



BACK TO NATURE

Vergelegen wine estate in Somerset West completes South Africa's largest private alien vegetation clearing environmental project after 14 years

25 October 2018

Two eucalyptus trees were ceremoniously felled at Vergelegen wine estate in Somerset West this week (25 October) – and the crash that resounded through the picturesque valley marked the completion of South Africa's largest private alien vegetation clearing project.

A vast area of 2200 hectares of densely packed pine, acacia and eucalyptus has been cleared in a visionary programme initiated in 2004 and funded by estate owners Anglo American plc. Prior clearing from 1995 was funded by estate profits.

The 3000 hectare estate is now home to burgeoning fynbos. Rare and endangered plants and grasslands have regrown, and numerous birds and mammals have returned to the 318-year-old estate, attracting local and international researchers.

"Today we can finally celebrate the conclusion of a project that has been daunting at times," said Vergelegen CEO Don Tooth. "It's involved blood, sweat and tears and everyone involved can be proud of contributing to a South African success story."

"I would like to congratulate every member of the team, and to thank Anglo American plc for their commitment. We've faced setbacks such as fires burning rehabilitated land, yet their unwavering support has made today's celebration possible."

Honorary guests included Minister Anton Bredell, Western Cape MEC Environmental Affairs, and Norman Mbazima, Deputy Chairman of Anglo American South Africa.

Vergelegen was acquired by Anglo American plc in 1987. The environmental investment forms part of an extensive programme to restore the historic estate and establish it as a showcase of South African heritage, culture, wine and biodiversity. The estate is open to the public and is viewed by 100 000 visitors a year, half of whom are international visitors.

Mr Tooth confirmed that the restored land will be preserved for future generations, as 1900 hectares of the estate will be promulgated as a private nature reserve with the same protection status as the Kruger National Park.

The programme has created many work opportunities in the local Helderberg community. Previously unemployed residents have acquired skills such as brush

cutting, hand-picking alien seedlings, chainsaw operation and herbicide application, and first aid training.

Now that the clearing and felling of alien vegetation is complete, a smaller work force will continue to be employed for annual follow-up work in the cleared areas. Ongoing maintenance ensures that re-emerging invasive aliens will be removed before producing seeds.

The natural diversity has also attracted scientists and students and Vergelegen has shared its knowledge and facilities through the establishment of an informal "Centre of Learning Excellence". To date 22 formal qualifications have been obtained from work done during this project, 17 from local institutions and five from international universities.

Ecological treasures on the estate include the re-emergence of 15 hectares of critically endangered Lourensford Alluvium Fynbos and 105 hectares of critically endangered Swartland Shale Renosterveld.

The project has unlocked water resources and restored 80 hectares of wetlands, fed by the Hottentots Holland mountain range catchment area. These form an ideal habitat for birds, amphibians, invertebrates and mammals such as otters, mongoose and small buck.

Vergelegen also conducts monthly bird counts, identifies wild flowers and uses infra-red camera systems to monitor wildlife movement. Species such as Cape leopard, caracal, honey badger, grey rhebok and spotted genet are regularly spotted. The number of bird species has soared from 80 to at least 152. Some 279 plant species have been recorded, including 22 on the Red Data List.

Captions

- (1) L to R: Godfrey Gomwe, director Anglo American SA; Vergelegen CEO Don Tooth; Minister Anton Bredell (Minister of Local Government, Environmental Affairs and Development Planning); and Norman Mbazima, deputy chairman Anglo American SA, with portions of the final tree to be felled in South Africa's largest private alien vegetation clearing project at Vergelegen wine estate in Somerset West. (Andrew Brown)
- (2) L to R: Norman Mbazima, deputy chairman Anglo American SA; Don Tooth, CEO Vergelegen; and Minister Anton Bredell, Minister of Local Government, Environmental Affairs and Development Planning, with one of the final trees to be felled in South Africa's largest private alien vegetation clearing project. (Andrew Brown)
- (3) Green team: Woodcutter Melvin Smit symbolically fells a eucalyptus tree at Vergelegen wine estate, marking the completion of the alien clearing project. (Andrew Brown)
- (4) Abundant fynbos in a cleared area of Vergelegen wine estate, which completed South Africa's largest private alien vegetation clearing project. (Alain Proust)

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