

Spekboom: The Miracle Plant

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The Spekboom is an amazing plant. Botanists have known about it for centuries. They first documented it about 400 years ago as one of the most common plants in the Cape landscape. And today we know it as one of the iconic plants of the Little Karoo.

A healthy spekboom cover allows other native plants to return to the landscape, and improve biodiversity. The plant also pulls carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and reduces the greenhouse gas problem. Unfortunately large areas of spekboomveld have become badly degraded in the past century due to unsustainable human practices. Soil erosion and reduced veld productivity are posing a real threat to farming, as vital ecosystem services such as flood control, water infiltration, carbon capture and storage are undetermined.

A campaign of the Gouritz Cluster Biosphere Reserve (GCBR) is trying to fix the many hectares that have been degraded. In partnership with the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA) and with funding from the European Union, a project is underway to plant the Spekboom back into the landscape. The 'Jobs for Carbon Project' is being implemented through a collaboration between the GCBR, WESSA and Rhodes University.

The practice of restoring Spekboomveld back to its natural condition is well researched and tested. We know that as the vegetation structure is restored, biodiversity returns as more rainwater infiltrates into the soil and more plants will grow in the area. It also has great potential to create jobs through the planting of thousands of Spekboom cuttings.

The goal is to return barren, brown landscapes to a lush, green state. Healthy Spekboom can restore the functioning of many different ecosystems. River systems start working more effectively, because water can infiltrate in the soil



Wendy Crane and Andre Britz are involved with the spekboom project in the Vanwyksdorp area. Photo: Tisha Steyn

faster. The Gouritz Cluster Biosphere Reserve believes that by rehabilitating large areas of degraded spekboomveld, it is possible to improve the rural economy of the Klein Karoo and heal its damaged ecosystems.

We want the system to become a sponge again, able to absorb the water and slowly release it into the rivers instead of flash floods and erosion. And the employment created in a new 'restoration economy' can improve income of poor rural families at the same time as replenish the natural capital for their children and their children's children.

The Jobs for Carbon Project will initially involve the restoration of 300 hectares of degraded land. Apart from creating much needed employment, it will also build entrepreneurial capacity to run restoration teams, and provide valuable scientific work needed to test the possibility of selling carbon credits on the carbon market. While initially focused on the Vanwyksdorp area, the GCBR would like to see the project as a catalyst for a much bigger restoration programme in the wider region in the coming years.

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