



MPUMALANGA MEC APPROVES THE DECLARATION OF THE GREATER LAKENVLEI PROTECTED ENVIRONMENT

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Start

A major milestone for the conservation of South Africa's water resources and threatened Highveld grass- and wetlands was reached on 7 April 2017, when the MEC for Mpumalanga's Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Land and Environmental Affairs (DARDLEA), Vusi Shongwe, declared the Greater Lakenvlei Protected Environment near Dullstroom. South Africa's grasslands and wetlands are poorly represented in formal protected areas and this declaration will now add 14,305 hectares of important grassland and wetland habitat to the network of protected areas within the province. This momentous achievement was made possible through the collaborative efforts of Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MTPA) and their NGO partners, the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) and BirdLife South Africa.

These organisations have a long history of working together in the area, dating back to 1994, and began the Mpumalanga Biodiversity Stewardship Programme, which aims to secure privately owned land within formal protected areas, in 2010. Biodiversity Stewardship has been a critical factor in enabling cost effective protected area expansion. It ensures that land stays available for agricultural production while offering landowners a way to contribute to national biodiversity conservation targets in a sustainable way. MTPA Head of Protected Areas Expansion, Brian Morris, commented that the future of biodiversity conservation is in the hands of private, communal and corporate landowners and the MTPA has walked a long road with the landowners of the Greater Lakenvlei area to secure the site under formal legal protection. He is very hopeful that, in the future, the leadership in the provincial conservation agency and the Provincial Government will continue to support the declaration of more land for conservation.

The Greater Lakenvlei area is critical to biodiversity as it harbours all three of South Africa's crane species—including South Africa's National Bird, the Blue Crane, and the Critically Endangered Wattled Crane—as well as other threatened species such as White-winged Flufftail. Lakenvlei is also a peatland, which is a wetland with a particularly high organic matter content that is good at storing and purifying water, as well as sequestering and storing carbon in a pristine state, critical to preventing additional impacts on climate change. Furthermore, the Lakenvlei wetlands provide crucial ecosystem services, including the ability to trap nitrates, regulate stream flow, maintain biodiversity, flood attenuation, and to prevent erosion due to good vegetation cover.

The Greater Lakenvlei Protected Environment falls within the well-known Dullstroom tourism hub that provides a large number of local tourism-related jobs connected to the scenic beauty and outdoor

activities in the area. This declaration will enable the continued development of sustainable tourism opportunities within the area.

“We are excited about this conservation milestone, especially in the light of the development pressures this area faces. The EWT would like to extend its appreciation to our partners and to the MEC for his visionary commitment to biodiversity conservation and securing sustainable tourism areas in Mpumalanga,” says Ursula Franke, Senior Field Officer for the EWT’s African Crane Conservation Programme. “The objectives of the GLPE are to demonstrate the mainstreaming of biodiversity conservation into the agriculture and tourism sector by securing the conservation of the area and by promoting agricultural and other land use practices that are compatible with biodiversity conservation. The ultimate objective is to ensure ongoing grassland conservation whilst livelihoods from livestock farming and tourism are maintained.”

CEO of BirdLife South Africa, Mark Anderson, says: “This declaration is a vital achievement in protecting this important grassland area which hosts many threatened bird species, and is also important for water management, tourism and agriculture.” Daniel Marnewick, the manager of the Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas Programme (IBA) at BirdLife South Africa adds that “this declaration will protect the Steenkampsberg IBA through improved management and by minimising threats to this sensitive grassland and vlei habitat, such as from mining which could negatively impact on the water, natural habitats and thereby the bird species found in this system.” Marnewick further indicates that this declaration is another victory for biodiversity stewardship in the country, which empowers local landowners to become stewards of the natural diversity found on their land.

The Greater Lakenvlei Protected Environment is an area of immense beauty and home to a wide variety of special plants and animals. The protection of the area also secures and enhances water and food production—our country’s lifeblood. The landowners’ commitment to Biodiversity Stewardship is especially praiseworthy. With assistance from MTPA and partners, the sustainable management of this special area will largely be in their hands.

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Notes to Editors:

- The Grassland Biome has high avifaunal significance, because it supports about 350 of the 846 bird species, 29 of the 125 Red Data bird species (Barnes 2000) and 53% of endemic bird species (Clancey 1986) occurring in South Africa. Consequently, 50 of South Africa's 122 Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas are in grasslands (Barnes 1998).
- The national Biodiversity Stewardship Programme aims to sign private and communally-owned land into voluntary contractual agreements that afford legal Protected Area status to sites of critical biodiversity importance outside of State-owned nature reserves and national parks.
- For information on the EWT visit www.ewt.org.za
- For information on BirdLife South Africa visit www.birdlife.org.za and Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs), visit <http://www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/important-bird-areas>