness of the threat of alien fish species in critical fish habitat. The team developed an innovative spatial tool for use by conservation agencies to help prioritize risks of alien invasive species spread in critical catchments.

Bragg explains, “The special and unique fish in the cape critical rivers area need the summer low-flows of rivers to survive – thus if you steward the water, you steward the fish and other biodiversity that relies on that water.” Our strategy regarding water resource management in critical rivers has been facilitated by one of the CCR partners, the Freshwater Research Centre (funded by the Water Research Commission), and the team managed to collect hydrological flow data for four critical rivers, in order to compare flows with the Ecological Reserve requirements and create a user-friendly monitoring tool for managing river flows.

The project team works closely with local communities, such as Water Users Associations (WUA), and with provincial government agencies to ensure that the outcomes of the project are sustained beyond the scope of our own initial interventions,

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*Photo available on request.

Please visit www.ewt.org.za or contact DCP Manager Christy Bragg (christyb@ewt.org.za) for more information about the Cape Critical Rivers partnership.

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