

A Renosterveld conservation initiative

A programme has been launched to protect the remaining Renosterveld around the towns of Napier and Bredasdorp after land use in the area changed, writes **Cameron McMaster**.



ABOVE: Members of the local Botanical Society, from left: Louis Willemse and Cameron and Rhoda McMaster, toasting the first phase of the Napier Renosterveld Conservation Programme. The McMaster grandchildren in the front are De Leeuw and Tatiana Beyers.

The rare pincushion *Leucospermum heterophyllum* (BELOW) found undisturbed on the pristine areas of the Napier commonage (BELOW RIGHT).



FOR MANY YEARS THE ARABLE sections of the 600ha Napier commonage were leased to local farmers and used for cropping. Within the leased area there are a number of Renosterveld fragments too steep or stony to plough.

These fragments were well-preserved in the cropping regime and were never subjected to grazing in the winter growing season or to frequent fires. Consequently they have remained in an almost pristine state and still contain much of the original biodiversity of the Renosterveld in the region.

A rare part of the world

Renosterveld is an extremely threatened endemic vegetation type with less than 10% of its original total area of still in existence. The Renosterveld in the Napier and Bredasdorp vicinity is extremely rich in bulbous plants especially, with a number of rare species.

Many other villages in the Western Cape also have commonage areas with rare local biodiversity that deserve protection and could follow in the footsteps of a programme that has been launched to protect the Napier commonage.

Three fragments there are of particular importance now as recreational areas

and tourist attractions. Two of the fragments comprise critically endangered Central Rüens Shale Renosterveld of which less than 10% still remains, very little of which is in a good state.

The rare plants found on these fragments include *Ixia longituba*, *Moraea tricolor* and *Babiana montana*. The third fragment, at Skurwekop, comprises critically endangered Central Rüens Silcrete Renosterveld, of

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which only 9,9ha is left in the world. This is home to large populations of *Nerine humilis* and *Haemanthus coccineus*, as well as some rare and threatened species such as *Gladiolus abbreviatus* and *Lachenalia nervosa*.

Adapting to change

The conservation programme on the Napier commonage has been launched mainly as a direct result of a change in land use from exclusively cropping to pasture and cattle grazing by the recently formed BEE Agridwala Group.

It's a very positive initiative, led by the farmers Kosie van Zyl and Piet Blom, to empower members of the local community and give them a share in





Rare flowers such as *Lachenalia nervosa* (ABOVE LEFT) occur on Skurwekop (ABOVE RIGHT), an outcrop near Napier of critically endangered Central Rùens Silcrete Renosterveld which falls within the Napier Renosterveld Conservation Project.

the potential the village commonage has for income generation.

The Southern Overberg branch of the Botanical Society realised that unless drastic steps were taken to protect the three relict Renosterveld fragments, the areas would be negatively affected by the new land-use programme. The society hurriedly took steps to raise awareness and earlier this year launched the Napier Renosterveld Conservation Programme.

Finding solutions

The programme aims to preserve the unique Renosterveld flora in reserves adjacent to the Napier village, to promote ecotourism and attract visitors to the village.

Last year numerous large groups visited the village to see the flora on the commonage and spent a few nights in the village.

The Botanical Society believes there the potential to establish wildflower viewing trails and arrange guided tours in the flower season. By establishing

the Napier Mountain Conservancy (See *Farmer's Weekly*, 25 January 2008) and fencing off the Renosterveld areas, visitors will be attracted to study and enjoy the interesting and beautiful wild flowers that thrive in these very distinct veld types.

There has already been a buy-in of support from the lessors of the land, who've pledged their support to register an integrated development plan (IDP) to obtain funding to erect fences and clear alien vegetation. There has also been enthusiasm for setting up a monitoring and management committee made up of lessors and representatives from the community, the Botanical Society and the local municipality with a view to ultimately establishing a stewardship contract with CapeNature.

The cooperation of the local municipality and the Agridwala Group was very encouraging. Fundraising was started to cover the costs of fencing. A donation from the Agulhas Biodiversity Initiative gave the programme a boost, as did donations

from local residents. These allowed the first phase of the fencing to be completed.

On 10 May a few conservation-minded residents toasted the erection of a 700m fence that keeps livestock out of the first fragment just outside the village. This particular fragment is unique in that there are at least nine species of *Gladiolus* that occur there, as well as a wealth of other bulbs and shrubs.

A big payout

Since the fence was erected there have been further discoveries, for instance of a few *Massonia echinata* and the rare creeping pincushion, *Leucospermum heterophyllum*.

Another two fragments still need to be fenced, requiring at least 2,5km of fencing. This additional fencing will cost around R50 000 and donations and sponsorship are urgently required.

• *If you would like to make a donation to the Napier Renosterveld Conservation Programme, contact Cameron McMaster on (028) 423 3651 or e-mail cameron@haznet.co.za. |fw*

'Fundraising was started to cover the costs of fencing.'

- Renosterveld is a unique, endemic veld type.
- A change in land use from cropping to grazing put the Renosterveld in danger.
- The need to protect remaining pockets of Renosterveld is critical.



Members of the Agridwala Group. (From left) Willem Jansen, Gavin Jaars, Abram Coetzee, Piet Blom, Joshua September, Daniel Pieters, Kosie van Zyl, Lucas Matthys, Floors Gabriels, Gerard Abrahams, Hendrik Stuart. Kneeling: Henry Leners (holding the calf), and Marius Engel.