

Biodiversity Stewardship

An Overview for Volunteers

'Stewardship' means the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care, and 'biodiversity stewardship' is the care and responsible management of biodiversity within one's influence.

Historically, the conservation of our natural resources, including biodiversity, has been the responsibility of the national and provincial agencies. However, as early as 2001, Mark Botha and Kristal Maze (from BOT SOC's Conservation Unit at the time) explored different options for landowners with important biodiversity. Due to the rapid development and expansion of agriculture and urban development in recent decades, the conservation of private land has become an urgent concern and an opportunity to involve landowners and communities in conservation to expand our national protected area network. Biodiversity Stewardship began as a pilot programme in the Western Cape in 2003. Within ten years, it had been initiated in all nine provinces in South Africa, and there are now large areas of conservation-worthy land with important biodiversity formally declared as protected areas. There are several types of biodiversity stewardship arrangements ranging from formally declared nature reserves to biodiversity agreements and easements or servitudes.



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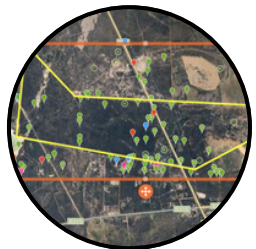
How does it work?

Coordinated by the provincial conservation authorities, several non-governmental conservation organisations, including BOT SOC, are now actively implementing biodiversity stewardship in most of the provinces across South Africa. After identifying an “important biodiversity property”, a standardised and enforced set of procedures and the type of conservation model is initiated. In the case of a Nature Reserve or Protected Environment, these could include:

Identification of a site – Any area of biodiversity value (i.e. with threatened or endemic species or vegetation types or situated in strategic water source areas) may be considered for stewardship if the site is in a relatively good condition. These may be known to local inhabitants and landowners or identified by conservationists, researchers and citizen scientists.

Interactions with the owner – The custodians of any potential site are informed about the stewardship process and the potential benefits to the landowner or community. The process is initiated if they are willing to have their land declared as a conservation area.

Assessment of site – Once a potential site has been identified and agreed on, a desktop assessment of biodiversity features is performed, including vegetation type, species present, land cover and/or hydrological features is completed. An on-site evaluation is conducted with the landowner or community and relevant conservation officials, scientists and stakeholders. The property is inspected and rated against specific species, vegetation, ecosystem values and conservation priority criteria. This may be one of the most critical areas where volunteers can contribute - with the owner's consent by recording species present using iNat, for example.



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How does it work?

Approval of category by a working group – Any site assessment findings are presented to the relevant provincial stewardship body and a conservation category (e.g., Nature Reserve or Protected Environment) is assigned based on its biodiversity value and condition. This outcome is then communicated to the landowner for a proposed agreement.

Drafting of Management Plan – At the same time, a management plan is considered a priority and a workshop is hosted with the landowner and other stakeholders for the plan to be approved and endorsed by the provincial conservation authority. A management authority is also appointed.

The intention to declare – The site must be approved by the provincial MEC and published for a 60-day public participation process in newspapers and the provincial conservation website.

Declaration (documents, gazette notice and endorsement of title deeds) – The provincial MEC and management authority sign the final declaration agreement. The declaration is published in the government gazette and a notary endorses the title deeds.

Post-declaration support – Management meetings are held at least annually after a formal declaration. This ensures that the adaptive management practices align with the conservation objectives of the site or property.



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How can you contribute?

The Importance of Biodiversity

Stewardship: Biodiversity stewardship is a fantastic tool that is currently contributing more to protected area expansion than any other mechanism. However, we need an understanding of exactly what species we are protecting under this framework.

Citizen Scientists to the Rescue:

Sadly, due to an ongoing lack of trained naturalists, we do not have a complete picture of biodiversity in most of our protected areas. This is a big gap that citizen scientists can help to fill, especially with the tools now available, such as iNaturalist.

BOT SOC's Role in Stewardship:

BOT SOC branches, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, have been actively supporting biodiversity stewardship through volunteer-driven activities such as bioblitzes on declared stewardship sites. During these events, volunteers and citizen scientists help document species and ecosystems of conservation value. Projects for each site are created on iNaturalist, where participants can upload biodiversity data captured on-site.



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How Bioblitzes Make a Difference:

This ongoing effort creates an online biodiversity inventory, assisting with the long-term management of these protected areas.

Protecting Threatened Sites: In other provinces, such as Gauteng, bioblitzes have been hosted at sites facing threats such as proposed expansion of mining activities. The data collected is crucial in advocating for the protection of these areas through biodiversity stewardship agreements.

Get Involved and Make an Impact!

By participating, you can contribute to preserving South Africa's natural heritage, helping ensure that threatened ecosystems receive formal protection. Joining a bioblitz is easy! Simply connect with your local BOT SOC branch, follow and join the projects on iNaturalist or sign up for field trips or surveys. Your involvement directly aids conservation authorities in making informed decisions about protecting land with high biodiversity value.

