



Towards a sustainable Agulhas Plain

How the
Nuwejaars
Wetland Special
Management
Area was born:
2002 – 2011





NUWEJAARS WETLAND

SPECIAL MANAGEMENT AREA

The Nuwejaars Wetland Special Management Area (SMA) is defined as ‘an area of excellence and good practice’. It is a formally recognised area in which private landowners collaborate in collectively managing their land to ensure environmental, social and economic sustainable development and biodiversity conservation. The SMA involves 25 landowners together protecting rare and endangered habitat on 45 600 hectares on the Agulhas Plain, at the southernmost region of Africa. Aside from conserving the land, the SMA venture also seeks to promote the well-being of all people living within its borders and the surrounds.

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Published by the Nuwejaars
Wetland Land Owners' Association
(NWLOA)

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An SMA is born

It took six years for the Nuwejaars Wetland Special Management Area (SMA) to evolve from a vague concept to a working venture.



The SMA's progress

2002, June	Farmers meet to look at conservation on private land
2003, January	Agulhas Biodiversity Initiative (ABI) starts
2003, August	SMA Statement of Intent signed
2003, August	Section 21 Company registered
2007, March	Development framework accepted
2008, December	Nuwejaars Wetland Land Owners' Association (NWLOA) established
2009, February	German Federal Ministry (BMU) funding secured
2010, March	Financial completion of BMU funds

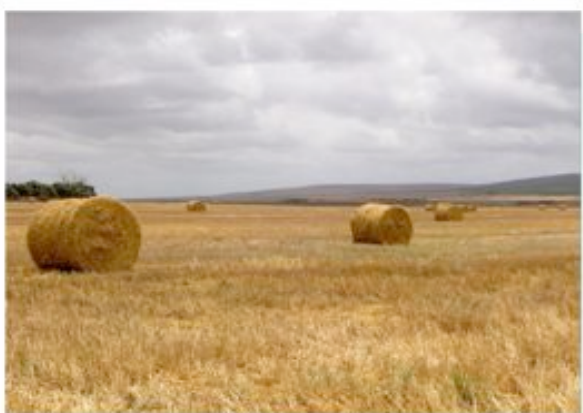
The Nuwejaars Wetland Special Management Area (SMA) offers a groundbreaking solution to the age-old conflict of farming while conserving. Today the SMA, implemented across private farmland on the Agulhas Plain in the Overberg, is the only one of its kind in South Africa. So much so that the United Nations Development Programme's report on the SMA quotes CapeNature as saying, "People are queuing up to follow the SMA model". Still, finding the solution that works for both the farmer and the conservationist forced those involved to rethink their preconceived ideas on both. And that took time. All in all, six years were spent developing the SMA from a vague concept, to a workable, and working venture.

The challenges? For one, there was simply no precedent in South Africa which the SMA members could follow. It was a pioneer concept in which conventional views on agricultural activities and biodiversity conservation had to be discarded. And creativity, innovation, imagination and persistence were needed.

For 25 landowners across the Agulhas Plain to commit to the SMA's objectives, as decided by its founding members, also required considerable

Conservation ahead of its time

In 1992 the Haasvlakte Farmers' Association, chaired by now-SMA member Dico Swart, highlighted the lack of conservation on the Agulhas Plain. At a meeting led by the late Michael van Breda at the historic Zoetendalsvlei Farm, farmers agreed to investigate creating a biosphere reserve around the Nuwejaars Wetland Ecosystem, to place these natural resources under one management. Could this have been the start of the SMA?





Map showing the SMA's location.



The Erica regia (Elim heath) is one of the rare fynbos species found in the SMA which now enjoys extra protection.

negotiations and determination – driven by their belief in the venture. Farming and conservation are often seen as conflicting practices. With profits from farming steadily declining, landowners may be forced to use more natural land. Therefore, encouraging landholders to conserve the biodiversity on a large scale on their own land, at great sacrifice to themselves, was a coup for the region.

No protection

The SMA's intervention on the Agulhas Plain was also timely: not long ago only four percent of land here enjoyed any form of formal protection. The rest was exposed to habitat transformation, alien plant infestations and all too-frequent fires. Land included in the SMA is home to countless vulnerable fynbos species, many found nowhere else in the world. A number of animals, birds and fish (such as the redfin minnow) are also dependent on working wetlands, which feed into the ecosystem. In fact, the Cape Action for People and the Environment (C.A.P.E.) describes the Nuwejaars Wetland Ecosystem as 'highly irreplaceable'.

More than 300 threatened fynbos species are found on the Agulhas Plain, with the SMA potentially conserving more than 200 of these. The Elim community, an SMA member, has included the pristine Geelkop Reserve, which holds numerous vulnerable species.

It was this realisation, that landowners on the Agulhas Plain were farming on a delicate, interlinked ecosystem, that sparked a renewed emphasis on conservation across a number of farms in 2002. This awareness was encouraged by the creation of the Agulhas National Park. Talks started between two

landowners, who discussed linking two vital lakes in the area, Voëlvllei and Waagschaalvllei. More landowners joined negotiations that year – and the conservation momentum grew.

It was during this time that the Agulhas Biodiversity Initiative (ABI) was

launched. ABI was tasked with finding viable methods of conserving on private land. The similarities between ABI's ideals, and the SMA's concept persuaded the two to work together.

Statement of Intent

By August 2003 the SMA was formalised through the signing of a Statement of Intent by eleven landowners. These eleven initial members undertook to investigate the

Traditional farming under pressure

Conservation hasn't always been important on the Agulhas Plain. Many farmers admitted in a recent study done by the University of Cape Town that survival is a higher priority for them. Landowners in the Overberg, who are generally livestock, grain, dairy or in some cases wine farmers, are under pressure. Input costs have risen on average 10 percent a year since 1994, while production prices have not kept pace. As a result, agriculture simply can't afford to support areas for conservation only. On the contrary, in many cases the natural habitat is damaged as more land is used for farming. The SMA initiative, however, is working to find a balance between conservation and agriculture, so that landowners make full sustainable use of their land, without affecting production and food security.



area's conservation needs. This included restoring the wetlands and other natural habitats, and collaborating in the long-term management of their farms. They registered a Section 21 (Not-For-Profit) company for the future management of the SMA. This dictated that all profits be utilised for the SMA's development goals.

With money obtained from the Development Bank of Southern Africa, it fell to consultants Dennis Moss Partnership to help draft a development and management framework. It aimed to promote sustainability in all forms of agriculture and slotted in with the national and international agenda – a process that was only completed early in 2007 (see box below). This framework was to give the SMA members influence over both the agricultural and natural land of its independent farmer-members. It was therefore essential to have the buy-in of all affected landowners, as well as local municipalities. This collaboration, too, was a first in South Africa.

The development framework sought to change the current thinking about sustainability, emphasising economic sustainability as being as valuable as environmental and social sustainability. To do this, the initiative had to look at launching eco-tourism opportunities and potentially selling the ecological services it could supply (like rehabilitating the wetlands).

The SMA also needed the support of

landowners in drawing up its Constitution. For two and a half years, this document passed from landowners to lawyers, and back again, with five drafts completed locally before the manuscript even reached the experts. By December 2008, all of the SMA's members had given the Constitution the green light, and they currently abide by its principles (see box right).

Preparing for climate change

Two months later, the first real steps were taken in evolving the SMA into a funded venture. A €2-million grant from the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU), facilitated by the UNDP and ABI, was signed for in February 2009. The first capital was received in July of that year. The BMU is a member of the International Climate Protection Initiative, and through this funding, the SMA, with UNDP and SANParks' input, set about tackling various projects linked to climate change adaptation. These were similar to the principles set out in the development framework. Projects included wetland restoration, alien clearing and game reintroduction.

Funding to employ a project coordinator to oversee the project's implementation also proved a vital cog in the SMA's wheel – with a grant for this secured from the Table Mountain Fund. The SMA was finally ready to tackle its many tasks. And that was when the real work began.



A strong Constitution

The Constitution ensures each landowner contributes to the SMA's conservation objectives, by bringing the land under joint management and preventing natural habitat from being lost. It has two vital components:

- It ensures the landowner retains control over his or her property;
- It requires landowners to agree to title deed restrictions, whereby those who inherit or buy the land in the SMA must abide by the SMA's goals as set out in the Constitution in perpetuity.

Moulding a development framework

A team, consisting of the four SMA steering committee members, a representative from SANParks, the Department of Agriculture, the Development Bank of Southern Africa, and led by Dennis Moss Partnership, dedicated many hours between 2003 and 2007 to compiling the development and management framework. This framework complies with Agenda 21's principles, a UN action plan on sustainable development adopted by governments and other groups globally.



Revitalising ecosystems on the Agulhas Plain



Many natural systems suffered at the hands of man's expanding influence on the Agulhas Plain during previous centuries – with habitats and species reaching the point of extinction or near-extinction. The Nuwejaars Wetland SMA is now re-establishing these ecosystems.

The Nuwejaars Wetland Special Management Area members were ready to implement their conservation strategies by early 2009 with the BMU funds. Wildlife management on SMA property topped the list of priorities. In fact, game formed a vital part of the development framework from the start. For one, having game facilitates climate change resilience, as the wild animals are much less destructive than livestock to the natural habitat. Game also offers an economic driver to landowners through eco-tourism and game farming.

First, the SMA had to erect a 120km-long game fence, creating a consolidated core conservation area and buffer zones (the area that serves as an interface between conservation and agricultural land). Agricultural land was fenced out, on which farm activities could continue. This separation is being tested through the use of new methods, such as electric fencing and lower game fences to keep game out of crops.

The SMA's management plan also ensured natural corridors were not broken up by agricultural land or by fencing. These corridors allow animals

and vegetation to move out of an area affected by the changing climate – allowing them to survive.

The return of buffalo

In April 2010, after the completion of boma facilities – arguably one of the best planned and developed bomas in the Southern Cape – the Nuwejaars Wetland initiative bought 15 disease-free buffalo. Records indicate that the last buffalo were seen in the vicinity some 200 years ago. These buffalo allow the SMA to develop eco-tourism activities, with regular buffalo tours available to the public. Income will also be generated through the sale of disease-free buffalo, contributing to the sustainability of the venture.

In the same year, five hippos were released into Waagschaalvlei. Hippos, last seen here 150 years ago, not only offer a rare sight to tourists, they also assist in wetland rehabilitation and peat rehydration. The animals spread water into the peat as they walk through the vlei, opening up blocked channels. This ensures the vlei systems remain linked to each other.

Game re-introduction

2009, March	Bontebok from the Bontebok National Park released
2010, April	'Quagga' released
2010, April	15 buffalo acquired
2010, July	Bontebok donated by CapeNature and the Overberg Test Range released
2010, July	Hartebeest released
2010, October	Five hippos released
2010, October	Eland released

Saving the bontebok

In the late 1800s bontebok faced extinction. Records show less than 20 animals remained at the time. In the 1930s, PK Albertyn of Zeekoeivlei offered up some of his land to conserve the bontebok. This land formed the original Bontebok National Park. With a number of PK's direct descendants now SMA members, it was fitting that the SMA, too, played its part in conserving the bontebok.



The quagga returns

The SMA is a partner in the Quagga Project – which aims to re-establish a herd of zebra that closely resembles the now-extinct quagga. It brings selected common Plains Zebra together with fewer stripes and a brownish colour, to concentrate these characteristics in one herd. The SMA is home to nine 'quagga'.



Aliens and fire: Tackling the Agulhas Plain's biggest threats

Experts warn that the Agulhas Plain will be more adversely affected than most by the effects of climate change, with temperatures rising and extreme weather events increasing. The Plain is frequently hit by wildfires, which are fuelled by out-of-control invasive alien plants that burn easily. This in turn puts more carbon back into the atmosphere. Wildfires don't just facilitate global warming; endangered fynbos, small animals and those jobs dependent on the land are usually the primary victims of fire.

The SMA gave immediate attention to its fire management and veld management plans with the BMU grant. Through its veld management plan, the SMA venture is employing local people from vulnerable communities to remove invasive alien plants and their regrowth. At the 2010 Fynbos

Forum, conservationists warned that the Agulhas Plain will be overrun by aliens in just 10 years.

The SMA initiative is also promoting secondary industries from its alien-clearing activities. The venture is creating additional jobs through chipping the aliens and using them in wetland rehabilitation, creating compost sold as fertiliser, and selling invasive alien material to a local factory from which charcoal briquettes are made.

Prepared for wildfires

The BMU grant has also allowed SMA members to equip themselves

better to deal with wildfires. The venture bought five fire units and a custom-made fire engine in 2009. When the Agulhas Plain was hit by a fire in December 2009, members were better prepared than in the past. Losses on SMA land were minimal.

The SMA movement is also working with government and municipalities in fighting fires – in a first deal of its kind between private landowners and government. The Overberg District Municipality manages the SMA's fire-fighting infrastructure, and employs and trains fire fighters through funding provided by the SMA.

The SMA has partnered with government's Working on Fire programme. Facilitated by ABI, and with additional funding obtained from

the Department of Public Works, the programme has trained and now employs a 26-man crew. They

maintain firebreaks and are on standby 24 hours a day, contributing to the entire area. The SMA has further facilitated the implementation of the Fire Protection Agency – a legal requirement for landowners.

Veld management also involves controlled burns. Fynbos needs to be burnt every 12 to 15 years to regenerate growth and create grazing for wildlife. But burning the veld also promotes the regrowth of aliens, and will require financial and physical input for many years after the burn. SMA members have already completed a 605-hectare block burn across a number of farms in 2010 – and plan more in the coming years.



The SMA is using chopped aliens in wetland rehabilitation, thereby creating jobs (below).



Alien Facts (Sept 2009 to March 2011)

Aliens cleared	900ha (dense)
Aliens cleared	2500ha (sparse)
Firebreaks	145km
Block burns	605ha
Trees planted	2500
Peat rehydrated	28ha
Eco-log structures	10

Fixing our damaged wetlands



The Nuwejaars Wetland Ecosystem and the surrounding catchments that feed into this system are integral to the region's biodiversity, as well as to human well-being. A number of coastal lakes are found on SMA land – with Zoetendalsvlei the largest natural freshwater lake in South Africa connected to the sea. The Nuwejaars River runs into Zoetendalsvlei, which in turn leads to the De Mond Estuary, a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance. This makes it vital to have a clean and natural Nuwejaars River for those species and communities dependent on it downstream.

In the SMA, members are now working to ensure these wetlands resume their natural functions – primarily by re-establishing and rehydrating peat, which stores both water and carbon. The venture is placing 'eco-log' structures across degraded sections of rivers. These structures are made up of invasive aliens that have been chipped. Chips decompose in the water, and this forms the basis for peat. The structures also create tiny dams, the right habitat for frogs and fish (including the nearly extinct redfin minnow species which is found only on the Agulhas Plain) to survive the dry summers.



Felled invasive alien plants have also been replaced with natural vegetation along riverbanks. More than 2500 indigenous trees were planted by the end of 2010. This indigenous vegetation is better able to withstand floods. Aliens are easily uprooted, washing away part of the carbon-storing peat, leaving the surrounding peat banks to dry in the sun. During the floods of 2005, peat of up to five metres was washed away. Given that it takes a year for just one millimetre of peat to form, 5000-year old peat was lost in a matter of hours.

Tapping into the carbon market

Hydrated peat stores carbon effectively, while drying peat releases it. Therefore conserving and rehydrating the peat is an important tool in fighting climate change. The SMA, with the help of a scientific consultant and by using a 3-D scanner acquired through BMU funds, is now trying to assess how much carbon is being saved and stored through its wetland rehabilitation project. By recording and analysing this information, the SMA venture could tap into the carbon market in the years to come. This is another attempt to make the SMA venture sustainable.



Rehabilitating the wetlands, however, holds a more immediate and important direct benefit for communities living on the Agulhas Plain. A wetland that is operating naturally provides clean water for those living in the area, and ensures the river system doesn't dry up, even during the summer months. Well-functioning wetlands also replenish underground water systems. With local communities and landowners often dependent on boreholes on the Agulhas Plain, working wetlands make for a sustainable future and a protected water supply in the region.

Becoming sustainable through renewable energy

Sustainability is vital for the members of the Nuwejaars Wetland SMA. That's why they set up a Section 21 company, through which all profits are pumped back into the initiative's development goals. As an example, the SMA has put up four renewable power facilities – consisting of solar panels and wind turbines at its energy-intensive wine cellars within its borders. In this way, money that would have been paid to a power utility is now going straight back into the SMA. This creates jobs by funding continued alien-clearing operations and wetland rehabilitation.





Using nature to create jobs

Eco-tourism opportunities

The SMA initiative premiered its eco-tourism venture by offering guided tours to the buffalo at their boma. Here they introduced tourists not only to the animals, but also to the ground-breaking concept that is the Special Management Area.

Now further eco-tourism activities are being planned. Two bird hides have been constructed and cultural tours are being set up. Botanical interpretive tours will cater for the fynbos enthusiasts, while game drives will give added value.

These activities will create ancillary employment opportunities such as those needed in the hospitality industry. The venture will also require guides and rangers – providing them the opportunity for training and skills development. And local people will be able to manufacture and sell goods (like fynbos bouquets) to satisfy tourist demand.

The eco-tourism industry can offer further nature-based opportunities for local entrepreneurs, creating more sustainable jobs on SMA land.

During the BMU Project, the SMA venture supported some five percent of those living in the Cape Agulhas Municipal area, through its 270 direct employees and their dependents. More specifically, within the SMA's borders, the venture supported a quarter of the area's inhabitants. These 'green' employees were local residents only – many from vulnerable rural communities.

The project offered employment in five primary areas: fencing, alien clearing, wetland rehabilitation, wildlife infrastructure and fire management – substantially improving skills in the area. The projects have demanded specialist knowledge and application, proving the human capital of the Agulhas Plain has the skills to manage and build resilience as climate change takes hold. This is one of government's national objectives, given that vulnerable members of society are likely to be hardest hit by global warming.

The initiative has also highlighted the region's leadership skills, with the management team taking the SMA from an idea, to a well-developed and managed venture once funds were secured.

Flipping the economy

Still, social sustainability is integral, as set out in the initiative's development framework. Many nature-based business opportunities exist, including eco-tourism businesses, sustainable flower

Jobs created through BMU funding (Sept 2009 – March 2011)

Alien Clearing	144
Fences	50
Working on Fire	26
Wetlands	12
Management & Office	4
Students	2

harvesting, ecosystem services and secondary industries. Statistics show that developing these industries could flip the economy from a pure agricultural one, doubling the number of careers per unit area.

This would further boost job creation on the Agulhas Plain, where, like the rest of the country, unemployment rates have been high in the past. Recently local economists put the jobless rate at nearly 80 percent. Given

its recent experience – as one of the region's single largest employers – the SMA venture is perfectly placed to drive a new recruitment, training and entrepreneurial phase into the future.

Culture and heritage – both of which abound within the SMA's borders – also need protection. The small historic town



of Elim, which dates back to 1824 and is only inhabited by Moravian Church members, is an important member of the SMA. Developing the town's tourism potential will create opportunities for small businesses. This will help provide a culturally-rich lifestyle for all its residents.

What the experts say of the Nuwejaars Wetland SMA:

“The SMA is playing a pivotal role in showing the world how, beyond conserving biodiversity, protected areas can contribute to reducing the vulnerability of local communities to climate change, in this case from climate change induced floods and catastrophic wildfires.”

Nik Sekhran, Chief
Technical Advisor, UNDP-
GEF

“I’m most impressed with the commitment and conviction the SMA has shown in developing its vision, and driving the implementation. I believe this type of model of landscape management is globally relevant and will have to become the norm in the next 20 years if we stand any real chance of addressing the food security, conservation, adaptation, and mitigation needs of society.”

Onno Huyser, Manager,
Table Mountain Fund

“The BMU capital investment... has gone a long way to supporting a new model of collective landholder action to ‘flip’ land use practices towards land use that is more dependent on sustaining biodiversity, eco-tourism and carbon- and energy-neutral production. This is an innovative investment that has created... solutions to the challenges of climate adaptation and securing natural habitats.”

Dr Brian Child, Associate
Professor, University of
Florida / UNDP Consultant

“I believe the SMA provides a powerful model of collective conservation by landowners, and is piloting innovative approaches to climate change adaptation on the Agulhas Plain. Other landscape initiatives across the C.A.P.E. partnership are watching the SMA’s progress with interest.”

Dr Mandy Barnett,
Coordinator, C.A.P.E.

The SMA in the global context

The concept of a Special Management Area gives the land refuge or ‘special’ status. The term originated in America, where a number of SMAs are found. In most cases, responsibility is shared in an area of excellence, where sustainability is practiced. SMAs are designated by management strategy, and protect land of international importance.

Still, there is one major difference between international SMAs and the Nuwejaars Wetland SMA. Most SMAs are continuously funded. The Nuwejaars Wetland SMA is using agriculture as an economic driver, and other biodiversity economic drivers (like eco-tourism) to become sustainable.

Dennis Moss Partnership presented this fresh new approach to conserving the natural landscape at the World Congress of Biosphere Reserves held in Madrid in 2008. This concept was new to participants at the conference. Following the event, the Nuwejaars Wetland SMA’s philosophy was built into the Madrid Action Plan, to achieve Man and the Biosphere (MaB) principles.

The Nuwejaars Wetland SMA also fits with the international objectives

identified by the United Nations and driven through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) and the UNDP. It addresses the Agenda 21 principles laid down at UNCED conferences, which have been adopted as the foundation for the South African National Outcomes and Provincial Strategic Objectives.

Sustainable capital

An SMA must find ways of unlocking sustainable capital – and that is what the Nuwejaars Wetland SMA sets out to achieve through its development framework and management strategy. That means taking advantage of its physical assets and infrastructure, its natural capital and its human capital.

The SMA initiative has the infrastructure in place, acquired through the BMU funds. It also has the natural capital – the uniqueness of the area and the endangered habitats and species that live here. And it has the human capital – those skills in the area. These assets must now be used collaboratively to secure sustainability.



The town of Elim, viewed from Geelkop Reserve.



The way forward

The Nuwejaars Wetland Special Management Area offers a new model of collective landowner action, which is likely to prove vital in conserving the endangered Cape Floristic Region. This model is considered by conservation organisations and landowners alike as a way to combine conservation, climate change resilience, and agriculture. Already three potential SMAs are being proposed in the Overberg by landowners, while SANParks is considering the model in its buffer zones.

Still, the Nuwejaars Wetland SMA experience shows that in order to implement this model, landowners themselves need to drive its creation. And for that, they need time, effort, innovative thinking and persistence.

They also need financial support, as the venture takes its first steps in becoming sustainable. Through the BMU funds and through support from partners, the Nuwejaars Wetland SMA members helped make the environment, the economy and the people more resilient to the effects of climate change. For the members, it has meant a change from traditional methods, to a greener, more sustainable way of farming.

Planning for sustainability

Now the Nuwejaars Wetland venture must plan the way forward – building on the foundations already laid. The ultimate goal? To become sustainable – environmentally, socially and economically. Members have already applied for Protected Environment status to the Department of Environmental Affairs. Plans to become registered as an international carbon provider are also being made.

On SMA land, members will have to further implement sustainable drivers, developing eco-tourism opportunities, ecological services, and other nature-based economic opportunities to improve the livelihoods of all those living on the Agulhas Plain. Building climate change resilience into the everyday lives of its residents is imperative.

Government, national and international conservation groups and private landowners are watching the Nuwejaars Wetland SMA with interest. SMA members should once again lead the way in collective conservation action on private land.

Elim (below) is a key partner in the SMA.



Vital statistics

The grant given by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety allowed the SMA to buy and build much-needed infrastructure. These included:

- A truck, bakkies, tractors, trailers and a bus;
- Five fire units and a fire engine;
- Alien-clearing equipment;
- Two chippers;
- A 3-D scanner;
- Compost turner;
- Office equipment;
- Two bird hides;
- Buffalo boma;
- Game (See P5);
- Game fencing;
- Two information kiosks;
- Four renewable energy facilities.



Progressive sunset at Waagschaalvlei – taken one summer’s evening.

Our thanks to our partners:

The Nuwejaars Wetland Special Management Area has a long list of partners to thank for their input and help from 2002 to date. Here is a list, although this list is not exclusive:

Agulhas Biodiversity Initiative;
Cape Action for People and the Environment;
Cape Agulhas Municipality;
Cape Agulhas Tourism Bureau;
CapeNature;
Dennis Moss Partnership;
Department of Agriculture;
Department of Environmental Affairs;
Development Bank of Southern Africa;
Fauna & Flora International and the Arcadia Fund;
German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety;
Global Environment Facility;
Overberg District Municipality;
Overberg Test Range;
South African National Parks;
Table Mountain Fund;
United Nations Development Programme;
Working on Fire.

A special thanks also to our dedicated staff and the SMA members.

Photo credits

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