



Media Release

23 February 2010

Starts

CELEBRATING BIODIVERSITY - 2010

The International Year of Biodiversity 2010 is a global campaign designed to encourage worldwide action to safeguard biodiversity. It is a celebration of life on Earth and of the value of biodiversity for our lives. It is an opportunity for every person to act; together we can ensure a sustainable future for all life.

The United Nations declared 2010 the International Year of Biodiversity and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is driving the global campaign. The CBD is one of the most signed onto treaties in the world, and deals with the need to sustain the rich diversity of life on Earth. In 2002 the CBD adopted the 2010 Biodiversity Target, an international commitment to reduce biodiversity decline by 2010. However, the Target was never met and the world is now negotiating its revision.

There are several South African initiatives under way, of which the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), Wildlife & Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA), The Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB), the Wilderness Foundation and the Cape Leopard Trust are driving just a few.

What is biodiversity?

It is the network of life. Every living organism, the variation among and within species, the variation in the genetic make-up of species and all the processes that support these species are collectively known as biodiversity. We are biodiversity, along with the 13 million other species on our planet, and the global cycles that allow all these organisms to exist – the water cycle, the nutrient cycle, the oxygen cycle, to name a few.

Why does biodiversity matter?

Our lives depend on it. Loss of biodiversity will have drastic impacts for livelihoods, human health, economies and our way of life. The services and goods that nature provides and that we take for granted such as the food we eat, the water we drink and the air that we breathe, will be lost if the current rate of biodiversity loss continues.

The poor are especially vulnerable because they do not have the means to produce or even use technology to solve their problems. For example, while many marine fisheries have been depleted, fishing fleets have simply shifted to previously underexploited stocks to ensure that the wealthy continue to receive the same level of supply. The poor are however unable to do this and their very survival is affected by the loss. Where water pollution has caused diseases to break out, the wealthy have access to advanced medical care to avoid serious illness and death, while the poor are highly vulnerable.

But the rich are also affected as ultimately, biodiversity underpins all life on earth. Everyone is affected by the effects of natural disasters, worsened by the loss of local biodiversity, or by rising food costs and polluted water catchments and it is everybody's challenge to solve the problems left in the wake of biodiversity loss. Some examples:

- In KwaZulu-Natal alone about 70% of people rely on traditional medicine for their primary form of healthcare and this comes from indigenous plants and animals - biodiversity.
- In 1995 the expenditure on medicinal plants in South Africa was R768 million. Several hundred thousand people are directly employed in the industry.
- KwaZulu-Natal's wetlands are worth an estimated R200 000 per hectare per annum for their water catchment and purification value, and forests around R21 000 per hectare per annum.
- The economic losses of ecosystem services in the Fynbos due to alien plant invasion amount to almost R700 million per year.
- Globally economic losses due to invasive alien species amount to almost 5% of the world economy.
- Wood fuel is the main source of energy for about 75% of rural South African families.
- Rural and urban households use woodland products to an estimated value of R5 500 per household per year.

Biodiversity allows our planet to adapt to changes and so ensure our future survival. The less biodiverse the planet is, the more vulnerable we are and less able we are to adapt.

What is the status of the Earth's biodiversity?

It is declining rapidly. Experts estimate that at least 34 000 plant and 5 200 animal species face extinction today and this will increase dramatically if current trends continue. Biodiversity is being lost at 100 times the rate of previous extinctions documented in fossil records. Human beings are driving much of this. Some examples:

- The human population increased by 34% since 1987 and there are currently about 6.5 billion people on the planet, with the number still rising. Consumption rates also increased by 300% in this time.
- We lose 50 000 km² of primary forest every year.
- More land was converted to cropland between 1950 and 1980 than between 1700 and 1850.
- About 20% of world's coral reefs were lost and another 20% degraded in the past few decades.
- About 35% of mangroves were lost in the past few decades.
- Desertification costs the world an estimated US\$42 billion per year.

What is the status of South Africa's biodiversity?

Comparatively good. However it is declining.

- South Africa contains the 3rd highest level of biodiversity of all the countries in the world.
- South Africa is home to 10% of the planet's plants and 7% of reptiles, birds and mammals.
- Our coastline contains 15% of world's coastal species.
- South Africa is the only country in the world to contain an entire floral kingdom within its borders – the Fynbos.

However:

- Only 18% of our river systems are intact while 54% are Critically Endangered.
- More than 50% of our wetlands have been destroyed.

- Alien plants have invaded more than 10 million hectares of our land, obliterating indigenous species.
- 34% of our terrestrial ecosystems are classified as threatened.
- 20 of our 25 key commercial marine fish species are over-fished and stocks have collapsed.

What can you do to protect biodiversity?

- Learn about biodiversity and teach others what you've learnt.
- When shopping, always choose products that use less packaging.
- Buy locally produced products as much as possible.
- Grow your own fruit and vegetables.
- Question retailers about their products and ask them to stock environmentally responsible products.
- Buy only what you need.
- Replace alien plants with indigenous ones.
- Use fewer pesticides and other chemicals, or switch to natural alternatives.
- Reduce, reuse and recycle.
- Calculate and reduce your carbon footprint (visit www.cap.org.za).
- Use the power of your vote to protect biodiversity.
- Support biodiversity conservation initiatives such as the Endangered Wildlife Trust.

What we're doing to protect biodiversity:

The Endangered Wildlife Trust – www.ewt.org.za:

- We protect threatened species and the habitats in which they live, which also benefits people dependent on the same land.
- We prevent species from becoming endangered by monitoring populations and working with stakeholders to provide realistic solutions to the threats to biodiversity, all based on on-the-ground experience and scientific research.
- We are developing the next generation's leaders so that our work can continue and improve in future.

SANCCOB – www.sanccob.org.za:

- SANCCOB plays a reactive role in conserving seabirds through the successful rehabilitation and release of oiled, ill, injured and orphaned seabirds, and a pro-active role in partnering with organizations working towards minimizing the factors that cause natural decline in Southern African seabird populations.
- We inform the public and school learners about the role they can individually play in affecting the marine environment, either positively or negatively, and provide specialist training to seabird conservation partners.
- We identify key elements that aid our understanding to conserve seabirds and to assist us to make informed management decisions, and to carry out research projects which speak to these core issues.

The Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA) – www.wessa.org.za:

- Contribute to the formulation of biodiversity related legislation and protect the legislation from amendments that may undermine life-support systems and fail to protect the diversity of life in our country and protect sensitive ecosystems and habitats as the basis for broader species protection and human livelihoods and well being.
- Endorse and support initiatives such as the Conservancies and Stewardship programmes that enable conservation in non-protected areas and monitor the ability of those institutions charged with protecting our biodiversity, and particularly our protected areas, to fulfil their obligations.
- Assist in developing techniques for understanding the functioning of life-support systems and the role that these systems and biodiversity play in our livelihoods and well being and

provide opportunities for all sectors of society to experience and learn about our environment in ways that generate an appreciation of the functions that these systems perform as well as their intrinsic, cultural, aesthetic and spiritual value.

The Wilderness Foundation – www.wildernessfoundation.org.za:

- The Wilderness Foundation is a project-driven conservation and leadership organisation that strives to create opportunities for economic and social equality and achieves its mission by initiating and implementing programmes concentrated in four main areas: Conservation; Social; Advocacy and Awareness; and Experiential Education.

The Cape Leopard Trust – www.capeleopard.org.za:

- We are researching and conserving the threatened leopard population in the Cape mountains.
- We use the leopard as a flagship species to highlight the importance of a healthy ecosystem, where predator diversity plays an important role in the system.
- We run an environmental education programme which provides children with experiences which kindle interest and connection with the wonders and diversity of life.

Ends

Contact: Hayley Komen
Communications Manager
Endangered Wildlife Trust
Tel: +27 (0)11 486 1102
E-mail: media@ewt.org.za
www.ewt.org.za

Margaret Roestorf
Fundraising & Marketing Co-coordinator
SANCCOB
Tel: +27 (0)21 557 6155
E-mail marketing@sanccob.co.za
www.sanccob.co.za

Bryan Havemann
National Director of Conservation
WESSA
Tel: +27 (0)33 330 3931 ext 146
E-mail: bryan@wessa.co.za
www.WESSA.org.za

Matthew Norval
Director: Conservation Programme
Wilderness Foundation
Tel: +27 (0)41 3730293
E-mail: matthew@sa.wild.org
www.wildernessfoundation.org.za

Quinton Martins
Project Manager
Cape Leopard Trust
Tel: +27 (0)27 482 9923
Email: quinton@capeleopard.org.za
www.capeleopard.org.za