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GSSA HOSTS A GRASSLANDS MANAGEMENT WORKSHOP IN GAUTENG



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Many civil society organisations, conservancies and private landowner groups in Gauteng are interested in obtaining expertise and resources on how to best manage grassland ecosystems for biodiversity. This was demonstrated through good attendance of a workshop in which several experts on veld management shared their knowledge and experience on managing grassland ecosystems in Gauteng. The workshop was themed "Understanding your veld for improved production and conservation" and was organised by the Grasslands Society of Southern Africa (GSSA) at the Crocodile River Reserve in Pretoria. Grasslands Programme Agricultural Component Co-ordinator, Tsumbedzo Mudalahothe, showcased the recently published

Grassland Ecosystem Guidelines and Grazing and Burning Guidelines available to support managers and planners.

The workshop covered various topics of grassland management, including fire, grazing, invasive alien species and soil erosion. Tsumbedzo Mudalahothe introduced each of the recently produced, user-friendly products developed to help managers and planners integrate biodiversity management and conservation objectives: the Grassland Ecosystem Guidelines and Grazing and Burning Guidelines. The **Grassland Ecosystem Guidelines** address biodiversity-related aspects of land-use planning, management and regulation in South Africa's grasslands and grassland related ecosystems, namely wetlands, rivers and indigenous forest. The **Grazing and Burning Guidelines** are designed to encourage grassland managers to apply grazing and burning best-practice principles in grasslands. These tools were provided to the attendees on a CD, along with other useful grasslands management resources.

Frits van Oudshoorn, author of the "Guide to Grasses of Southern Africa" and one of the experts presenting emphasised that fire and grazing are two of the most important ecological drivers in grassland ecosystems. He explained that certain grass species become prominent in conditions of overgrazing, or infrequent or too frequent fire. Grasses that indicate these conditions are categorised into "increaser" and "decreaser" species. Decreasers are the most important group, which decrease in number under poor management, but are an abundant sign of healthy grasslands. Increasesers are the unpalatable species that become more dominant as grazing pressure increases. During a practical session, delegates were taught the Visual Veld Assessment technique, which is a simple technique that inexperienced people can apply to assess the health of their grasslands.

The well-known naturalist and biologist Vincent Carruthers also gave an inspiring talk on the fascinating history and evolution of Gauteng grasslands, saying, "The Grasslands are permanently at war, fighting battles for supremacy or displacement along an ecological frontier. The Bankenveld (and Crocodile River Reserve) lies right at the front line of the battlefield, the ecotone between grassland and savanna. It is this dynamism that makes it such an interesting and diverse ecological region".

Most of the people in attendance came from conservancies, nature reserve associations and private landowner groups in Gauteng. It was clear that these voluntary organisations are doing much to conserve urban grasslands, including working towards formal biodiversity stewardship agreements. All the participants were enthusiastic and had a strong desire for any resources and assistance in pursuing their conservation objectives. Thanks to the GSSA, the workshop was valuable in providing some of the expertise and resources that were sought.

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