

Department steps in to protect trees
Press Release by the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry
13 September 2004

A new national list of tree species has been declared as protected by Government Gazette Notice 1012 of 27 August 2004. This protection is afforded in terms of the National Forests Act no 84 of 1998 (as amended). The enactment of the protected tree list proves that the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF) is committed to the protection of its heritage of trees, and it is only appropriate that this should have happened on the eve of Arbor Week.

South Africa is richly endowed with more than 1700 indigenous species of trees and shrubs. Some species are now threatened on account of their rarity or the pressure of commercial or subsistence use. For this reason DWAF has undertaken a comprehensive three year long process to review the old list of protected trees, which has been in place since 1976. The main aim of the new list is to contribute towards the protection of biodiversity and ecosystems, which has become a high priority after South Africa ratified the Convention on the Protection of Biological Diversity a few years ago.

This is the first national list of protected tree species to be developed with stakeholder inputs, and on the basis of objective scientific criteria. Tree species listed as protected may not be cut, disturbed or damaged and their products transported or sold without a licence. Such protection applies across the whole country. Listing certain species as protected is not primarily aimed at preventing the use of a tree species, but to ensure sustainable use through licensing control measures.

A panel of experts assisted DWAF in the selection of tree species to be protected, using objective scientific criteria and a scoring system. These criteria related to the rarity of species, the importance of species in the maintenance of an ecosystem (keystone species), the utilisation pressure on species (timber, fuelwood or other uses), and the cultural or spiritual value of species (including landscape value). An important consideration was also the degree to which species already enjoy protection under provincial ordinances and other legislation. The shortlist produced by the expert panel went through further changes, following public participation.

A Protected Tree Task Team has been set up within DWAF to develop national policy and guidelines for the management of protected tree species. Detailed guidelines have already been developed for the handling of licence applications to cut Camel thorn trees (*Acacia erioloba*) following extensive research and consultation with a variety of stakeholders. Large scale felling of Camel thorn for commercial braaiwood made proper control, based on scientific criteria, a matter of urgency. Other protected species under threat include the rare Pepperbark tree (*Warburgia salutaris*), which is widely used for medicinal purposes. Commercial harvesters pose the main threat to these resources, while some ecologically important forest trees are also under pressure from coastal development.

The Marula tree (*Sclerocarya birrea*), also on the protected tree list, is one of the most highly valued trees in the country. A large industry is based on products derived from Marula fruit, including beauty products and a famous brand of Marula liqueur. To many rural people it is a vital source of income and subsistence. The Tsonga people celebrate the Feast of the First Fruits by pouring an offering of fresh Marula juice over the graves of deceased chiefs.

The protection of tree species dates back to many centuries before the colonial era. Indigenous peoples of the country had traditional laws prohibiting the cutting of certain trees and forests, handed down from one generation to another. Some trees and forests were considered to be sacred, and these traditions persist to this day. The first written laws and decrees to protect trees date back to 1657, when prohibitions were placed on the cutting of certain trees shortly after the establishment of a post at present-day Cape Town by the Dutch East India Company, mainly to reserve trees for the use of that company. Since 1941 a few individual tree species were declared as protected for reasons of biodiversity conservation,

and in 1976 the first comprehensive national list of protected tree species was declared under the old Forest Act of 1968.

The new list of protected tree species heralds a milestone in the history of tree protection in this country. It is the first comprehensive national list of protected trees to be developed through the application of objective scientific criteria, supported by a computerized scoring system. Having gone through an exhaustive participative process, it also reflects the collective input from all walks of society. The guidelines and systems now being developed to direct the management of these species are even more comprehensive and progressive to respond to the increasing pressures placed on the natural resources by the growing population and economy.

Contacts:

Izak van der Merwe

Tel: (012) 336 7731

vandermerwei@dwaf.gov.za

Ephraim Monyemoratho

Tel: (012) 336 7140

<mailto:1ai@dwaf.gov.za>