



MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate use:

PROTECTING THE WESTERN CAPE'S ESTUARIES FOR BIRDS AND PEOPLE

Cape Town, 7 December 2015: Estuaries constitute one of South Africa's most productive, but threatened habitats. While well-known for their rich biodiversity and the essential services they provide; including water purification, flood attenuation, fish nursery grounds and recreational opportunities, they remain at risk from a growing number of threats. Threats, including encroaching development, intensifying human disturbance and overexploitation have caused significant degradation of this important habitat. Whilst upstream, freshwater inflows vital to the health and maintenance of estuaries have been siphoned off or polluted.

A new BirdLife South Africa project is focusing attention on three of South Africa's most valuable, but vulnerable estuaries. The sites, the Berg River Estuary at Velddrif on the West Coast, and the Klein River Estuary and Bot-Kleinmond Estuarine system near Hermanus, are some of our country's most important estuaries for the conservation of birds and other biodiversity dependent on these natural ecosystems.

All three estuaries are Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs); places of international significance for the conservation of birds and other biodiversity. Supporting populations of several threatened bird species, significant populations of congregatory waterbirds, as well as fish, these estuaries are some of the most valuable in the country for nature conservation. If managed appropriately, these estuaries' rich birdlife and their natural aesthetics provide substantial tourism and recreational potential. They are productive fisheries and vital as nurseries for juvenile fish, many species of which form the basis of employment for the local communities, as well as being fundamental to supplying the wider commercial fishing industry.

In spite of this, all three estuaries currently have little or no formal protection, leaving them increasingly vulnerable to a multitude of threats. Funded by WWF South Africa's Elizabeth Harding Bequest, BirdLife South Africa's new Western Cape Estuaries Conservation Project seeks formal protection and sustained conservation action for these sites. The project will explore various tools for formal protected area expansion to combat the environmental issues being faced by the landowners and users of these estuaries and to help prevent activities that could damage them. It is hoped that these formal protected area designations will provide benefits for the private landowners involved, including a legal framework, incentives and political backing for the conservation and sustainable use of these estuaries.

The project was launched in July and the project manager, Dr Giselle Murison, has begun meetings with farmers and other stakeholders in the estuaries and wider catchments areas. The success of the project is dependent on recognising and incorporating the needs of the farmers and other land users in its development, to generate the kind of positive collaboration

necessary for a more productive and sustainable landscape in the future. The existing Estuary Management Forums and Conservancies which comprise key stakeholders concerned with the conservation and wise-use of the estuaries and their catchments have provided invaluable platforms from which to launch this ambitious project. Working together, the Western Cape Estuaries Conservation Project seeks to achieve protection for these estuaries, whilst also maintaining their important role in supporting the local economy of the fynbos biome.

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Notes to Editors:

Additional information

South Africa has as an extraordinary diversity of life. With 846 bird species, 8% of the world's bird species, and a diversity of other life and habitat types, it is not always easy to prioritise the most important sites for conservation. As a developing economy, South Africa has to accommodate competing land uses and therefore we need to focus conservation efforts on habitats and sites of irreplaceable worth. Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas, or IBAs, are just that, the most important sites for conserving our birds and the rich diversity of life associated with birds. The IBA network is comprised of sites of global significance for bird conservation, and may be considered the minimum set of sites essential to ensuring the survival of the world's birds. The consequences of losing any one of these sites would be disproportionately large.

About Birdlife South Africa

- BirdLife South Africa is the local country partner of BirdLife International. BirdLife International is the world's largest nature conservation Partnership with more than 120 BirdLife Partners worldwide and almost 11 million supporters.
- BirdLife South Africa is the largest non-profit bird conservation organization in the country. It relies on donor funding and financial support from the public to carry out its critical conservation work.
- Birds are important environmental indicators, the proverbial "canaries in the coal mine". By focusing on birds, and the sites and the habitats on which they depend, BirdLife South Africa's IBA Programme aims to improve the quality of life for birds, for other wildlife, and ultimately for people.
- To make a contribution towards the IBA Fund, go to <http://birdlifesouthafrica.givengain.org> and click on "IBA Fund" to make a donation. Alternatively, please contact Daniel Marnewick at daniel.marnewick@birdlife.org.za or +27 (11) 789 1122.
- For more information, visit www.birdlife.org.za.