



MEDIA RELEASE

Intention to declare the Chrissiesmeer Protected Environment – Amendment of Gazette Notice

Start

Johannesburg, 29 August 2013 - The Intention to declare the Chrissiesmeer Protected Environment was published in the Provincial Gazette on 21 June 2013 (Notice 209 of 2013, Provincial Gazette No. 2181, page 2) and notices appeared in the *Beeld* and *Citizen* newspapers thereafter. This was a result of several years of collaborative efforts from the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MTPA), funded by the South African National Biodiversity Institute, BirdLife South Africa and the Endangered Wildlife Trust, both funded by the WWF Nedbank Green Trust, and Chrissiesmeer landowners. An Amendment of the intention to declare, Gazette Notice 209 of 2013, was published on 9 August 2013 in Provincial Gazette Number 2197 (pages 24-36), Notice 276 of 2013.

Brian Morris, MTPA Protected Area Establishment and Expansion Manager, explained “The original notice has been amended as the previous notice did not contain sufficient information on the extent of the area to be declared and the reasons for declaring.”

The purpose for the intended declaration of the Chrissiesmeer Protected Environment is fourfold:

- *To enable the owners of the land to take collective action to conserve biodiversity on their land and to seek legal recognition therefor.* Chrissiesmeer supports many threatened bird, animal and plant species.
- *To protect the area if the area is sensitive to development due to its biological diversity, natural characteristics, scenic and landscape value and the provision of environmental goods and services.* Chrissiesmeer is a unique panfield, surrounded by the headwaters of four South African river systems that are essential for water production in the region: the Vaal, Komati, Usuthu and uMpuLuzi Rivers.
- *To ensure that the use of natural resources in the area is sustainable.* Livestock grazing for red meat production on well managed natural grasslands can be sustainable.
- *To protect a specific ecosystem.* In this case, the endangered Chrissiesmeer Panveld.

“This proposed declaration is visionary and once finalised will go down in South Africa’s history as a true representation of inspired good governance” said Angus Burns, WWF-SA Grasslands Programme Manager.

“The landowners’ commitment to, and enthusiasm for, the Biodiversity Stewardship Programme is praiseworthy,” said Dr Charmaine Uys, BirdLife South Africa Regional Conservation Manager in Mpumalanga and Free State. “The road we have all walked together to reach this consultation process for the intention to declare the Chrissiesmeer Protected Environment has united this farming community. It has fired their passion for the environment. They take pride in the natural assets that they are custodians of, especially the threatened birds breeding in these wetlands and

grasslands. It has inspired them to take bold leaps of faith, such as building a wedding venue on one of the farms within the proposed Protected Environment. The number of visitors to Chrissiesmeer has increased, and with this the number of local people sustainably employed directly or indirectly in the tourism industry. Tourism, farming and conservation in this setting are highly compatible, but mining, especially opencast coal mining, is highly incompatible with existing land uses. If just one coal mine opens inside the water catchment area (with the catchment being roughly the boundary of the Chrissiesmeer Protected Environment), everyone will pay the price. So this Biodiversity Stewardship road has given the Chrissiesmeer farming community strength and courage to stand up against unsustainable and inappropriate development applications that threaten the livelihoods, health and water resources of everyone living in the area.”

The collaboration has been engaging with over 60 landowners over the past three years to reach this milestone. This is a key area for many threatened species, including all three of South Africa’s crane species, which depend on the area’s many pans and wetlands for their survival. Said Ursula Franke, Senior Field Officer of the Endangered Wildlife Trust: “We are working actively with communities and schools in the area on environmental awareness, greening, and job creation within the growing tourism market. The initiation of the Chrissiesmeer Crane Festival in 2012 – the aim of which was to draw attention to the unique features and value of the area – forms part of our bigger plan to develop the area in a sustainable manner that benefits the people and the environment. Protected Environment status will secure habitat and the sense of place that makes Chrissiesmeer so special and in turn is the foundation of the area’s tourism value.”

A key part of the publication of the Intention to Declare Notice is a 60 day public consultation period where members of the public were invited to submit letters of support or objection to the notice. All legitimate stakeholders, municipalities and landowners were informed and consulted.

BirdLife South Africa and the Endangered Wildlife Trust campaigned widely to garner public support for this unique wetland and grassland landscape where cranes flock and breed, and which is globally recognised as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area. Collectively, the organisations accumulated over 1000 signatures of support for the declaration of this Protected Environment. These came from as far afield as Kenya and England, from every South African province and all sectors of society. Government conservation agencies and departments in neighbouring provinces, the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, university professors and students, professional scientists, NGOs, societies and interest groups, commerce leaders, and ordinary citizens made a stand. Every BirdLife South Africa affiliated bird club in Mpumalanga submitted a letter of support, as did many other bird clubs around the country. Most importantly, local residents of Chrissiesmeer town and KwaChibikhulu Township pledged their support for this conservation initiative.

The amendment notice has initiated another 60 day consultation period, to end on 9 October 2013 and we encourage the public to continue with their letters of support for the declaration of Chrissiesmeer as a Protected Area.

Submissions must be lodged with the Chief Executive Officer: Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency, Private Bag X 11338, Nelspruit, 1200. Gazette notices are available free online at www.gpwonline.co.za or contact Brian Morris for further information on 084 579 7979 or enviroteq@gmail.com.

End

For further information, please contact:

- Dr Charmaine Uys: BirdLife South Africa, Regional Conservation Manager: Mpumalanga and Free State, charmaine.uys@birdlife.org.za, 011 789 1122, 082 265 2762.
- Ms Ursula Franke: Endangered Wildlife Trust, Senior Field Officer: Highveld Crane Conservation Project, ursulaf@ewt.org.za, 017 811 2817, 083 332 8859.
- Mr Brian Morris: Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency, Manager: Protected Area Establishment and Expansion, enviroteq@gmail.com, 084 579 7979.

Notes for the Editor:

About the Endangered Wildlife Trust

The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) is dedicated to conserving threatened species and ecosystems in southern Africa to the benefit of all people. Our Vision is a healthy planet and an equitable world that values and sustains diversity of all life. The EWT was established in 1973 and is registered as a Non-Profit Organisation. The EWT fills the key niche of on the ground conservation action. We identify the key factors threatening biodiversity and develop innovative methodologies and best practice guidelines to reduce these and promote harmonious co-existence and sustainable living for both people and wildlife. We achieve our goals through specialist programmes, and our skilled field staff are deployed regionally and throughout southern Africa. The EWT is a proud member of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the United Nations Global Compact. Visit www.ewt.org.za for further information.

About BirdLife South Africa

1. The Mission of BirdLife South Africa is to promote the enjoyment, conservation, study and understanding of wild birds and their habitats.
2. For more information about BirdLife South Africa visit www.birdlife.org.za.
3. BirdLife South Africa contact details: Lewis House, 239 Barkston Drive, Blairgowrie, P.O. Box 515, Randburg, Johannesburg, South Africa, Tel. +27-11-789 1122, Fax. +27-11-7895188, or e-mail info@birdlife.org.za.