



Overberg farmers unite to conserve Renosterveld

Farmers in the Overberg wheat belt are working together to conserve one of the planet's most threatened habitats. In return, they are getting much-needed veld-management support, writes **Dr Odette Curtis-Scott**, director of the Overberg Renosterveld Conservation Trust.

In winter and spring, the rolling lowlands of the Overberg are renowned for their bright yellow canola lands, contrasting with the blue-greens of adjacent barley and wheat fields and the pastures populated with sheep and cattle. However, most 'life' in this landscape is found in the small remnants of grey, scrubby veld lying between the cultivated lands. This region is home to one of the planet's most threatened habitats, the Renosterveld, or as it is colloquially known, *uitvalgrond* (surplus ground) or *bossieveld* (shrub veld).

Renosterveld may seem grey and dull, but with time and attention, even an untrained eye can see the astounding diversity of life that it still holds, despite the years of abuse, neglect and mismanagement. This resilient habitat is the richest bulb habitat on Earth and houses the highest levels of plant diversity in all Mediterranean ecosystems.

A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL PROGRAMME

After the inception of the Overberg Renosterveld Conservation Trust (ORCT) in 2012, its members set out to build relationships with landowners in the region. This sharing of knowledge has led to a remarkable change in attitude amongst the farmers who own and cultivate land in the region.

The result was the development of the Conservation Easement Programme, which helps farmers conserve their Renosterveld at minimal or no cost. The programme offers participating landowners the chance to put a title deed restriction in the form of a conservation servitude over their land in perpetuity. Farmers willing to show this level of commitment are rewarded by being given assistance to restore and improve management of their Renosterveld habitats and watercourses.

The type of assistance depends on the interventions identified while developing the management plan to implement the conservation objectives. The plan is developed in co-operation with the landowner and is dependent on the strength of the partnership and the funding that ORCT can raise towards securing and managing these Renosterveld remnants to ensure their long-term viability in the face of a changing climate and potentially changing land-use. The landowner commits to conserving the natural habitats on the farm, and ORCT helps with incorporating the management of these remnants and watercourses into the general farm management, while also carrying most of the initial costs where possible.