

CO-EXISTING WITH NATURE IN A SUSTAINABLE AND BUSH-FRIENDLY MANNER

A GPNR forum on guidelines relating to the interaction between humans and the natural environment

INTRODUCTION

What is the main reason we all love living on or visiting Grietjie? Without doubt, it is to be in the bush and to experience all the wonderful things that nature has to offer. We want to enjoy its serenity and beauty, and delight in its flora and fauna. But how often do we reflect on the impact that **we** have on the bush? Many of us live in cities and seldom need to concern ourselves with questions about conservation and ecology, or with the problems that could arise when humans interface with the natural bush environment.

In order to address these issues, the present committee has initiated this forum. Each month we will deal with some of the most frequently asked questions pertaining to living in the bush and to conservation in general. Our ultimate goal is to compile a well-researched document containing guidelines for the sustainable, bush-friendly development and conservation of Grietjie. These guidelines will be in line with those of the APNR, and we will coordinate our efforts with those of the Environmental Interest Group.

Please send any comments, questions and interesting articles to Liz Lewis: liz.lewis.sa@gmail.com

OCTOBER'S TOPICS

1. Should we feed animals and birds during the drought, or throw left-overs/scraps into the bush?
2. Is it acceptable to plant non-locally indigenous and/or alien plant species on our properties?
3. Is it in order to collect firewood on one's own property?
4. Elephants ... and more elephants! A few interesting research extracts.

1. Should we feed animals and birds during the drought, or throw left-overs/scraps into the bush?

There are a number of well-accepted reasons why we should **not** feed animals:

- It allows naturally weaker animals to survive and thereby weakens the population's gene pool in the long term.
- It could introduce the seeds of plants that are not indigenous.
- It is impossible to target only specific species for feeding (such as rhino) since all animals will take advantage of the food source. This can lead to increased animosity amongst individuals being fed in close proximity to each other, which can result in fighting and unwanted injuries, or even deaths.
- Animals become increasingly 'tame' which leads to potential friction between humans and animals. These animals could eventually become 'problem' animals, with associated aggressive behaviour towards humans. Ultimately, they might have to be shot. By feeding animals we could actually be signing their death warrant.
- Animals could become dependent on being fed by humans and thus stop foraging for themselves.

2. Is it acceptable to plant non-locally indigenous and/or alien plant species on our properties?

It is very important to note that invasive aliens are rated by legislation according to their levels of invasiveness:

Category 1: Invader plants must be removed and destroyed immediately

Category 2: Invader plants may be grown under controlled conditions only

Category 3: Invader plants may no longer be planted

(For lists of invader plants, see for example www.environment.co.za)

As a general rule, it is not wise to plant species that are not locally indigenous. Apart from creating a visual clash with the bush environment, when we plant alien and non-indigenous plants, we encroach on the available territory of plants that are locally indigenous. This encroachment could eventually impact negatively on overall floral diversity, and/or on the diversity of the gene pool of particular species because fewer plants are propagating.

Non-indigenous pot plants and those planted in enclosed areas may seem quite acceptable, but bear in mind that the wind, birds, monkeys and the like can spread the seeds of alien and non-indigenous plants far and wide.

There are many attractive local species available with which to create a beautiful indigenous garden. By planting more locally indigenous plants we also increase the diversity of the gene pool of those particular species. The best place to source locally indigenous plants is the nursery at Skukuza, by far the most extensive and cheapest in the area.

3. Is it acceptable to collect firewood on one's own property?

Some feel that it is acceptable to take wood from the veld in moderation, while others believe it should not be done at all. Much depends on the circumstances. There is, for example, a big difference between a busy lodge that constantly gathers wood for its guests and an owner who collects a little now and again. Availability might also play a role: under the present drought conditions there is an increased amount of dead wood lying around. Whatever one decides, it is important that we do not rob nature of the important organic recycling that should be taking place. Surface wood not only breaks down to form a ground cover which rejuvenates the soils (which so desperately need the extra nutrients), but facilitates the formation of seedbeds for the establishment of grasses and young trees, and provides food and shelter for insects and a variety of animals.

The following are important points to remember:

- There are various tree species that are protected in terms of the National Forests Act of 1998, which may not be cut, disturbed, damaged, or destroyed, and their products may not be possessed, collected, removed, transported, exported, donated, purchased or sold – except under a license granted by the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (e.g. Leadwood, Marula and Pod Mahogany).
- No wood is allowed to leave Grietjie, unless a permit is issued by the Committee.
- No person is permitted to collect wood from any property on Grietjie unless specifically permitted to do so by the owner.

4. Elephants ... and more elephants!!!

Most of us are deeply concerned about the severe impact the elephants have had on Grietjie. We often associate the words '*wanton destruction*' and '*devastation*' with them. But are we forgetting about the human impact on the environment? Every building, every road and every fenced garden reduces the habitat of all the animals who live in that area, while at the very same time our waterholes attract them. To a certain extent, we have contributed to the problem. Therefore, before we blame everything on the elephants, let us consider what we as humans are doing on our properties and try to minimise, rather than maximise our impact.

Following are a few interesting research extracts:

4.1 On the 'destruction' by elephant

'In Kruger, big trees have declined despite past capping of elephant numbers ... There is no benchmark against which to judge an ideal vegetation state for Kruger.' N. Owen-Smith et al. 'A Scientific Perspective on the Management of Elephants in the Kruger National Park and elsewhere' in the *South African Journal of Science* 102, September/October 2006, 390.

'For most of the wet season elephants consume largely grass. Impacts on trees and, in particular, felling and debarking of large trees, tend to be concentrated during the latter part of the dry season when the dry grass is less nutritious than woody plant parts. This is

heightened in dry years when food becomes sparse.' N. Owen-Smith et al. 'A Scientific Perspective on the Management of Elephants in the Kruger National Park and elsewhere' in the *South African Journal of Science* 102, September/October 2006, 391.

4.2 On waterholes

'The previous **even distribution of water across the landscape** [of the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Park] over the years seems to have had a number of negative side-effects. Many of these were facilitated by the fact that throughout the park, permanent sources of water were within walking distances for animals throughout the year. As a result management had to deal with **over-grazing, veld degradation and erosion during droughts.**' P. Kotzé, 'Water for Elephants – Towards Natural Population Management' in *The Water Wheel* July/August 2011, 20.

Case studies have shown that '**where water is supplemented by waterholes**', elephant **numbers increase.** P. Kotzé, 'Water for Elephants – Towards Natural Population Management' in *The Water Wheel* July/August 2011, 21.

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