

Conservation bodies and wine industry join forces to protect Cape Ecology

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Western Cape and international conservation bodies have joined forces with the South African wine industry to form the Biodiversity and Wine Initiative to prevent the potential destruction of the province's plant and animal life by the proliferation of vineyards in ecologically sensitive areas.

According to Dr Johan van Rooyen, chief executive of the South African Wine and Brandy Company (SAWB), the growth of the local wine industry - which is predominantly situated in the Western Cape - cannot be allowed to expand to the detriment of the Cape Floral Kingdom and the region's animal life.

'Despite the wine industry's contribution to the local and national economy, and the pressure on the industry to become more globally competitive, growth and expansion cannot take place at the cost of the Western Cape's unique natural environment,' says Van Rooyen.

'The Cape Floral Kingdom is recognised as a global diversity hotspot and a World Heritage Site, being one of the richest reservoirs of plant and animal life on earth, the home of some 9 600 plant and tens of thousands of animal species. However, the Western Cape also happens to be the South African region most suited to vineyard cultivation for winemaking, with 90% of the country's wine produced in this province. Until now vineyard development has proliferated on a largely uncontrolled basis and there has been little attempt to create a vineyard environment that is in harmony with the ecology.'

Western Cape vineyards total some 95 000ha.

Van Rooyen says studies commissioned by the SAWB as part of the industry's Integrated Production of Wine (IPW) programme have to date not found signs of major damage to the environment resulting from vineyard expansion.

'But to ensure no future harm is done to the natural environment, the wine industry has teamed-up with various leading conservation authorities to launch the Biodiversity and Wine Initiative to protect the interest of both parties and to establish vineyards that are not invasive, but integral parts of the natural landscape,' says Van Rooyen.

A boom in wine exports during the last decade created concern within the conservation sector that some of the region's most vulnerable natural habitat, especially renosterveld and lowland fynbos, might be targeted for vineyard expansion. Following an initial study by the Botanical Society of South Africa together with Conservation International, the conservation sector and the South African wine industry - through the SAWB - decided to embark on a major initiative to incorporate biodiversity best practices in the local wine industry.

Relevant criteria and guidelines for greater co-operation between the wine industry and conservation bodies are being developed to be incorporated into the IPW Guidelines, which is currently supported by more than 95% of the SA wine grape growers and producers.

According to Van Rooyen, the Biodiversity and Wine Initiative aims to benefit both the wine and the conservation sectors. 'The wine industry benefits through the marketing opportunity derived from the link with biodiversity, as well as playing a critical role in sustainable natural resource management and conserving South Africa's natural heritage,' he says.

'Conservation benefits through the conservation of the Cape Floral Kingdom's threatened habitats and by pioneering biodiversity best practices with the industry. Success will require the full co-operation

and involvement of both sectors if a win-win outcome is to be obtained.'

Van Rooyen says that presenting itself as being committed to conservation and environmentally friendly practices will assist the South African wine industry in competing for a larger slice of the global market.

'Environment-friendly production, together with quality control and ethical concerns are the prime motives for buyers of wine in Europe and America,' he says. 'And with the newly promulgated Biodiversity Act, the wine industry has shown itself to be at the forefront of ecologically friendly practices.'

Van Rooyen says the Biodiversity and Wine Initiative is one of the major thrusts of the SAWB's Wine Industry Strategy Plan, which has already addressed issues such as integrity, alcohol abuse, substandard containers and the industry's global competitiveness.

According to Tony Hansen of Conservation International and co-ordinator of the Biodiversity and Wine Initiative, the initiative has the full support of the wine industry on boardroom level, as well as among the wine farmers themselves.

'The partners in this initiative, namely conservation bodies and the wine industry, have identified a number of key strategies for achieving the desired objective, he says. 'This includes identifying biodiversity champions in the wine industry to act as role models, the promotion of conservation stewardship whereby wine producers are encouraged to enter into contracts with Cape Nature Conservation to conserve critical sites - mainly of renosterveld and lowland fynbos - and to develop a biodiversity wine route.'

Conservation International is a conservation body based in Washington DC and is active in protecting biodiversity hot spots on the five continents.

Hansen says that a biodiversity wine route, marketed locally and internationally, has the potential of making the local wine industry a leader in the field of wine and ecotourism. "No other place on the planet has this unique combination of a world-class wine industry, breath-taking scenery and rare and extraordinary natural plant and animal life," he says.

'Due to the high profile of the South African wine industry, we hope that its championing of biodiversity and conservation will set an example for other industries to implement more biodiversity friendly practices,' says Hansen.

Conservation bodies involved in the Biodiversity and Wine Initiative are The Botanical Society of South Africa, Conservation International, Centre for Environmental Leadership in Business, Cape Action for People and the Environment, South African National Biodiversity Institute, Western Cape Nature Conservation Board, the World Conservation Union and the University of Stellenbosch's Centre for Agriculture Biodiversity.

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