

MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate release

Free State declares first protected environment near Memel

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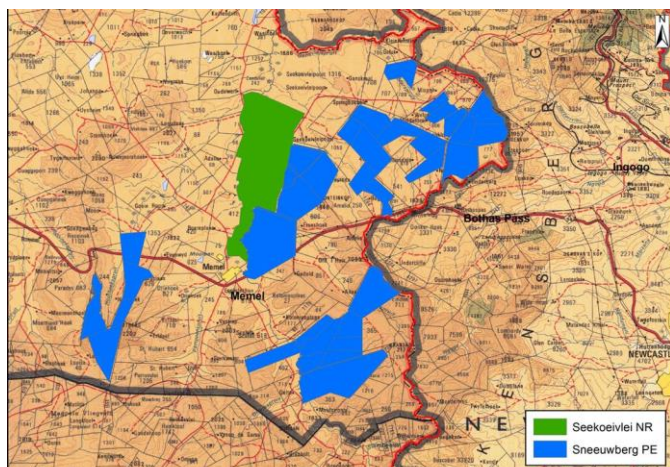


A spectacular area of the north-eastern Free State around the village of Memel has become the first in the province to be declared a “protected environment” – for its exceptional natural beauty, diversity of species and significance as a water source area.

The 17 456-hectare protected area, known as the Sneeuwberg Protected Environment (SPE), was gazetted on Friday 29 July 2016.

A “protected environment” is a class of protection under the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act (NEMPAA), which offers the next most secure form of protection after a nature reserve. The fact that protected areas can be proclaimed on privately owned land is made possible through the innovative national Biodiversity Stewardship Programme. This programme allows for the expansion of our protected area network through ground-breaking legislation and partnerships.

Protected environments require a management plan encompassing issues like veld management and wetland protection, while still allowing residents to make a living off the land



through activities such as livestock farming and tourism.

The Sneeuwberg Protected Environment lies within a strategic water source area, feeding rivers that provide water for our cities. It is also rich in fauna and flora and falls within the Grasslands Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA). The area is important for unique and threatened bird species such as the threatened Wattled Crane, Southern Bald Ibis, Blue Korhaan, Denham's Bustard, Yellow-breasted Pipit and Rudd's Lark. Other special species to occur in this mountainous grassland environment include the Oribi and Giant Girdled Lizard.

In terms of the gazette notice, the purpose of the declaration is to:

- Regulate the area as a buffer zone for the protection of and conservation of the provincial Seekoeivlei Nature Reserve;
- To enable landowners to take collective action to protect unique and threatened grasslands, wetlands, and the associated animals; and,
- To ensure that "ecosystem services" derived from the area (such as water production) are sustained.

This milestone for the Free State underscores the importance of partnerships in working towards common environmental goals.

In this instance, WWF South Africa, BirdLife South Africa, the Department of Economic, Small Business Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs (DESTEA) in the Free State and 12 landowners came together in 2012 to develop a conservation plan for the valuable biodiversity within the focal area. With the declaration of the SPE, the plan is to build on this success through the establishment of additional private protected areas that are critically important for biodiversity and as water source areas in other parts of the Free State.

QUOTES

Mark Anderson, CEO for BirdLife South Africa: "The Sneeuwberg Protected Environment is another success story for our birds, grasslands and water resources, providing the springboard for future protected area declarations of this nature in the Free State. We applaud MEC Mr Malambulele Samuel Mashinini for his foresight and the Memel landowners for their commitment to conservation.

South Africa's rich diversity of 847 bird species relies on the successful conservation of our 112 Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs). This is, in part dependent on achieving legal protection for priority IBAs, and can be accomplished using innovative mechanisms such as biodiversity stewardship, and through strategic partnerships between NGOs, government and landowners."

Dr Morné Du Plessis, CEO for WWF South Africa: "I commend the Free State provincial government, landowners and our partners for reaching this significant milestone. The declaration of the Sneeuwberg Protected Environment not only recognises the unique biodiversity of South Africa's grasslands but also the need for those who live in this beautiful part of the country to sustain their livelihoods through caring for the environment. As an important water source area, the wellbeing of this natural system is of significance to us all."

ENDS

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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.
- Vision: BirdLife South Africa wishes to see a country and region where nature and people live in greater harmony, more equitably and sustainably.
- Mission: BirdLife South Africa strives to conserve birds, their habitats and biodiversity through scientifically-based programmes, through supporting the sustainable and equitable use of natural resources and through encouraging people to enjoy and value nature.
- 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.
- For more information, visit www.birdlife.org.za

About WWF

WWF is one of the world's largest and most respected independent conservation organisations, with almost six million supporters and a global network active in over 100 countries. WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the earth's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by conserving the world's biological diversity, ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable, and promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

WWF-South Africa

WWF-South Africa is a national office that is part of the WWF network. We are a local NGO that for more than 40 years has worked towards the aim of inspiring all South Africans to live in harmony with nature, for the benefit of our country and the well-being of all our people.

WWF stands for the World Wide Fund for Nature

See www.wwf.org.za for more information

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