

## **Pioneer project and government tackle challenges on Agulhas Plain**

11 March 2011: Government, non-governmental organisations and the Nuwejaars Wetland Special Management Area (SMA) met last week to seek joint solutions to environmental and social challenges facing the Agulhas Plain. The strategic workshop included high-profile delegates from provincial departments, local municipalities, SANParks and NGOs such as the United Nations Development Programme and the Table Mountain Fund.

The workshop, held last Tuesday near Elim, sought to find ways in which the SMA initiative could help government and NGOs meet their environmental objectives. It emerged that many of the SMA's goals align with government's environmental agenda. The SMA initiative could potentially assist in projects, including job creation through alien clearing and wetland rehabilitation.

The SMA initiative is the first of its kind in South Africa. Private landowners across some 46,000 hectares are working together to conserve the endangered biodiversity on the Agulhas Plain, without affecting farming operations and food security. The venture will become the first to obtain National Protected Environment status if the Department of Environmental Affairs grants the application.

During the workshop, the SMA's project coordinator Rory Allardice highlighted the differences between the SMA venture and other traditional protected areas. "The SMA retains the existing economic, social and environmental drivers and adds a parallel driver through natural biodiversity products."

Delegates at the workshop stressed the importance of the Agulhas Plain. Critical biodiversity areas are found within the SMA, including endangered fynbos species and natural veld. Scientists have warned the Plain will be hard hit by climate change and invasive alien plants. According to Willeen Olivier of the Department of Environmental Affairs, "There's some pretty important stuff down here (on the Agulhas Plain), including critically endangered veld. Rivers on the Agulhas Plain are all critically endangered, so it's very important to look at the conservation of river areas."

Onno Huyser, manager of the WWF-Table Mountain Fund said of the SMA, "Projects like the SMA are the currency of progress for sustainable land management, everywhere." He said the SMA brings people and organisations together, to provide long-term conservation security.

Members of the German Embassy also attended the workshop. The German government funded various SMA projects from early 2009, which will conclude at the end of March. Through the German funds, the SMA supported around five percent of those living in the Cape Agulhas Municipal area. Local people have been employed in projects such as alien clearing, wetland rehabilitation, wildlife infrastructure and fire management.