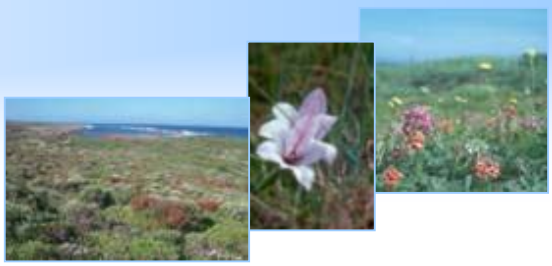
The St Francis Conservancy Project



NEWSLETTER

April 2004

CONSERVANCY MEMBERS TO GET WEEVILS

Members of the fledgling St Francis Conservancy will be assisted in their fight against invasive alien vegetation by a small seed-eating weevil.

Alien vegetation, particularly Rooikrans *Acacia cyclops*, is a major threat to the unique natural environment of the St Francis area. The alien weeds smother natural vegetation, resulting in a loss of indigenous species, increased fire hazard and a reduction in the area's the scenic beauty.

Melanterius servulus – The seed-eating weevil that will assist in controlling alien vegetation on the Conservancy (photo: PPRI)

Like the Rooikrans that they will control, the weevils (*Melanterius servulus*) are native to Australia. They have been brought to South Africa by the Plant Protection Research Institute (PPRI) of the Agricultural Research Council to be used in conjunction with other alien eradication methods. The PPRI has been conducting extensive research on the effectiveness of the weevils as control agents, and the results are promising.

The weevils are small (3-5mm long) brown or black beetles with long snouts. They produce only one generation of offspring per year, at a time which coincides with the reproductive phase of their host plants. The adults are inactive during the cooler months and emerge from their shelters at the start of the breeding season in spring.

Although the weevils have no impact on the standing mass of Rooikrans, they reduce invasiveness by feeding on, and damaging, Rooikrans seed. Adult feeding damage can be observed on seed pods as a small hole in the middle of the seed. Levels of damage may reach 100%, reducing the rate at with the weed can spread and its ability to re-grow after being cleared. The weevils are specific to Rooikrans and will not harm the indigenous vegetation.

WESSA's Biodiversity Conservation Unit (BCU) has negotiated with the PPRI for these weevils to be released within the boundaries of the St Francis Conservancy. Releases will take place in September to coincide with the flowering time of Rooikrans. Releases will be made in dense stands of alien vegetation and it is hoped that self-sustaining populations of weevils will develop.

THE IMPACT OF ALIEN PLANTS

The control of alien invasive plants is a major challenge facing the Conservancy. Alien plants spread rapidly (in excess of 7% per year) and, without some form of control, will encroach much of the remaining natural area.

The negative impacts associated with this scenario are massive, and include:

- loss of biodiversity – flora, habitats and fauna
- reduction in the scenic beauty of the area as natural vegetation is replaced by dense stands of monotonous and unattractive Rooikrans
- an associated decrease in property values

- continued loss of accessibility to certain areas as impenetrable thickets of Rooikrans become established
- creation of large standing fuel loads which exacerbate the danger of wildfires
- a legal problem (the Conservation of Agricultural Resources Act – landowners are compelled by law to remove alien vegetation)
- loss of economic opportunities (e.g. through ecotourism)

ALIEN WORKING GROUP

Due to limited resources, interventions aimed at addressing the alien vegetation problem need to be focussed in areas where maximum gains can be achieved. Consequently, a small working group is being formed to redevelop and refine the current draft alien eradication strategy. This group will consist of interested landowners and people with experience in alien eradication.

A range of issues needs to be taken into consideration before clearing priorities can be identified. For example, it is more cost-effective to clear sparsely-invaded areas than it is to clear dense thickets of alien vegetation. It may therefore be sensible to prioritise sparse stands over dense stands for clearing. In addition to alien density, other issues that need consideration include accessibility, degree of fire hazard and the needs and desires of landowners.

It is important that all landowners have the opportunity to be involved in the prioritisation process, and that they understand where, why and how money is being spent on the Conservancy.

Landowners wishing to be involved in this working group are encouraged to contact the BCU.

CONSERVANCY ESTABLISHMENT

In order to officially declare the Conservancy, the landowners within the Project planning domain must complete membership forms, and provide proof of ownership for their individual properties. The landowner representatives on the Conservancy Steering Committee are assisting the BCU in obtaining this information. Once the completed membership forms have been received, the BCU will develop and submit an application to the provincial authority to officially declare the Conservancy.

Conservancy in bloom – *Brunsvigia striata* (top) and the vulnerable *Brunsvigia litoralis* (above) add colour to the Conservancy during the autumn flowering season (photos: A van Cauter)

For further information, please contact:

Brian Reeves
St Francis Conservancy Project

1st Floor Havilland House,
Cnr Lawrence St & Havelock St,
Central Hill,
Port Elizabeth, 6001
Tel: +27(0) 41 582 3361 / 582 3367
Fax: +27(0) 41 582 3368
Mobile +27(0) 84 400 0926
E-mail: breeves@wessa-bcu.co.za

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