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HUGE INCREASE IN PROTECTED AREAS IN THE GRASSLAND BIOME

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The Grasslands Programme has worked with partner organisations to increase the extent of protected areas in production landscapes in the Grassland Biome. There has been remarkable progress towards this in the last six months. With recent declarations, the extent of additional protected area in the Grassland Biome has reached more than 60,000 ha since the Programme began. The area protected has increased by 35,000 ha in the last three months alone. This huge success was achieved with the partnership, support and hard work of many different organisations, both public and private, and with the letters of support from our network. Biodiversity stewardship has been

vital to this protected area expansion. New sites include areas in plantation forestry and agricultural landscapes in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and Mpumalanga.

In plantation forestry production landscapes, recent declarations in KZN include Clairmont Mountain Nature Reserve, Forest Side Nature Reserve, Weza Protected Environment, Excelsior Protected Environment and Mount Shannon Protected Environment, totalling just over 7,500 ha. In Mpumalanga eight sites declared as forest nature reserves in terms of [National Forestry Act](#) will be deemed nature reserves under section 9 of the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act. They represent almost 15,000 ha of relatively pristine montane grasslands, mistbelt forest, northern escarpment and dolomite grasslands. All of the areas are of significant biodiversity value because they are fully or partially targeted in the Mpumalanga Biodiversity Conservation Plan as of high irreplaceability, are endangered ecosystems, or are areas earmarked for protected area expansion. In one site alone, the Hartebeesvlakte state forest grasslands, there are more than 250 plant species, including more than 30 red data plant species. The sites also contain the headwaters of several river systems such as the Ohrigstad River, Spekboom River, Blyde River and Sabie River. Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and the Komati Land Forest Company will manage these reserves.

The [Pongola Bush Protected Environment](#) is one of the newly proclaimed areas covering 9,258 ha of Highveld grasslands and associated forests, in northern KZN between Wakkerstroom and Paulpietersberg. The area has relatively intact grasslands containing a wealth of plant, bird and mammal species, many of which are endemic and some of which are Red Listed (and thus in need of protection). Protection of this site contributes towards achieving national grassland conservation objectives through conserving (and rehabilitating where necessary), a representative sample of Wakkerstroom/Luneberg Grasslands and Paulpietersberg Moist Grassland. The site is also particularly important for freshwater systems in the area, as well as for climate change adaptation, as it improves connectivity between existing provincial nature reserves and KwaMandlangampisi Protected Environment in Mpumalanga. Ncandu Private Forest and Grassland Nature Reserve (1,390 ha) is a further recent proclamation in the northern Drakensberg in KZN and contains Low Escarpment Moist Grasslands and the largest areas of indigenous forest in the province.

In most of these recently declared sites, [biodiversity stewardship](#) has been a critical factor in enabling cost effective protected area expansion. It avoids taking land out of agricultural production, and has offered land owners a way to contribute to national biodiversity targets and benefit from incentives under biodiversity stewardship.

There remain more than 90,000 ha of grassland areas that have been gazetted with intent to declare as either Nature Reserves or Protected Environments. These areas are likely to be declared in the near future and will make greatly significant contributions to further protection of this under-protected Biome. This includes six sites in Gauteng of over 22,000 ha and [Chrissiesmeer Protected Environment](#) in the Mpumalanga Lake District (over 60,000 ha). Provincial biodiversity stewardship programmes in KZN and Mpumalanga, as well as the NGO partners that support stewardship, are key to these successes. Ultimately, this work can not be done without the numerous organisations working together, and your continued support.

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