



PLATBOS, AN ANCIENT, OLD-GROWTH FOREST AT THE FOOT OF AFRICA.



Platbos is a botanically unique forest. It is also a rare and endangered ecosystem. Indigenous forests cover less than 0.05% of the Western Cape Province. Only 0.5% of the entire land surface of South Africa is forested today. Platbos grows on an ancient sand dune, located a few kilometers inland from the coastal town of Gansbaai in the Western Cape.

Platbos is Africa's southernmost indigenous forest with trees estimated to be over one thousand years of age. Referred to as a relic, or remnant forest, Platbos has likely been in existence for many tens of thousands of years.

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“Platbos is uniquely special and should at all cost be conserved and protected for future generations.” *(Professor Eugene Moll and Dr. Bruce Mc Kenzie)*

Platbos is unique. To find forest in South Africa on gently undulating terrain, covered by deep, alkaline sandy soils, is rare. The canopy make-up of the forest occurs nowhere else: it has the elements of coastal forest - milkwoods, sea guarrie, pock ironwoods and wild olive- unusually combined with Afromontane forest elements -white stinkwood, hard pear, white pear, wild peach and bladdernut-. It is the hard pears, white stinkwood and white pears that give the forest its special character. The origin of the sub-tropical white stinkwoods in the forest date back to a time when this was a summer rainfall region : it is unusual to find white stinkwoods so far south.





Platbos Forest supports a myriad of life forms - from mosses, lichens, birds and bees, to bushbuck and honeybadgers

Natural forests are dynamic systems that create and maintain biodiversity. The Bushbuck finds the South-westernmost fringe of its distribution in the Platbos area. This buck depends on a habitat of indigenous forest for its continued survival. Were it not for Platbos, the largest remaining fragment of the Swartkransberg forests, it is likely that this stately animal would become locally extinct. All efforts to conserve, rehabilitate and expand the forest therefore combine to ensure that the Overstrand can still boast six naturally occurring free-roaming buck.





There is at least one red data (endangered) species at the forest : the Leopard toad. Its namesake, the shy and seldom seen leopard also finds refuge at Platbos Forest.

The Leopard Toad is endangered due to a combination of habitat loss and vulnerability during the breeding season when they move en masse over roads and other obstacles to rivers and wetlands. The moist and shady forest floor is a safe haven for these endangered amphibians. Platbos is also a refuge for the Cape leopard and caracal. In addition, the forest is the source of an abundance of prey such as buck, franklins, baboons and porcupines, to mention but a few. Signs of these shy, magnificent creatures - spoor, droppings and claw marks - have been found in and around Platbos. A number of scientific studies have been conducted at Platbos and more are welcomed: there is much to be learnt from this unique and ancient forest ecosystem.





Birds nest and roost in the tree tops. The forest canopy supplies an abundance of sustenance for creatures large and small.

Forest birds - such as paradise flycatchers, Cape robins and Cape batis - collect moss and old man's beard lichen to make their nests in the forest canopy. The olive woodpecker hunts for insects and grubs hiding out in rotten tree trunks. Platbos is also home to the Cardinal and Knysna woodpeckers. All of the forest tree species produce edible berries that are enjoyed by numerous forest birds, baboons, rodents and even genet and bat-eared foxes. Barn owls and Cape eagle owls perch in the tree tops and keep a sharp eye out for moles and mice. The distinctive calls of a fish eagle pair can be heard as they soar above the forest canopy.





The forest floor provides seasonal foraging for countless vertebrates and invertebrates.

Depending on the time of year, there is an array of geophytes such as arum lilies, *lachenalia* and *chasmanthe* that provide tasty meals for porcupines. In return, the porcupines disperse the bulbs throughout the forest. This is an invaluable service since the forest floor is generally too shady to allow for flowering and thus the seeding of these bulbs. Numerous swarms of the Cape honey bee nest in the hollows of the ancient trees. For much of the year, one or more of the forest tree species are in flower. The bees forage on the spring flowers and *fynbos* species that grow on the forest edge. Mole rats - who are in turn preyed upon by mole snakes and caracal - feast on roots and bulbs beneath the soil. A pair of black eagles have been sighted hunting mole rats in nearby fields.





Natural forests create and maintain clean, oxygen-rich air.

Usnea “Old Man’s Beard” grows all over the world. Like all lichens, it is a symbiosis of a fungus and an algae. Being extremely sensitive to pollution, usnea is an indicator of clean, oxygen-rich air. At Platbos these tree beards can grow to almost a metre in length. The only epiphytic fern of the Cape Peninsula - “*Pleopeltis macrocarpa*” - occurs in the forest. Referred to as the Resurrection Fern because of its survival strategy of going brown and dormant during dry spells, as soon as the rains arrive, it springs back to vibrant life. Dense mosses and patchworks of colourful lichens cover the tree trunks.





Forest soil and a cooler climate.

The forest floor is rich with humus created from fallen leaves and old, decaying tree trunks. Turning over an old log will reveal a hive of activity: beetles, centipedes, slugs and an assortment of snails - some visible, some almost microscopic. Their activities break down fallen trees and recycle them into fertile top soil. Thus they add to and support the biodiversity of the forest. Platbos has about ten different species of indigenous snails - some are carnivorous and feed on the other snail species. The forest canopy shades the earth and keeps it moist. It insulates the environment from temperature extremes. Indigenous forests are intimately involved with the water cycle and their extensive root systems bring up minerals from deep within the earth. The forest stores carbon in the soil and in the timber of the trees.





As has happened to forests the world over, in the past large areas of the greater Platbos Forest were cleared for cultivation.

The Italian prisoners of war were put to work at Platbos and neighbouring forests in the 1940's. In addition, large areas were cleared for potatoes, chillies and grazing for cattle. Locals felled forest trees such as the milkwoods, hard pears and white pears for their valuable, workable timber. Others were harvested for firewood. The 1938 aerial photo bears testimony to this. In 1957, Botanist HC Taylor wrote: *"When I first saw Uilkraal(i.e. Platbos) Forest, some nine years ago, I could hardly believe my eyes ...I spent my weekends there, seeking a solution to the problem of its origins.....In the past, perhaps over two hundred years ago, the forest must have been much larger than it is today...That which remains (its all in private ownership) must be protected - and soon."* Journal of the Botanical Society of South Africa, 1957





Present-day dangers: from forest to fire.

Where forest was felled, dense stands of invasive aliens now grow. Cleared for agriculture, the sandy soil soon lost its fertility. Subsequently abandoned, these fields were rapidly colonized by alien trees that now pose a grave fire threat to the forest. The *Acacia Cyclops* “Rooi Krans” burns ferociously. During the devastating fires of 2006, two ancient indigenous forests near Platbos - one moist kloof forest and one coastal thicket - were destroyed. This is what will happen to what is left of the old-growth Platbos Forest unless fire breaks are created and maintained around the forest. Gradual climate change over the last few centuries, alien vegetation, and a “fynbos orientated” fire management policy, all combine to make Platbos Forest dependant on human help for its survival.





From fire to forest : the re-forestation project is born.

Following the 2006 fires that burnt large areas of neighbouring land and further fragmented small patches of nearby forest in the *Uilkraal Valleï*, The *Trees for Tomorrow Reforestation Project* was born. The vision of this initiative is to clear the aliens that pose a fire threat to the forest, and to reforest with endemic forest trees. In this way, not only is the fire risk to the forest greatly reduced, but the forest itself, and the biodiversity it supports, is reintroduced back into the landscape. The scope of the project goes way beyond tree planting: it is about reinstating the forest canopy and the biodiversity that this supports.





Trees for Tomorrow Reforestation Project.

Having consulted Forest Ecologist Prof Geldenhuys, Botanist Prof Moll and Mr Otto Pienaar from the Department of Water Affairs & Forestry (DWAF), the reforestation project began in 2008. Trees, endemic to Platbos, are planted densely together in order to recreate the forest canopy and so shade the ground as quickly as possible. With necessary permits obtained from DWAF, seedlings are sustainably harvested from the forest floor and grown on at the nursery until they are ready for transplanting. The vision of this initiative goes beyond the borders of Platbos and extends to neighbouring land that was once forested. **To date, almost 3000 forest trees have been planted -sponsored by concerned individuals and corporations . In addition, 12 000 forest trees were planted under the auspices of the Platbos Conservation Trust at Farm 215.**





Platbos tree nursery.

The Platbos Tree Nursery propagates the main tree species of the forest. Maintaining the genetic integrity of the tree saplings for the reforestation is vitally important. Trees grown from the parent trees of the old-growth forest are superior in all respects. In addition, they are perfectly adapted to the local growing conditions. The nursery uses only organic fertilizers and vermicompost; no pesticides or chemicals are used in the nursery. As a result, the trees are of an exceptional quality. The nursery, office and forest home are all “off-grid” and are powered by solar energy. The nursery was established in 2006 and provides permanent employment for at least two full time employees.





Platbos is now receiving the protection and recognition that it deserves.

The Kriges purchased Platbos in 2005. Whilst botanical studies had highlighted Platbos' importance over the intervening years, it was zoned inappropriately as "Agricultural Land". For the past seven years, the Kriges have dedicated themselves to the conservation of this unusual indigenous forest, and have "put it on the map". Since raising public awareness of the forest, Platbos has featured on television programmes such as "50/50", "Pasella" and "Kwela", and in numerous publications and radio shows. Most importantly, the forest is soon to be rezoned as a Nature Reserve: *"The Kriges are in the process of signing a Full Stewardship Contract with Cape Nature, which involves a perpetuity agreement with the Agency to commit their land to conservation and manage it according to a conservation management plan."*





Platbos Forest is to be rezoned as a Contract Nature Reserve.

“Being awarded stewardship status is not an easy task and the approval process is a rigorous one - such status is only awarded to properties with high conservation value, in terms of uniqueness, biodiversity and connectivity to the landscape. Platbos is an extremely unique forest and contributes enormously to conserving the last remnants of lowland forest in the Western Cape. CapeNature therefore supports any endeavors to raise funding for assistance with maintaining the long-term ecological integrity of this special nature reserve.” Odette Curtis, Environmental Consultant to CapeNature.





Melissa and Francois Krige, custodians of the forest.

Francois Krige began his arboricultural career in the forests of Germany where he worked for three years. In London, UK, he learnt the specialist art of tree surgery. After his return to South Africa in 1991, Francois founded his arboricultural business, Krige Tree Services. Since then, Francois has built his company into one of Cape Town's most respected, and he has championed modern tree care with his passion for old trees. Melissa Krige is a qualified horticulturist and together, their expertise and passion for trees and forests ensures that the future of Platbos, and the biodiversity that it supports, are in the best possible hands.





Educational school trips and educational working weekends.

School children visit Platbos to learn about the ecological importance of forests and trees. In addition, they gain practical experience of how to plant and care for trees. Each winter, Platbos donates indigenous trees for planting at local schools. "Tree & Forest Appreciation Weekends" are held at the Platbos Forest Camp. Participants roll up their sleeves, grab a spade and add their efforts to reforesting the forest edge. These workshops have proved very popular, and people come away inspired and energized by the forest and Francois Krige's vast and insightful knowledge of trees. The educational *Platbos Forest Trail* is also open to the public.





Platbos Conservation Trust

The Platbos Conservation Trust Nonprofit Organization Registration Number: 086-576-NPO. Public Benefit Organization (PBO) Exemption Number Registered with SARS: 930 036 766 “The vision of the Trust is the provision of support for biodiversity conservation programs and projects. The emphasis shall be on expanding Platbos Forest, supporting biodiversity conservation, especially conservation based on community development projects, and to act as a catalyst for the protection of threatened tree species and to foster increased conservation awareness amongst the people of South Africa.” Employment creation, skills-development and environmental education for the local community go hand-in-hand with the Platbos Reforestation Initiative. As the reforestation project expands, so too do job opportunities and community involvement.

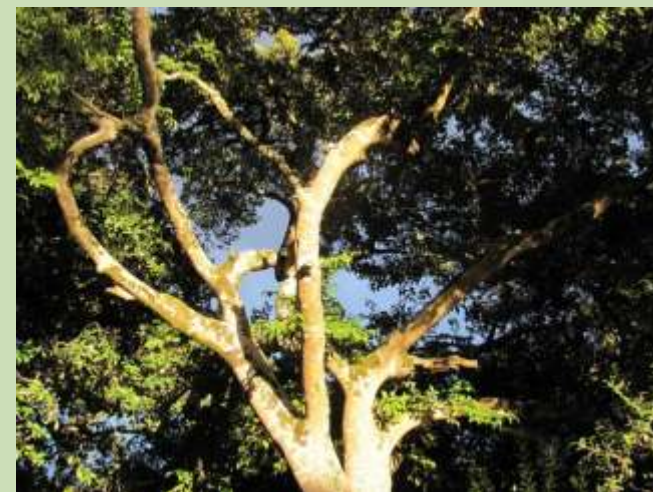




Please help us to preserve and rehabilitate this ancient forest.

Investigations into indigenous forests and their distribution in the Western Cape, leads to the inescapable conclusion that a combination of climate change over the eons, alien invasive vegetation and *fynbos*-orientated fire management programmes, have resulted in a situation where natural forests need active intervention in order to survive.

We rely on funding to keep Platbos, a National Forest Treasure, alive.





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