

## Vergelegen SA's first Biodiversity and Wine Champion

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*The South African wine industry emphasised its commitment to conservation with the appointment yesterday (22 March) of the famous Vergelegen Estate as South Africa's first Biodiversity and Wine Initiative Champion. Vergelegen's current project to return the estate's non-arable lands to a pristine example of Cape fynbos is the second-largest conservation project in the Western Cape after the Table Mountain/Cape Peninsula project and the largest private project.*

According to Tony Hansen, project co-ordinator of the Biodiversity and Wine Initiative (BWI), the BWI's Champion Programme honours wine estates and wine farms that are playing exemplary roles in conserving the highly threatened species of fauna and flora found in the Western Cape winelands.

'Some 9 000 species of plants are found in the Cape Floral Kingdom, a relatively narrow belt of land running between the Cederberg and Port Elizabeth. Astoundingly, there are more plant species in the Cape Floral Kingdom than the Boreal Kingdom which covers most of the Northern Hemisphere. Fynbos and renosterveld are the dominant types of vegetation in the Cape Floral Kingdom, where 80% of the land is in private hands,' says Hansen. 'Some 96% of the original extent of renosterveld and 49% of the fynbos has been converted to agricultural use and it is projected that 15-30% of the remaining habitat will be converted to agriculture in the next 20 years.'

'The conservation of this unique natural environment therefore depends entirely on the co-operation between conservation bodies, landowners and industry. The BWI is a pioneering partnership between the South African wine industry and the conservation sector to minimise the loss of threatened habitat and contribute to sustainable wine production through the adoption of biodiversity guidelines by the industry,' said Hansen.

'Over the past 10 years Vergelegen has taken extraordinary steps, including clearing a significant portion of the farm's alien invasive plants, allowing indigenous plant and animal species to return to vast tracts of land. Vergelegen has also avoided planting vines on their threatened renosterveld, their soils being renowned for superior viticulture potential. Considering the quality of Vergelegen's wines, the temptation must obviously have been there!'

Hansen said he hoped the BWI's Championship Programme will encourage grape farmers and wine producers to implement practices aimed at conserving the Western Cape's unique biodiversity.

According to Vergelegen MD, Don Tooth, Anglo American regards Vergelegen, founded first by Willem Adriaan van der Stel in 1700, as a Flagship Estate. In this context, and in terms of sustainable development, it accords significant weighting to three cornerstone elements: the wine business and its people, cultural heritage and the natural environment.

'For this the Vergelegen Environmental Trust was established, the goal of which is to ensure that at least one third of the 3 000 hectare estate be transformed into a pristine example of the Cape's natural heritage,' said Tooth. 'This project complements the sustainable development goals subscribed to by Vergelegen, as well as our owners, Anglo American. However, it also gives us the potential of becoming a platform acting as a base from which students (primary, secondary and tertiary), as well as environmental practitioners can learn and experiment.'

'We thus hope to become a practical think tank, for the benefit of the sector, about how to cost-effectively combat alien infestation, for example. The knowledge obtained here could then be passed on to other farming areas. More importantly, the opportunity would exist to conduct an outreach

programme to share an important part of their cultural and environmental heritage with learners from diverse backgrounds.'

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'It is important to emphasise that funds for the initial conservation project, to the tune of R3.9 million, were fully generated from Vergelegen's wine sales,' he says. 'Becoming a Biodiversity and Wine Champion depends on the commitment of the estate or farm involved. We hope that this accolade Vergelegen has received from the BWI will encourage others in the industry to take a new look at their farms and invest in conserving the unique and special environment in their hands. We stand ready to support the efforts of our colleagues and the industry as a whole.'

In the spirit of sustainable development, besides rehabilitating land to indigenous fynbos, Vergelegen's conservation commitments include a number of complementary goals, including a Centre of Learning Excellence, promotion of black economic empowerment principles, a structured outreach programme and an opportunity to benefit the surrounding communities. Already 50 jobs have been generated through the BEE company undertaking conservation work and the flow and quality of water to neighbouring communities has improved.

According to Hansen, the conservation principles underscored by the BWI have 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,' he said.

Hansen also said that, 'The European Union, which currently makes-up the majority of South Africa's export wine market, is working towards enforcing environmentally sustainable wine production systems on countries wishing to export wine to the EU. South Africa could be the big winner over countries such as Australia, as the Scheme for the Integrated Production of Wine (IPW) positions the South African wine industry as a leader in sustainable wine production.

'Having environment champions, such as Vergelegen, can only benefit the image and standing of our wine industry, whilst assisting to conserve the magnificence of the Cape Floral Kingdom,' Hansen said.

To become a Biodiversity & Wine CHAMPION, the following criteria apply:

- 1.) The property must have an ecologically viable portion of natural vegetation still intact, which is not less than 10% in area of the total farm size. This status must be verified by the BWI extension officer or other approved conservation officer.
- 2.) Champions must score a minimum of 85% on the biodiversity self assessment form, verified by the BWI extension officer.
- 3.) The farm AND cellar must be externally audited by the independent IPW auditors and awarded with an IPW Conformance Certificate.
- 4.) A champion must have developed a Conservation Management Plan, approved by the BWI extension officer and, most importantly, started IMPLEMENTING key scheduled activities from the plan. Champions must be able to show tangible results of their commitment to biodiversity conservation and have a minimum two-year track record of good conservation practice.
- 5.) Champions should, where appropriate, give conservation status to their pristine natural areas (minimum of 10% of the farm size), through one of CapeNature's Stewardship Programme options.