UNDERSTANDING A FARMER'S POSITION

*When University of Stellenbosch student Botany student **Sue Winter** headed out over Sir Lowry's Pass into the renosterveld to carry out the first of forty interviews with landowners for her Masters thesis, she expected most farmers to be on the defensive, yet she encountered a refreshing openness and a willingness to engage. **Karoline Hanks** chatted to her about her findings.*

Less than ten percent of original renosterveld remains today after decades of commercial farming. The Cape Lowlands were rated as a number one priority for conservation by Cape Action for People and the Environment (C.A.P.E.) based on the irreplaceable nature of their indigenous remnants. As most of these are owned by commercial farmers, it became apparent that a better understanding of their attitudes, needs and willingness to conserve the renosterveld remnants on their farms was needed before any conservation plans could be implemented.

'We are quick to point fingers and to claim that the fate of the Cape Floral Kingdom lies in the hands of the farmers' says Sue. 'What we don't do is ask what is currently preventing them from conserving the veld, or how these obstacles can be overcome'. In the past opinions of the farmers have seldom been taken into account, and farmers were quick to bemoan local conservation authority's lack of presence. Its is not surprising, then that we know very little about what drives a farmer to conserve his or her patch, and others not. And this does indeed vary across the board. 'We have to embrace a much more sociological approach to our work' says Sue. 'In the past, ecological studies have been divorced from a consideration of the people who have to live on and manage the precious ecosystems under study. Without this level of engagement, we are wasting time'.

"If it is no use to me, it is of no concern"

More than half of the farmers interviewed were not aware that the renosterveld was endangered or had any botanical significance at all. Eighty seven percent regarded renosterveld as 'uitvalgrond'. For the most part, the areas which have remained untouched are inaccessible – too high, too rocky, too wet or on steep slopes which are impossible to plough.

Many of the farmers had a negative perception to renosterveld. One such perception (albeit it incorrect) is that renosterveld is a breeding site for caracal (rooikat), which is regarded as a pest by many farmers. Stock losses of over one hundred lambs a year have been recorded on one farm – and when a lamb fetches R350 on the local market, these losses are significant enough for farmers to feel they ought to destroy all the veld on their farms. Others farmers see renosterveld as 'messy' and too costly to manage. It is also a source of weeds which invade into planted pastures, and a tick breeding site, all of which add to management costs. Basically, land under renosterveld has little or no perceived value. The challenge lies in changing these perceptions.

‘Over and over again, I would hear that it was too expensive to manage and that money could not be earned from renosterveld. Farmers are at the mercy of a tight economy, which in some cases forces them to make every hectare of land productive in order to earn a living’ says Sue. Presented with emphatic economic arguments, it is difficult to argue the case for biodiversity value. When asked what monetary value farmers would place on renosterveld, the answers were varied. Some put a price tag of R100/ha, and one ventured R2000/ha. When compared to the value of workable land at approximately R3500/ha, the difference is worth noting.

Some farmers have, however, found a use and value for renosterveld. Some use it as a protein rich grazing supplement for livestock and an important source of roughage, a kind of ‘grazing bank’ in drought periods, and others use it as a source of easy-to-cultivate garden plants. One farmer recognized that the grey-winged francolin depends on bulbs in the renosterveld and sees this as a hunting/ecotourism opportunity where a single bird could fetch up to R500. A number of farmers make use of the medicinal properties of certain renosterveld species for treating digestive disorders, insomnia, and cuts and bruises. It is also cited as protecting the quality of drinking water in areas where it has been conserved around dams, as well as protecting slopes against erosion.

‘The obvious challenge’ says Sue, ‘is to demonstrate that the pros of renosterveld far outweigh the cons, and we need more research to substantiate this.’

Sue’s study found that 63% of farmers were willing in principle to conserve renosterveld on their farms in the future, and 13% were unsure. A further 15% of farmers were not willing to conserve now, but possibly in the future with more assistance, while only 10% refused to consider conservation.

In her questionnaire, Sue incorporated a large section on Conservation Incentives. With guidance from Mark Botha of the Botanical Society’s Cape Conservation Unit Conservation Partnerships Programme, she set out to establish what incentives and co-operative management models would attract farmers. The three most attractive incentives offered were assistance with alien plant clearing, assistance with fencing to enclose remnants and subsidies or tax relief for land that is conserved. She also presented farmers with three possible management models: voluntary reserves, management agreement reserves and contract reserves, each with a specific set of incentives. The results showed that voluntary reserves were favoured.

Sue concludes that more dialogue is needed to explain the mutual benefits that a management agreement can offer, and to address many farmers’ fears. ‘It is abundantly clear that we need to commit more time and money to a renosterveld education and awareness campaign, as the levels of ignorance regarding renosterveld rank high,’ she said. ‘As the saying goes, “People will only conserve that which they love, and they will only love that which they know.” More importantly, as conservationists, we need to **talk** less and **listen** more, in order to truly understand a farmer’s reality.

Sue Winter *has spent the past few months researching for her Masters thesis for a new course in Ecological Assessment. Entitled 'Investigating landowners willingness to conserve renosterveld in the Cape Lowlands', the research component of her project involved visiting a number of farmers in the Overberg region of the Western Cape.* ***Karoline Hanks*** *is a media consultant with Alex Hetherington Media.*

We need to change attitudes. Education and increased financial incentives to conserve land is the conclusion that botanist Sue Winter reached after interviewing over forty farmers in the renosterveld. (See p. 140.) Here she is with farmer Eben van Niekerk on his farm Spesbona in the Overberg. Van Niekerk has fenced off a section of renoster-veld and actively transplants bulbs that are threatened by the plough into his renosterveld garden. Photo: K. Hanks.