

Bontebok, hartebeest released in pioneer Overberg project

10 August, 2010: In the first deal of its kind in South Africa, the private sector is working with CapeNature and other government organisations for biodiversity conservation. The Nuwejaars Special Management Area (SMA) in the Overberg has released 39 bontebok donated by CapeNature and the Overberg Test Range. The three organisations will now manage and research the bontebok together in a brand new way.

At the same time, the Nuwejaars SMA also released 21 red hartebeest onto its conservation land. Hartebeest last occurred naturally in the area in the 1800s – although historical records on when hartebeest became extinct in the Overberg are inconclusive. This is hoped to be the return of a free-ranging population in the area.

The Nuwejaars SMA is a pioneer conservation project in South Africa. Landowners in the region have offered up land for biodiversity conservation, while retaining their farming operations. The unique project has seen hundreds of locals employed in alien clearing, wetland rehabilitation and fire management. The project's seen as a potential nationwide model in creating a sustainable conservation system, and enjoys the support of government.

The release of the bontebok and red hartebeest also forms part of the SMA's re-introduction of animals shot out of the area centuries ago. Bontebok faced extinction in the late 1800s, with historical records at the time indicating fewer than 20 buck remained. Aside from the bontebok and hartebeest, the SMA will soon release hippos, eland and mountain zebra.

Of the 39 bontebok, 19 came from the Overberg Test Range near Arniston, and 20 from Potberg. CapeNature implanted microchips into the bontebok released onto the SMA, which will allow the buck to be individually recognised.

CapeNature is also facilitating further research of the animals. During the capture, the conservation group took DNA samples of the buck. Bontebok are known to hybridize with blesbuck. The DNA samples will be used to build up a reference database of pure buck.

According to the SMA's Project Coordinator, Rory Allardice, this level of cooperation between CapeNature, OTB and the Nuwejaars SMA could pave the way for similar deals between government and the private sector across the country. SANParks also assisted in the capture of the animals. "This just shows how the private sector and organisations like OTB, CapeNature and SANParks can work together in the name of conservation."

He said, "By donating the animals to the Nuwejaars SMA, it's also evidence of their commitment to the concept of the SMA, as well as to biodiversity conservation in general."

Government has already indicated its support for the SMA initiative, with the Department of Finance, Economic Development and Tourism in the Western Cape citing the introduction of the game as a major boon for tourism in the region.

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