



# ANOTHER MAN'S TREASURE

THE OVERBERG RENOSTERVELD TRUST (ORT) WAS NAMED THE ORGANISATIONAL WINNER OF THE 2025 WWF-SA LIVING PLANET AWARD. FOUNDER AND CEO DR ODETTE CURTIS-SCOTT LEADS THE CHARGE ON RESTORING THE RENOSTERVELD FROM WASTELAND TO WONDERLAND

Words **Lisa Abdellah**

**H**istorical accounts describe the lowlands of the Overberg as rolling hills and bountiful, grassy shrublands, interspersed with wetlands, which supported herds of large, grazing mammals – including the eland, black rhino, and the now-extinct bluebuck and quagga. It must've been paradise.

Sadly, when I visited for the first time in the early 2000s, as part of my research on black harriers, it was nothing like those accounts. I felt deeply saddened, confronted with the undulating slopes of monoculture, with only remnants of the once-rich shrubland, known as Renosterveld, remaining. One of the richest Mediterranean ecosystems in the world, renowned for its extraordinary bulb diversity, had been reduced to a ghost of how it was 300 years ago, before the European farmers began settling in the region in the 1700s, resulting in the extermination of megaherbivores and the transformation and fragmentation of habitats for large-scale commercial agriculture in the Western Cape. Now, over 95% of the Renosterveld has been irreversibly converted to croplands.

My research on black harriers evolved from a natural history project to a master's degree, investigating whether and how they used the Renosterveld. They weren't as threatened then, but they were only using the larger, more intact areas, suggesting they'd suffered due to habitat loss. It was more than a hunch: with an estimated 1 300 black harriers remaining, they're now rarer than rhinos, Endangered on the IUCN Red List. We could lose this species in our children's lifetime.

While observing the black harriers, I began spending time in the Renosterveld with botanists, who opened my eyes to a glimmer of hope: that despite these threats, the few remaining well-managed remnants supported a diversity of botanical gems incomparable with any other system in the world.

Yet nobody was doing anything to engage with the people who held its future in their hands: commercial landowners. I thought that since no one else was doing what was needed, I'd give it a try.

The landowners were hesitant to work with the government, and I assumed they'd potentially be more cooperative if approached by an NGO, so I decided to set one up.

## NEW GROUND

The Overberg Renosterveld Trust's (ORT) primary function is to secure, restore and protect the last fragments of the Renosterveld remnants and find a champion within each cluster – a daunting task, given that it's all privately owned land. Hundreds of farms criss-cross the remaining remnants.

What has worked well is educating landowners about what they actually own: not a bunch of bushes and a dumping ground, but a treasure trove teeming with life to be proud of. We encourage them not to overlook the biodiversity of this undervalued habitat by creating awareness of the diversity found within

healthy ecosystems and sharing with them the rare, endemic and threatened species that we see on their specific farms. We also extend a 'helping hand' to landowners. For example, assisting them with restoring and managing watercourses, which are ecological corridors essential for soil health, water quality and the movement of pollinators and other wildlife.

Some areas are coming together, others remain isolated, so we still have a long way to go, but as a result of our efforts, we've secured over 4 800 ha of Renosterveld for conservation through partnerships with landowners, in addition to 1 300 ha that we've acquired by partnering with WWF South Africa, World Land Trust, WildLandscapes International, IUCN NL and the Mapula Trust.

Another challenge was the uncertainty of it all; how we'd make it work and where the funding would come from. A hard thing to hear from some people was, 'Don't bother; it'll fail.' Fortunately, I built a strong support structure comprising a small team, including Sharon King, a general office Jack of all trades, and Grant Forbes, our conservation manager, as well as partnerships with CapeNature, WWF and universities.

## EXCITING DISCOVERIES

There are four different types of Renosterveld in the Overberg, each severely threatened: Western-, Central- and Eastern-Rûens Shale Renosterveld and Rûens Silcrete Renosterveld. Lowland Renosterveld is the relatively fertile, clay-based veld type that occurs in the low-lying areas of the Western Cape. While part of the Fynbos Biome, it's distinct from fynbos because of its fertile soils and the general lack of (with some exceptions) the three specific elements that tend to dominate fynbos: Proteas, Ericas and Restios.



**ABOVE** The Overberg Renosterveld Trust (ORT) was named the organisational winner of the 2025 WWF-SA Living Planet Award. Founder and CEO Dr Odette Curtis-Scott received the award in Johannesburg.

**RIGHT** The ORT is helping restore degraded Renosterveld landscapes, supported by WWF South Africa.



**LEFT** Dr Curtis-Scott and Grant Forbes (Conservation Manager, centre) sign an easement to create the Soutrivier Renosterveld Reserve with Klipdale Boerdery Manager Franco le Roux.

**BELOW** Toni Hoenders (left), a Dutch volunteer, assists Dr Curtis-Scott and her daughter, Molly, with GPS tagging black harriers to better understand threats to the species.

Many held the idea that Renosterveld was a shrubby grassland that should be burned more frequently than fynbos. We now know that isn't true. In fact, we surmise that it's less dependent on fire and more so on the interaction between fire and large herds of game that would've browsed the shrubby components, helping to maintain a balanced system. Fynbos is comparably nutrient-poor and doesn't hold the same forage value for grazing or browsing animals.

With this in mind, we're cautious with how and where we use fire, and future research needs to involve understanding the long-term patterns of burning after fire on different types of Renosterveld. We're working towards experiments that involve mimicking the role of herds of game, potentially with carefully managed livestock.

The ORT has helped to discover new species. When we started the Trust, I was sitting on a slope with renowned Botanist Professor Charles Stirton, a special adviser to our board. We were observing plants we'd recently found, and I mentioned how fantastic it would be if we could discover another new species and auction the plant's naming rights to cover our start-up costs. I don't think we'd even moved when I spotted this pretty pink flower I'd never seen before. We were in luck: taxonomists soon confirmed it was a new species, a beautiful iris in the genus *Hesperantha*!

Furthermore, while purchasing key areas of Renosterveld, we discovered a previously unknown hotspot for breeding black harriers, and we acquired additional sites, thanks to donors who understood the value in conserving habitat for this rare raptor. There are higher densities here than in the West Coast National Park, which was always considered their most important stronghold. Technology has enabled us to do the things I dreamed about when I was a student. In 2021, we initiated a project to place GPS tags on black harriers in the Overberg, as well as other sites where wind farms potentially pose a current or future threat, working with Avian Specialist Dr Rob Simmons. To date, we've fitted 40 tags to these special birds.

We've collected data on what the birds are doing inside and outside the breeding season, and are gaining critical insights into adult mortalities. Of the 21 Overberg tagged black harriers, two have been killed by wind turbines thus far, while several untagged harriers have also been killed at various wind farms. These data can be used to persuade wind farm developers to introduce higher levels of mitigation for the species.

Black harriers are also ecosystem indicators, as, unlike their cousins in the Northern Hemisphere, they don't breed in croplands, so they depend on healthy, intact habitats. While I wouldn't say that where there aren't harriers, there isn't biodiversity, they are generally associated with rich, diverse, intact areas. That their decline could happen on our watch speaks for the habitats on which they depend, signifying threat and loss, and sounding the alarm we should be listening to.

The WWF-SA Living Planet Award acknowledges that what we're doing matters and hopefully provides the platform on which we can broaden our network of people who love nature and might consider supporting our work. That's important because when you're on the coalface, you often question whether what you're doing amounts to anything. The reality is that as a CEO, I spend most of my time working on budgets, project reports and proposals. But when spring comes, I'll be in the field, with the flowers, the flies, the bees, the black harriers. You have to keep in touch with what's going on on the ground. Otherwise, you can't make decisions that are good for conservation. **G**

[www.overbergrenosterveld.org.za](http://www.overbergrenosterveld.org.za)



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