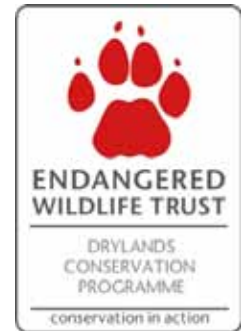




Bossies and Bunnies: Approaches to sustainable land management in the Nama Karoo



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The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) celebrates 40 years in conservation this year. The Endangered Wildlife Trust's Drylands Conservation Programme (EWT-DCP) is one of 14 programmes working on the conservation of endangered species and their habitats. The Programme was formerly known as the EWT-Riverine Rabbit Programme. The Programme underwent a name change late last year in order to reflect the broader scope and diversity of the objectives and projects of the programme.

Currently our projects include the **Riverine Rabbit Demographics and research project**, which is undertaking exciting research into the use of camera traps to accurately answer the question of how many Riverine Rabbits there are, but also to help us understand the habitat use and behaviour of this Critically Endangered Species.

The second project addresses one of the key problems facing Riverine Rabbits, that of habitat loss and degradation. The **Riparian Ecosystem Restoration project** not only actively restores degraded habitat, but is also a research-driven initiative, given that riparian vegetation is one of the least studied vegetation types. Restoration of drylands riparian vegetation is also a novel field, making the work done by the programme that much more imperative, given the vital role our river catchments systems play in water provision, particularly in the face of climate change.

This year we launched, in partnership with the Department of Environment and Nature Conservation (DENC) in the Northern Cape, Cape Nature (Western Cape) and the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Source to Sea Programme (EWT-SSP), the **Cape Critical Rivers project**, to address the conservation of endangered fish species, most notably the Clanwilliam sandfish.

Less than 1% of the Nama Karoo is formally protected and currently there are no populations of Riverine Rabbits in formally protected areas. The Riverine Rabbit is critically endangered, and is an indicator species for riparian health. Their absence along sections of the seasonal rivers in the Nama Karoo, indicate river systems under stress.

Although the situation looks dire, we as conservationists see not only problems, but opportunities, particularly opportunities for partnerships:

- Partnerships with landusers, in whose hands the survival of Riverine Rabbits lies. As such livestock farmers have voluntarily, in partnership with regional conservation departments and the EWT-DCP established four Riverine Rabbit Conservancies encompassing some 350 000 hectares, as part of South Africa's national Biodiversity Stewardship initiative.
- Partnerships with the Ubuntu Municipality, whereby the municipality has provided the land and water on which the Indigenous Karoo Plant Nursery was established in 2007 to provide seed and plants for the riparian restoration project. Two community members are permanently employed and have been trained as nursery workers and to supervise restoration teams. Casual labour is also employed on the restoration sites and at the nursery during busy periods. Restoration work is by nature labour intensive, providing opportunities not only for job creation, but also for skills development.
- Partnerships with the regional conservation departments, most notably the DENC (Northern Cape) and Cape Nature (Western Cape) who have worked closely with the EWT-DCP and before that also with the Riverine Rabbit co-ordination committee to ensure the survival of this Critically Endangered species.
- Partnerships with the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, and the Department of Agriculture's Landcare section. Most recently DAFF assisted programme staff in setting up a comprehensive long term monitoring on ecosystem service restoration on the upscaled restoration site established this year.
- Partnerships with academic institutions. As such we host students as part of the ongoing research initiatives of the programme, and also currently host a Groen Sebenza intern (Horticulture Diplomat).
- Partnerships with Drylands specialists such as RenuKaroo's Professor Sue Milton, who has provided much support regarding research methodologies and the propagation of Karoo plant species at the nursery.

The Programme is somewhat unique in its approach to biodiversity conservation in that it strives to integrate biodiversity conservation priorities with those of agriculture, while also taking social needs into account. Riverine Rabbits occur in working commercial livestock farming landscapes – making it imperative that we successfully integrate interdisciplinary priorities in order to ensure the survival of this iconic Karoo species.

