

World Bank steps in to aid Cape Biodiversity and Wine Initiative

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An international conservation body, financed by the World Bank and various partners, has thrown its weight behind efforts to conserve the Western Cape's indigenous plant and animal life through the Biodiversity and Wine Initiative (BWI).

The BWI, a partnership between the wine industry and various conservation bodies, has raised R1,4m towards propagating and implementing viticultural practises aimed at preventing the further eradication of the Cape Floral Kingdom - particularly the critically threatened renosterveld and lowland fynbos - over the next two years.

Some R600 000 was funded by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), an international donor made up of the World Bank, Global Environmental Fund, MacArthur Foundation, Government of Japan and Conservation International. The CEPF premise is that economic prosperity and biodiversity conservation are intrinsically linked. Their investments focus on environmental projects taking place in global biodiversity hotspots, i.e. the 25 regions representing the greatest yet most threatened biodiversity on earth, of which the Cape Floral Kingdom is one. The balance of the amount raised is made up from contributions by the Green Trust (an associate trust of WWF-SA made possible by Nedbank Green), the Botanical Society of South Africa and the South African Wine and Brandy Company (SAWB).

According to Dr Johan van Rooyen, chief executive of the SAWB, the contribution of international funding highlights the importance of integrating wine production and conservation practises.

"This profiles the South African wine industry in the eyes of the world in terms of its commitment to conserving the Cape Floral Kingdom (CFK)," he says. "The funds will, however, allow the closest co-operation to date between the wine industry and conservation bodies. I am sure that the outcome will develop into an international model of how agriculture can be seamlessly integrated with the conservation of a unique and threatened environment.

"The SAWB approved the project which consists of a number of activities including the incorporation of biodiversity guidelines into the Integrated Production of Wine (IPW) programme. Another important and visible activity will be to develop a unique biodiversity wine route.

"This could not only conserve a unique biodiversity hotspot, but could lead to the opening-up of myriad marketing opportunities for South African wines and the region's tourism."

The immediate priorities of the BWI include co-ordinating information workshops bringing wine grape growers up to speed with the initiative and its future plans and goals, as well as communicating its benefits to industry bodies involved in marketing South African wines internationally. An office has also been set-up in Stellenbosch.

According to Tony Hansen, project co-ordinator, the BWI is part of Cape Action for People and the Environment (CAPE), a 20 year strategy to conserve the biodiversity of the CFK while delivering significant economic benefits to the people of the region. A core objective is to promote and initiate private sector and community involvement in conserving the threatened landscapes of the CFK.

"In the CFK, some 96% of the original extent of renosterveld and 49% of the fynbos has been converted to agricultural use. It is projected that 15-30% of the remaining habitat will be converted to agriculture in the next 20 years. In addition to this, the remaining habitat is also severely threatened

by urban development, alien plant infestation and frequent fires," says Hansen.

According to Hansen, approximately 80% of the land in the CFK is in private hands. "This makes partnerships with industry critical to conserving biodiversity," he says. "An important lesson for the conservation sector is that industry will not engage with the conservation initiatives unless a win-win approach is adopted i.e. benefits for industry and benefits for conservation.

"The BWI is a good example of this approach, with tangible benefits to both the wine industry and the conservation sector. The wine industry benefits by using the region's biodiversity as a unique selling point for South African wines and through sustainable resource management in complying with the agricultural and environmental laws. The conservation sector benefits by pioneering biodiversity best practices with industry which results in conserving South Africa's unique natural heritage for future generations."

Hansen says that the conservation issue at stake has the full support of the wine industry and all relevant parties. "The entire supply chain, including growers, viticulture services, marketing services and industry regulators, will be involved in a transparent process of implementing biodiversity best practices into the SA wine industry together with the Western Cape Department of Agriculture, regional conservation bodies and the private sector."

According to Van Rooyen, the funding for the two year phase lays the foundation for a permanent initiative whereby wine production and conservation will exist hand-in-hand. "The BWI has been created with sustainability in mind, ensuring that by the end of the two year process, the objectives have been incorporated into the wine industry structures with ongoing support from partners," he says.

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