

Abstract:

Urban Nature Conservation: People & Nature, Together?

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Cape Town is the most biodiverse city in the world with high level of endemism. Like many other big cities urbanisation is putting tremendous pressure on many aspects of its make-up, especially the ecological ecosystems. Strategic biodiversity planning on the local scale was initiated in 2001/2002 and called the Biodiversity Network (BioNet) for Cape Town and directed the Conservation of Critical Biodiversity Areas. Aligned to this, Cape Town proclaimed over 16 Protected Areas to ensure their perpetual protection to serve the current and the future generations. A further five conservation areas are now “in process” and will be proclaimed in the future.

Many of the proclaimed areas are degraded by alien invasive species and agricultural practices, and at Blaauwberg Nature Reserve, a structured and research based restoration is currently being implemented. The City's Biodiversity Management Branch is further planning to mainstream lessons learnt through this research into management and in particular through the implementation of fire, fauna and flora management within its network of protected areas.

Urbanisation as a global phenomenon is one such challenge in Cape Town where the need for housing has been increasing rapidly in the past 15 years. Much of the critical endangered biodiversity faces ongoing threats such as formal housing, industrial, mining and in recent years an increase in illegal land invasion. Land invasion increased exponentially during the Covid-19 lockdown. While, most of what was lost was mainly earmarked for biodiversity expansion, various pockets of proclaimed protected areas were invaded during this time. Law Enforcement working collaboratively with various anti-land invasion units made many attempts to remove and relocate people invading land, but faced various challenges. This is an ongoing challenge, which requires new thinking and new approaches that can serve both the perpetual conservation of biodiversity with social integration.

Cape Town continues to celebrate successes through its well implemented protected areas management plans which include fauna and flora, veld management, fire management, the people and conservation programmes. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become even more clear why strategic management planning is important as without it, it would have been very difficult to know where the focus for conservation work would be. Having a knowledgeable, decisive conservation management leadership as well as dedicated and able employees is essential to ensuring that the right decisions are taken and implemented when it matters. Lessons we continue to learn is that research and strategic partnerships are critical for effective biodiversity conservation and management.