



Road Reserves and breaking the law

The mismanagement of road reserves is a blot on our biodiversity conservation initiatives, writes **Cameron McMaster**.

LEFT: *Cyrtanthus contractus*, one of the rare plants being negatively affected by roadside mowing of the N6 in the Thomas River area near Cathcart

ROAD AND RAILWAY RESERVES have up to now been the repository of many of our rare and most endangered wild plants.

As they are generally fenced and free of grazing livestock most of the biodiversity has been preserved. The palatable species of wild flowers have all but disappeared in much of the adjacent farmland as a result of decades of continuous grazing by domestic animals. Even less palatable species have declined due to the degradation of habitat and declining regeneration of populations from seed.

However, within the protected areas of road reserves most species remain intact and are able to flower and reproduce, thus providing the means for not only the essential pollinators to survive, but also providing annual crops of seed essential to sustain populations within the reserves and the adjacent farmland when conditions permit. There has been an alarming

change in the management of national road reserves in recent years. Whereas before only an appropriate strip of one to two meters on either side of the tarmac was mowed to keep the road verge clear, recently the entire area within road reserves, right up to the fences on either side, are systematically and regularly closely mowed along many of our highways and provincial

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roads. This is particularly evident along some roadsides in the Eastern Cape along the N9 and N6 highways. And it's also the case along roads in other provinces. Woody shrubs and trees within road reserves have been felled and their stumps poisoned. While this may be understandable in places where trees and bush obscure vision or may hide kudu and other animals that might be

a danger to motorists, the clearing of bush and aloe, even on road verges high above cuttings, seems an unnecessary destruction of beautiful roadside vegetation.

It's difficult to understand the rationale behind the mowing of grassland and short karoo shrub right up to fences. It has been reported in the Northern Cape that not only are road reserves mowed, but rare succulent vegetation is being systematically, mechanically destroyed and cleared leaving road verges bare and vulnerable to wind erosion

Who's counting the cost

The consequence of this practice will be extremely dire. Some of our rarest plants survive only in these areas. If mowed regularly they will not flower and produce seed and would soon be totally exterminated. This means rare plants ability to sustain and expand populations will be entirely lost and far more seriously,

RIGHT: Road verges mowed to the fences on the N6 near Cathcart, even on the cuttings high above the road. In this case populations of rare *Cyrtanthus contractus* and *Aloe pratensis* that occur here are being severely damaged.



- Rare plants on road verges are protected from livestock.
- Unless road-verge vegetation poses a fire hazard, or could hide large game, it should be left intact.
- The rationale behind mowing is inexplicable.





the lack of flowers on road reserves will spell the demise of pollinators which could have dire consequences for entire ecosystems of the affected regions. It also denies motorists the pleasure of enjoying and appreciating roadside flora. For most folk, journeys along these highways are probably the only opportunity they will have to see and admire wild flowers.

Flouting the law

Many of the plants being destroyed in this way are listed as Red-Data species highly protected by our Nature Conservation Ordinances. If anyone were to pick roadside flowers or dig out these protected plants they would be committing a serious crime and be liable for prosecution with severe penalties. Yet road maintenance crews commit wanton destruction with impunity. One wonders if any EIAs were carried out along roadsides in sensitive areas before mowing was undertaken. I was shocked

on a recent trip on the N9 to observe this destruction between the Biervlei Dam and Aberdeen. The entire road verge from fence to fence had been cut to the ground with the total destruction of all plants taller than 10cm. A few of the dwarf aloes, although severely damaged, were bravely attempting to flower. The aloe species involved were *Aloe variegata*, *Aloe claviflora* and *Aloe longistyla*, all protected species, the latter two rare and vulnerable. Another rare plant now surviving almost exclusively on road reserves along this stretch is the big bulb with fan-shaped foliage, *Boophone disticha*. It will surely be destroyed by constant defoliation and the inability to flower and set seed. There must be hundreds of less conspicuous species that will be equally severely affected.

The karoo veld within this reserve is nowhere taller than 15cm and by no stretch of the imagination can it be a hazard to motorists. There is also no fire

hazard in this area. It's inexplicable why it's deemed necessary to mow the entire road reserve when the only mowing that used to be required was a distance of a meter or two from the tarmac. The cost to the road authority and taxpayers and the unnecessary waste of diesel and expensive equipment are additional considerations.

Address the problem

It's imperative that the provincial nature conservation authority investigate this malpractice and put a stop to it. If necessary the perpetrators should be brought to book and punished for breaking the law. As concerned citizens we can't sit back and accept this overkill of flora. Organisations like the Botanical Society and the South African National Biodiversity Institute must take action before irreversible damage is done to our road reserves.

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1. Very rare and Red Data listed plants occur in road reserves along the N9 south of Aberdeen. Large numbers of *Boophone disticha* bulbs are being destroyed here. The picture shows *Aloe claviflora* severely damaged, but still surviving because it's close to the fence. The plants in the path of the mower have been destroyed.

2. Many plants of *Aloe variegata* and *Aloe longistyla*, which occur within the road reserve on the N9, between Willowmore and Aberdeen are being destroyed by fence to fence mowing of Karoo vegetation. This vegetation is hardly 15cm high and by no stretch of the imagination a hazard to road users. The rationale behind the mowing of this type of veld is inexplicable.

3. Contract teams mowing road verges along the R62 in the Longkloof. Neither the contractor nor his workers had been alerted to the valuable biodiversity they were damaging.