

MEDIA STATEMENT

DESIGNATION OF TWO NEW SOUTH AFRICAN BIOSPHERE RESERVES, MAGALIESBERG AND GOURITZ CLUSTER

09 June 2015

The United National Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) on 9 June 2015 approved the designation of the Magaliesberg and Gouritz Cluster ecosystems as Biosphere Reserves.

The two biosphere reserves add to the existing portfolio of six biosphere reserves in South Africa, bringing these important protected ecosystems to eight.

The designation of the Biosphere Reserves was approved at the the 27th Session of the Unesco Man and Biosphere (MAB) International Coordinating Council in Paris, France. The Council is being held from 8 to 12 June 2015.

The South African delegation is being led by the Acting Deputy Director General for Biodiversity and Conservation in the Department of Environmental Affairs, Ms Skumsa Mancotywa, who is supported by the Heads of Departments for Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ms Thandeka Mbassa and North West Department of Rural, Environment and Agricultural Development, Dr Poncho Mokaila.

Launched in 1970 by the Unesco General Conference, the Intergovernmental Man and Biosphere Programme aims to improve human environments and preserve natural ecosystems. The Programme promotes research and capacity building with the main objective of reducing the loss of biodiversity and addressing the ecological, social and economic aspects. The Unesco network of biosphere reserves connects people around the world who are pioneering a positive future for people and nature.

Biosphere reserves are sites of terrestrial and marine ecosystems designated under the Unesco MAB Programme, where people share a sustainable way of living with nature and innovative practices are tested in co-operation with local inhabitants with the aim of reconciling conservation of biodiversity with sustainable utilisation. The zone includes strictly protected areas at the core, which are typically surrounded by buffer zones where conservation is emphasised, but where people also live and work. The whole area is surrounded by a transition area, or area of co-operation, which promotes sustainable development. These are therefore much more than “protected areas” and form an integral part of an integrated regional planning and development strategy aimed at promoting conservation and sustainable development whilst providing facilities for education, awareness and training.

Existing Biosphere Reserves in South Africa are:

- a) Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve (Western Cape Province, designated 1998)
- b) Cape West Coast Biosphere Reserve (Western Cape Province, designated 2000)
- c) Waterberg Biosphere Reserve (Limpopo Province, designated 2001)
- d) Kruger-to-Canyons Biosphere Reserve (Limpopo Province and Mpumalanga, designated 2001)
- e) Cape Winelands Biosphere Reserve (Western Cape Province, designated 2007)
- f) Vhembe Biosphere Reserve (Limpopo Province, designated May 2009).

One of the newly designated sites, the Magaliesberg Biosphere Reserve, adds numerous important aspects to achieve the goal of sustainable development through conservation. The site straddles the Gauteng and North West provinces and falls within the Bushveld Bakenveld terrestrial priority area, which has been identified as a priority area for conservation action. The site is at the interface of two great African biomes, namely, the Central Grassland Plateaux and the sub-Saharan savannah with the remnants of a third biome, the Afro-montane forest.

The Magaliesberg Reserve covers approximately 360 000 ha and is located between the Pretoria and Johannesburg in the east and Rustenburg in the west, with approximately 262 000 people living within the designated area. In addition, the area is endowed with scenic beauty, unique natural features, rich cultural heritage value. It is also of high archaeological interest as it includes the Cradle of Humankind, which is part of the Fossil Hominid Sites of South Africa World Heritage site with 4 million years of history. The area contains rich floral biodiversity, a number of faunal species, and over 45% of the total bird species of Southern Africa.

The second newly designated Gouritz Cluster Biosphere Reserve area covers an area of more than three million hectares and straddles the Eastern and Western Cape Provinces. The area is globally unique as it is the only area in the world where three recognised biodiversity hotspots -- the Fynbos, Succulent Karoo and Maputoland-Tongoland-Albany hotspots -- converge. The entire biosphere domain falls within the Cape Floristic Kingdom which is the smallest, but one of the richest of the six floral kingdoms in the world, and the only one found entirely within the boundaries of one country. This Reserve is home to high levels of endemic plant species, threatened invertebrates and butterfly species. It provides a migratory route for large mammals and serves as a nursery for marine species. Due to its immense historical significance, the biosphere reserve includes three components of the internationally renowned Cape Floral Region Protected Areas World Heritage Site.

The Minister of Environmental Affairs, Ms Edna Molewa shares the excitement of the inclusion of the two biosphere reserves on the world network of biosphere reserves.

South Africa is proud about the additional sites that have just been listed and the government, as the designation of these areas, supports national efforts of expansion of

the conservation estate in addition to supporting the achievement of government's development objectives, said Minister Molewa.

The Minister indicated that the implementation of the Magaliesberg Biosphere Reserve management plan will create a number of alternative community opportunities in partnership with the private sector and mitigate negative industrial impacts in pursuit of sustainable tourism and cultural heritage development.

The Minister also indicated that the designation of the Gouritz Cluster Biosphere Reserve, which is South Africa's biggest biosphere reserve, "will enhance South Africa's status as the third most biodiverse country in the world and enhance our effort to conserve the world renowned Cape Floral region".

Furthermore, this designation complements government's other efforts to expand the Cape Floristic Region World Heritage Site, to be considered later this month by the 39th Session of the World Heritage Committee in Germany.

"The government will continue to manage its growing portfolio of biosphere reserves in collaboration with land owners, communities and other partners to ensure that we meet Unesco standards and our own national goals of sustainable development," the Minister added.

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