

RESTORING LANDSCAPES IN SOUTH AFRICA (ReLISA)

A Visual Exploration of ReLISA Project Sites



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COVER IMAGE: Blyde River Canyon/*Image: Pixabay*.

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Moditlo River, Blue Canyon Conservancy, Limpopo.
Image: Pexels/Stewart Masweneng

Welcome note

South Africa is home to some of the world's most diverse and important ecosystems. From vast savannas to high-altitude grasslands and unique subtropical thicket, these landscapes sustain people, economies and cultures. Yet, they are under increasing pressure from unsustainable land use, invasive species, climate change, and biodiversity loss.

Restoring ecosystems is therefore one of the most urgent and hopeful tasks of our time. Healthy landscapes store water, protect soils, regulate climate, and provide livelihoods. They offer a natural shield against the droughts, floods, and fires that increasingly define our era. Restoration is not only an environmental act - it is an investment in people, in inclusive growth, and in a more secure future.

ReLISA – Restoring Landscapes in South Africa – is an ambitious partnership that responds to this challenge. It unites science, communities, governments, and finance to breathe life back into degraded lands. South Africa and Germany stand together, with international partners, to show that nature-based solutions can strengthen economies and ecosystems alike.

This photobook captures the essence of landscapes that have been longlisted for ReLISA project activities. It is both a celebration and a call to action. Through the images, we are reminded that in the face of a changing climate, cooperation across borders and sectors is the only way forward.



KEY

-  Savanna
-  Grassland
-  Thicket



View our interactive map here.

Blyde River Canyon, Mpumalanga.
Image: Pexels/Luke Figgieri

About ReLISA

ReLISA – Restoring Landscapes in South Africa – is a five-year project (2024–2029) funded by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Climate Action, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMUKN) through the International Climate Initiative (IKI).

ReLISA is led by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in partnership with the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), C4 EcoSolutions (C4ES), and Unique Land Use GmbH. Together, this consortium blends global leadership with local science, conservation practice, policy support, private sector engagement and technical innovation.

ReLISA addresses degradation across three critical biomes - grassland, savanna, and thicket - through nature-based solutions that deliver climate resilience, biodiversity protection, and sustainable livelihoods. The project works on four fronts: assessing the ecological and social value of landscapes; mobilising private and public finance; implementing restoration on the ground; and sharing knowledge to inspire replication. Its approach is inclusive, gender-responsive, and rooted in local participation, ensuring that restoration strengthens both ecosystems and communities.

This photobook is part of ReLISA's effort to showcase the beauty and importance of these landscapes, while highlighting restoration opportunities and the partnerships making them possible.

By advancing restoration at scale, ReLISA contributes directly to South Africa's commitments on land degradation neutrality, climate adaptation, and biodiversity conservation. It strengthens ecosystem services such as water security, carbon storage, soil health and biodiversity protection, while supporting rural economies and a just transition. In doing so, ReLISA aligns with the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and global goals to secure a thriving future for people and planet.

Savanna

Sunrise over the savanna, Kruger National Park, Limpopo.

Image: Pexels/Kelly



Savannas cover nearly a third of South Africa, home to iconic wildlife, rich biodiversity, and millions of people who depend on them for water, grazing, and livelihoods. Yet, they face growing threats from overgrazing, unsustainable agriculture, and mining. Restoration here focuses on tackling bush encroachment, protecting biodiversity, and ensuring healthy soil and water systems for future generations.

PROJECT SITES:

Western Soutpansberg (Limpopo)

Biodiversity hotspot under pressure from unsustainable land use.

Restoration: invasive species control, community-led conservation, biodiversity monitoring.

Waterberg Strategic Water Source Area and Biosphere Reserve (Limpopo)

A strategic water source area critical for wildlife and people.

Restoration: water stewardship, improved land management, sustainable grazing.

Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Reserve (Limpopo and Mpumalanga)

A landscape linking conservation areas and communities.

Restoration: habitat connectivity, land-use planning, eco-tourism support.

Magaliesberg Biosphere Reserve (Gauteng and North West)

A unique landscape balancing urban growth and natural ecosystems.

Restoration: alien plant removal, soil conservation, community awareness.

Western Soutpansberg, Limpopo Province

Nestled in Limpopo province, the newly declared Western Soutpansberg Nature Reserve (WSNR) represents a major leap for safeguarding endemic species and boosting South Africa's national protected-area estate. This mountain range is exceptional: home to the highest plant diversity at the family level in the country, at least 16 endemic reptile species. The site plays multiple roles: it is a Key Biodiversity Area, a Centre of Endemism, a Strategic Groundwater Source Area, and part of both Critical Biodiversity Areas under the Limpopo Conservation Plan and a wildlife corridor linking Soutpansberg to Mapungubwe and the Kruger National Park. Local landowners are working in partnership with government and communities to promote restoration, invasive plant control, fire management, eco-tourism and women's empowerment, linking local livelihoods with protecting one of South Africa's most biodiverse mountain landscapes.

Herd of springbok in the savanna, Limpopo.
Image: Pexels/Magda Ehlers

Project Site Profile



Hectares: 11,607 ha



Transboundary Context: Part of the Greater Mapungubwe Trans-frontier Conservation Area (Botswana, South Africa, Zimbabwe).



Land Use: Natural: 82%, Cultivation: 11%, Plantation: 1%, Urban: 1%, Other: 5%.



Protected Areas: Western Soutpansberg Nature Reserve, 100% protected.



People and Livelihoods: Rural settlements and farming in Vhembe District; women-headed households (Vhembe District): 51%.



Ecosystem Services: Biodiversity corridor, carbon sequestration, water regulation.



Strategic Water Source: Strategic groundwater source area.



Degradation Challenges: Overgrazing, agricultural expansion.



Restoration Actions: Alien plant removal, bush encroachment control, sustainable land use.



Economic and Investment Opportunities: Eco-tourism, community conservation enterprises, invasive clearing jobs, stewardship and expansion finance, groundwater recharge, carbon credits.



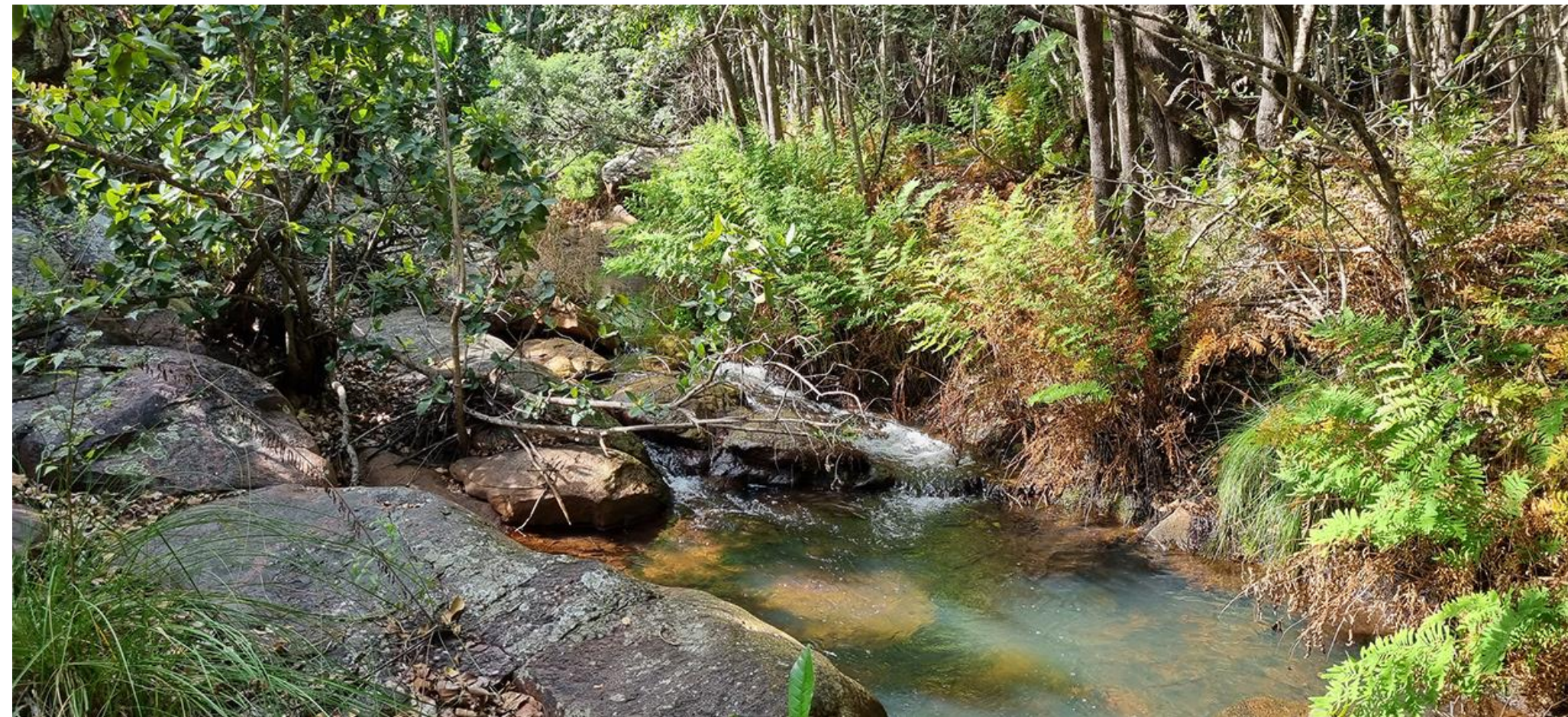
Heritage/Cultural Sites: Masorini Archaeological Site, Thulamela Iron Age Site.



SDG Links: 6 - Clean Water and Sanitation, 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth, 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities, 13 - Climate Action, 15 - Life on Land.



A ranger looks out at the Western Soutpansberg Mountains in northern Limpopo.
Image: Endangered Wildlife Trust



Western Soutpansberg is a strategic groundwater source area, with streams that feed the Sand River.
Image: Endangered Wildlife Trust

Waterberg Strategic Water Source Area and Biosphere Reserve, Limpopo Province

Rising from Limpopo's savanna plains, the Waterberg plateau is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and a Strategic Water Source Area, safeguarding water security through rivers like the Mokolo and Lephala. Spanning over 650,000 ha, it shelters diverse savanna vegetation and remarkable biodiversity, including threatened and endemic species, while also holding cultural treasures such as San rock art. Yet overgrazing, land fragmentation, poorly managed tourism and invasive plants place this landscape under stress. Restoration efforts under ReLISA will prioritise rangeland rehabilitation, alien plant removal and catchment stewardship with local landowners. Looking ahead, investments in eco-tourism, biodiversity credits, carbon projects and water fund partnerships can create new income streams, strengthen rural economies and sustain large areas of wilderness. By linking livelihoods to conservation, Waterberg has the potential to become a model for balancing biodiversity protection, cultural heritage and climate resilience.

A herd of hippos moves through the wetlands in the Waterberg.
Image: Pexels/Frans van Heerden

Project Site Profile



Hectares: 654,033 ha



Transboundary Context: The Limpopo River is a transboundary waterway (Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe).



Land Use: Natural: 93%, Cultivation: 3%, Plantation: 1%, Urban: 1%, Other: 2%.



Protected Areas: Water source area under formal protection: 4%.



People and Livelihoods: Supports Mokolo/Limpopo catchments; game ranching and tourism; women-headed households (Waterberg District): 41%.



Ecosystem Services: Biodiversity hotspot, water regulation, soil fertility.



Strategic Water Source: Limpopo River Basin, Groundwater Source Area (83,961 ha).



Degradation Challenges: Overgrazing, deforestation, land fragmentation.



Restoration Actions: Alien plant removal, bush encroachment control, sustainable land use.



Economic and Investment Opportunities: Water funds, biodiversity credits, eco-tourism, rangeland restoration.



Heritage/Cultural Sites: San rock art sites, Makapan Valley (hominid-rich site).



SDG Links: 6 - Clean Water and Sanitation, 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth, 13 - Climate Action, 15 - Life on Land.



Part of the Waterberg escarpment at Mamatlakala village.
Image: Waterberg Biosphere



Sedimentary rocks of the Waterberg.
Image: Waterberg Biosphere



"Tafelkop", the flat-top hill is a remnant of the original floor of the Waterberg Plateau.
Image: Waterberg Biosphere



Close-up view of the sandstone rock of the Waterberg.
Image: Waterberg Biosphere

Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Reserve, Limpopo and Mpumalanga Provinces

Stretching from the Kruger National Park to the Blyde River Canyon, the Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Reserve is Africa's largest UNESCO biosphere, critical for biodiversity, carbon storage and water security. Agricultural expansion, poaching and invasive species threaten its natural corridors. Partners restore vegetation, control invasives and support co-managed sustainable land use. Investment in nature-based tourism, carbon and biodiversity credits, and catchment stewardship builds jobs and keeps this wildlife corridor intact while benefiting rural communities.

Aerial view of the Blyde River Canyon, Mpumalanga.
Image: Pexels/Mike van Schoonderwalt

Project Site Profile



Hectares: 2.5 million ha



Transboundary Context: Part of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area, a transboundary conservation area linking South Africa, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe.



Land Use: Mixed protected reserves, production land.



Protected Areas: Kruger National Park is the central protected zone; 74 010 ha declared as protected areas.



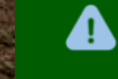
People and Livelihoods: Mixed rural/park-linked economies; tourism and production landscapes tourism; women-headed households (Ehlanzeni District): 47,5%.



Ecosystem Services: Biodiversity corridor, carbon sequestration, water regulation.



Strategic Water Source: Mpumalanga Drakensberg Strategic Water Source Area.



Degradation Challenges: Agricultural expansion, poaching, invasives.



Restoration Actions: Corridor restoration, invasive species control, sustainable land use co-management.



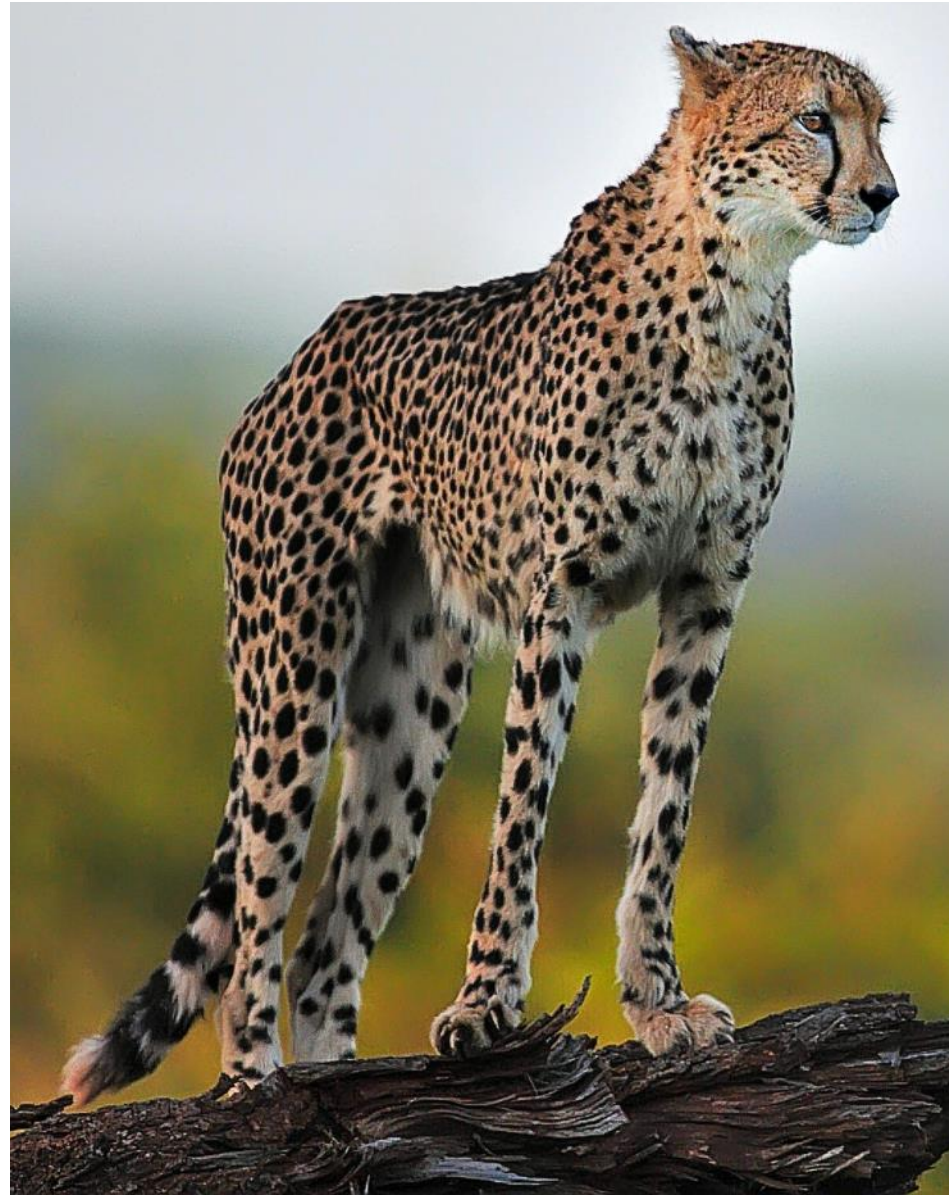
Economic and Investment Opportunities: Nature-based tourism, carbon and biodiversity markets, payment for ecosystem services.



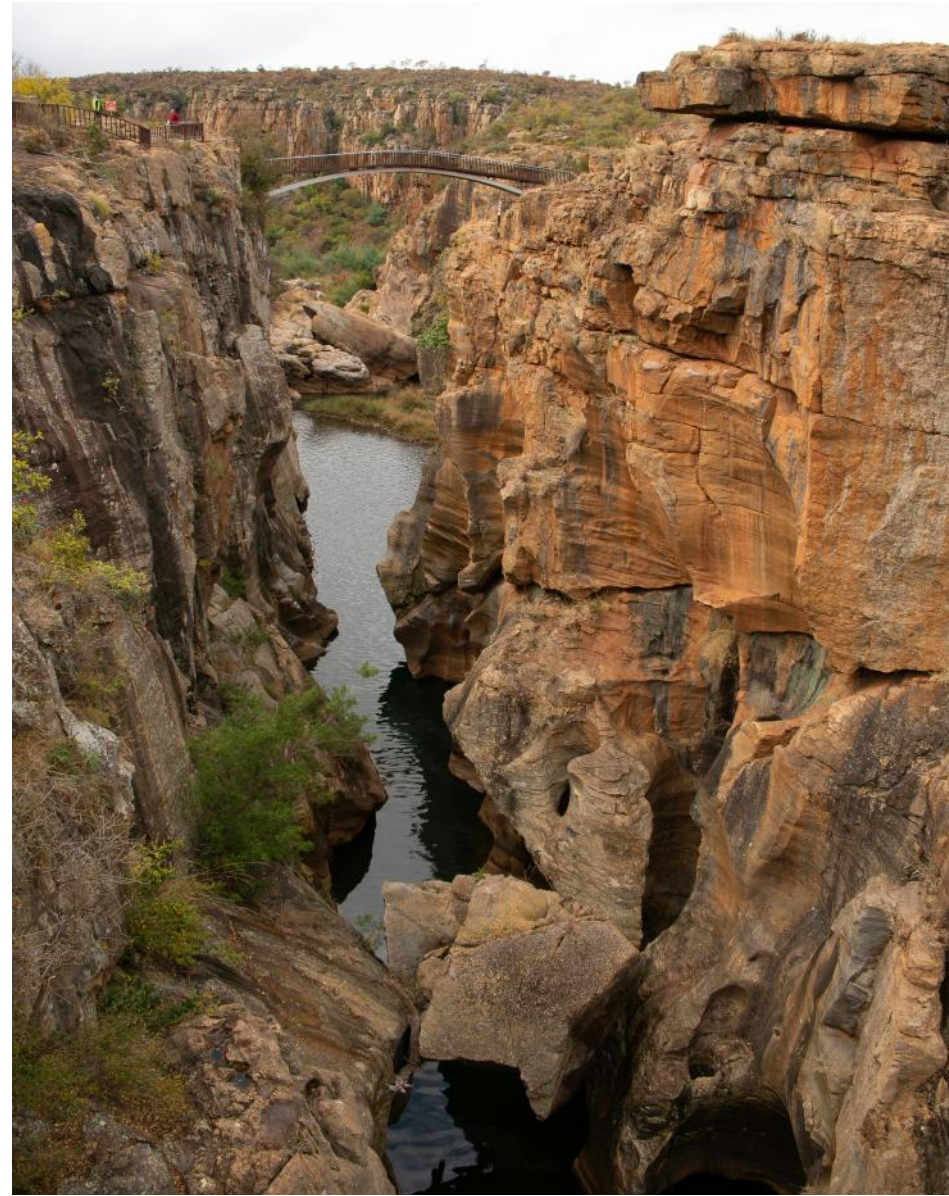
Heritage/Cultural Sites: Kruger National Park, Thomo Heritage Park.



SDG Links: 6 - Clean Water and Sanitation, 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth, 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities, 13 - Climate Action, 15 - Life on Land.



A cheetah perches on a ledge in the Kruger National Park.
Image: Pexels/Frans van Heerden



The Blyde River flows through rocky canyons in Graskop, Mpumalanga.
Image: Pexels/Frans van Heerden



Herd of elephants move uphill in the Kruger National Park, Mpumalanga.
Image: Pexels/Frans van Heerden

Magaliesberg Biosphere Reserve, Gauteng and North West Provinces

The ancient Magaliesberg Mountains cradle globally important geology, diverse savanna and grassland, and rich cultural heritage sites, yet sit beside intense mining, agriculture and urban growth. As a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, the Magaliesberg provides vital water catchments and green space for Gauteng. Degradation from mining, alien plants and sprawl threatens habitats and tourism appeal. Restoration actions focus on ridge protection, alien clearing and improved land-use planning. Heritage and eco-tourism, mine rehabilitation and green jobs can drive sustainable economies while safeguarding this iconic landscape.

Hamerkop Kloof, part of the Magaliesberg Mountain Range, North West.
Image: Wikimedia Commons/Tracy Robb

Project Site Profile



Hectares: 357,870 ha



Land Use: Mixed protected reserves, production land.



People and Livelihoods: Urban-rural mix, 196,728 residents within the reserve; surrounding agriculture and mining; heritage and tourism economies.



Protected Areas: Protected ridges within an urban/agricultural matrix.



Ecosystem Services: Biodiversity refuge, water catchment, cultural heritage.



Strategic Water Source: Crocodile West Catchment.



Degradation Challenges: Mining, agricultural expansion, urbanisation.



Restoration Actions: Ridge protection, alien clearing, tourism management.



Economic and Investment Opportunities: Nature-based tourism, carbon and biodiversity markets, payment for ecosystem services.



Heritage/Cultural Sites: Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site; Fossil sites.



SDG Links: 6 - Clean Water and Sanitation, 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth, 9 - Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities, 13 - Climate Action, 15 - Life on Land.



A Grey Heron spreads its wings at water's edge, Magaliesberg.
Image: Pexels/D Keats



A quartzite pedestal rock in the central Magaliesberg.
Image: Wikimedia Commons/Humphrey

Grassland



Grasslands landscape by the Ncandu Falls, KwaZulu-Natal.

Image: UNEP/Lucy Cockerell



Grasslands supply most of South Africa's fresh water, feeding rivers and dams that support millions. Yet decades of intensive farming, plantation forestry, and urban development have left them degraded. Restoration efforts target alien plant removal, soil rehabilitation, and sustainable grazing to safeguard water security, climate resilience, and livelihoods.

PROJECT SITES:

Northern Drakensberg Strategic Water Source Area (KwaZulu-Natal)

Key source area feeding rivers and dams.

Restoration: wetland protection, invasive species removal, rangeland management.

Southern Drakensberg Strategic Water Source Area (KwaZulu-Natal)

High-altitude grasslands crucial for water security.

Restoration: grassland rehabilitation, sustainable land-use practices, erosion control.

Mountain Zebra Camdeboo Protected Environment (Eastern Cape)

Linking protected areas with community-managed lands.

Restoration: biodiversity corridors, sustainable grazing, eco-tourism opportunities.

Amathole Strategic Water Source Area (Eastern Cape)

A drought-prone region vulnerable to invasive plants.

Restoration: catchment management, forest recovery, climate adaptation measures.

Wild Coast (Eastern Cape)

A culturally rich and biodiverse coastline.

Restoration: community-driven projects, sustainable land use, soil and water rehabilitation.

Northern Drakensberg Strategic Water Source Area, Free State and KwaZulu-Natal

High mountain grasslands of the Northern Drakensberg feed the uThukela River and form part of the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation Area. Erosion, overgrazing and invasive species reduce water yield and biodiversity here. Restoration includes alien clearing, grassland reseeded, sustainable grazing and fire management. Water funds, carbon markets and eco-tourism offer investment potential, while restoration jobs bring income to mountain communities who depend on these headwaters.

Lake Glencairn on the Pholela River in Himeville, KwaZulu-Natal.
Image: Pexels/Magda Ehlers

Project Site Profile



Hectares: 896 529 ha



Transboundary Context: Part of the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation Area with Lesotho.



Land Use: Natural: 80.6%, Cultivation: 8.8%, Urban: 3.7%, Plantation: 2.6%, Other: 4.3%.



Protected Areas: Only 8% is formally protected.



People and Livelihoods: Subsistence and commercial agriculture, livestock farming, and tourism.



Ecosystem Services: Water supply, carbon storage, soil stabilisation.



Strategic Water Source: Caledon, Orange, Thukela, Vaal and Senqu rivers; supplies water to approx. 4 million households.



Degradation Challenges: Mining, fracking/prospecting, erosion.



Restoration Actions: Grass reseeded, alien clearing, grazing management.



Economic and Investment Opportunities: Water funds, jobs, eco-tourism, payment for ecosystem services, grassland carbon.



Heritage/Cultural Sites: uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site.



SDG Links: 6 - Clean Water and Sanitation, 7 - Affordable and Clean Energy, 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities, 13 - Climate Action, 15 - Life on Land.



Grasslands of the Northern Drakensberg.
Image: Pexels/Zak H



View of the Drakensberg amphitheatre from the upper Tugela River.
Wikimedia Commons/Rudolph Botha

Southern Drakensberg Strategic Water Source Area, KwaZulu-Natal Province

At the country's southern "water tower," the Southern Drakensberg feeds the Mzimvubu and uMzimkulu rivers. Intact grasslands face overgrazing, alien trees and climate stress. Restoration centres on catchment planning, wetland and grassland rehabilitation, and community grazing management. Payment for ecosystem services (PES), sustainable farming and eco-tourism create green jobs and diversify rural livelihoods while protecting this globally significant water source.

Drakensberg Mountains grassland landscape, KwaZulu-Natal.
Image: Pexels/Alexander F Ungerer

Project Site Profile



Hectares: 2 049 626 ha



Transboundary Context: Transboundary water source area (with Lesotho).



Land Use: Natural (60.8%), Cultivation (12.6%), Plantation (15.2%), Urban (6.3%).



Protected Areas: 30 provincial nature reserves; 14% of the water source area is formally protected.



People and Livelihoods: Rural reliance on springs/farming.



Ecosystem Services: Water provision, biodiversity habitat, erosion control.



Strategic Water Source: Main rivers include uMgeni, Thukela, Mooi, uMzimkulu, and Mkomazi.



Degradation Challenges: Overgrazing, invasives, climate stress.



Restoration Actions: Grass reseeding, alien clearing, grazing management.



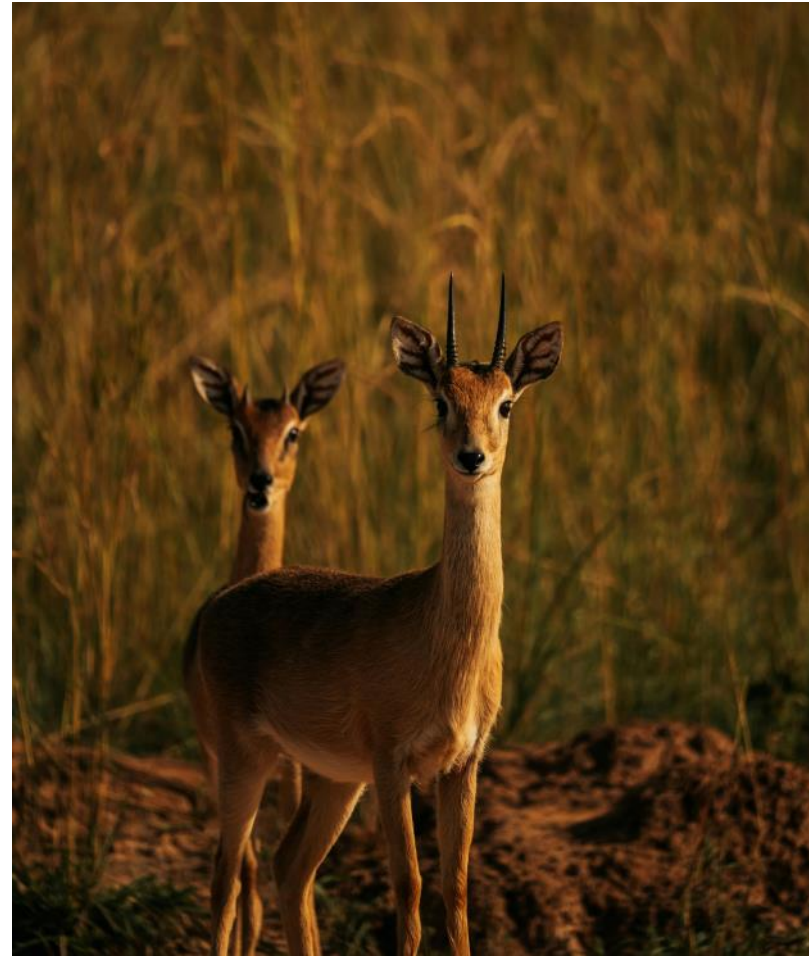
Economic and Investment Opportunities: Catchment management, wetland restoration, training, payment for ecosystem services.



Heritage/Cultural Sites: uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site.



SDG Links: 6 - Clean Water and Sanitation, 13 - Climate Action, 14 - Life Below Water, 15 - Life on Land.



Rare mammals like the oribi can be found in the Southern Drakensberg Mountains.

Image: Pexels/Caleb Falkenhagen



Multiple tributaries and pools of the uMzimkhulu and uMkhomazi Rivers dot the Southern Drakensberg landscape.

Image: Pexels/Charl Durand



Gunnera perpensa or "river pumpkin" (left) is a protected species and can be used for erosion control.

Unsplash/Melissa Brown

Mountain Zebra–Camdeboo Protected Environment Eastern Cape

Between the Karoo plains and the Winterberg escarpment, the Mountain Zebra–Camdeboo Protected Environment safeguards arid grasslands and thicket while linking two national parks. Overgrazing, bush encroachment and invasives degrade rangelands. Restoration focuses on grassland rehabilitation, erosion control and expanding conservation corridors through stewardship. Tourism, biodiversity credits and rangeland restoration jobs offer economic potential while helping farmers adopt sustainable management.

View of Mountain-Zebra Camdeboo National Park.
Image: Pexels/Zak H

Project Site Profile



Hectares: 268,343 ha



Land Use: Grazing/conservation estates.



Protected Areas: Expected to be 100% protected once declared.



People and Livelihoods: Subsistence and commercial agriculture and tourism.



Ecosystem Services: Biodiversity refuge, carbon storage.



Degradation Challenges: Overgrazing, invasives.



Restoration Actions: Grassland rehab, corridor protection.



Economic and Investment Opportunities: Conservation tourism, biodiversity credits, rangeland restoration pilots.



Heritage/Cultural Sites: uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site.



SDG Links: 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth, 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities, 12 - Responsible Consumption and Production, 13 - Climate Action, 15 - Life on Land.



Hartmann's Zebras in the Mountain Zebra Camdeboo Protected Environment.
Image: Barbara Fraatz/Pixabay



Sheep grazing in grasslands landscape, Eastern Cape.
Image: UNEP/Lucy Cockerell

Amathole Strategic Water Source Area, Eastern Cape Province

The Amathole Mountains are a Strategic Water Source Area that supplies urban centers such as Buffalo City. The landscape provides water, soil fertility, and climate regulation but suffers from alien tree invasions and recurring droughts. Restoration emphasizes alien plant removal, reforestation, and catchment management. Opportunities include sustainable forestry, payment for ecosystem services, and carbon-linked restoration. The vision is a drought-resilient water catchment supporting both people and ecosystems.

View of Hogsback Pass in the Amathole Mountains from the Auckland Nature Reserve.
Image: Wikimedia Commons/Lysippos

Project Site Profile



Hectares: 200,112 ha



Land Use: Natural 60%; Cultivation 17%; Plantation 20%; Urban 2%.



Protected Areas : 15% of the Amathole water source area is formally protected.



People and Livelihoods: Buffalo City and rural communities.



Ecosystem Services: Biodiversity corridor, carbon sequestration, water regulation.



Strategic Water Source: Mpumalanga Drakensberg Strategic Water Source Area,



Degradation Challenges: Alien plants, fires, land degradation.



Restoration Actions: Alien clearing, reforestation.



Economic and Investment Opportunities: Water yield, sustainable forestry, payment for ecosystem services, carbon credits.



Heritage/Cultural Sites: Forests and mountains of the Amathole region are considered sacred by the Gcaleka people and the wider Xhosa people.



SDG Links: 6 - Clean Water and Sanitation, 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth, 12 - Responsible Consumption and Production, 13 - Climate Action, 15 - Life on Land.



Aerial view of the Great Kei River as it meets the Indian Ocean.

Image: Wikimedia Commons/Greg Ritz



View of the Amathole Mountains from Thyume River Valley.

Image: Wikimedia Commons/Lysippos

Wild Coast, Eastern Cape Province

The Wild Coast, part of the Pondoland Centre of Endemism, is globally recognised for its biodiversity and cultural richness. Coastal grasslands, rivers, and marine ecosystems support rural livelihoods but face overgrazing, erosion, and poorly planned development. Restoration focuses on erosion control, rangeland rehabilitation, and community-led watershed management. Eco-tourism, sustainable fisheries, and green jobs offer opportunities for households. Strengthening community-led economies will ensure biodiversity and cultural assets continue to support local resilience.

Hole-in-the-Wall, Coffee Bay on the Wild Coast.
Image: Pixabay/Vincent van Oosten

Project Site Profile



Hectares: ~180,000 ha (Pondoland Centre of Endemism).



Land Use: Patchwork of communal rangelands and reserves.



Protected Areas: Marine Protected Areas (Pondoland, Hluleka, Dwesa-Cwebe, Mkambati).



People and Livelihoods: Rural households reliant on rivers, fishing and small-scale agriculture.



Ecosystem Services: Coastal biodiversity, cultural value, carbon sequestration, water regulation.



Degradation Challenges: Overgrazing, erosion, coastal development.



Restoration Actions: Grassland and shoreline rehabilitation, erosion control, community watershed restoration.



Economic and Investment Opportunities: Eco-tourism, fisheries support, watershed restoration.



Heritage/Cultural Sites: Hole-in-the-Wall landmark and Mzamba Fossils.



SDG Links: 2 - Zero Hunger, 6 - Clean Water and Sanitation, 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth, 13 - Climate Action, 14 - Life Below Water, 15 - Life on Land.



Grasslands in the Wild Coast face severe erosion.
Image: Pixabay/Vicent van Oosten



Coffee Bay Lagoon, Wild Coast, Eastern Cape.
Wikimedia Commons/Jon Rawlinson

Thicket



The subtropical thicket biome is small in extent but globally significant for its carbon storage, biodiversity, and cultural heritage. Decades of unsustainable livestock practices have left large areas bare and eroded. Restoration here involves re-establishing native vegetation, especially *spekboom*, improving soil health, and creating green jobs through large-scale planting initiatives.

PROJECT SITES:

Addo Elephant National Park (Eastern Cape)

Iconic biodiversity-rich area degraded by overgrazing.

Restoration: large-scale *spekboom* planting, soil recovery, habitat restoration.

Greater Addo-Amathole Node (Eastern Cape)

Linking thicket and grassland restoration zones.

Restoration: vegetation recovery, sustainable farming support, job creation in restoration activities.

Thicket landscape in the Eastern Cape.

Image: UNEP/Todd Brown

Addo Elephant National Park, Eastern Cape Province

From dense thicket to the open ocean, Addo Elephant National Park spans over 180,000 ha of land and 120,000 ha of marine habitat, protecting iconic elephant herds and globally significant biodiversity. Its thicket ecosystems, once degraded by overgrazing and erosion, are now the focus of large-scale *spekboom* planting, soil recovery and habitat regeneration. These efforts restore carbon storage, protect soils and strengthen resilience against climate change. Investments in carbon and biodiversity credits, marine markets and eco-tourism generate jobs and demonstrate how ecological recovery can align local livelihoods with global climate goals.

Elephants in the thicket at Kwandwe Game Reserve in the Eastern Cape.
Image: UNEP/Todd Brown

Project Site Profile



Hectares: ~155,000 ha land and 120,000 ha Marine Protected Area.



Land Use: Mostly Natural 60%; Cultivation 17%; Plantation 20%; Urban 2%.



Protected Areas: 100% (National Park and Marine Protected Area).



People and Livelihoods: Local farmworkers, tourism businesses.



Ecosystem Services: Biodiversity habitat, carbon, soils.



Strategic Water Source: 16 rivers and 437 wetlands.



Degradation Challenges: Elephant overpopulation/overgrazing, erosion.



Restoration Actions: *Spekboom* planting, thicket regeneration.



Economic and Investment Opportunities: Thicket carbon credits, marine biodiversity credits, eco-tourism.



Heritage/Cultural Sites: Khoisan rock art and colonial Settlements.



SDG Links: 6 - Clean Water and Sanitation, 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth, 13 - Climate Action, 14 - Life Below Water, 15 - Life on Land.



Fence-line contrasts healthy and degraded thicket.
Image: Africarbon PTY (Ltd)



Employees at a nursery that grows *spekboom* to restore thicket in the Eastern Cape.
Image: UNEP/Todd Brown

Greater Addo-Amathole Node, Eastern Cape Province

Where thicket meets grassland and mountain catchments, the emerging Greater Addo–Amathole Node is a landscape under pressure. Heavy overgrazing and low-resource land use practices have left soils bare and biodiversity reduced. Current projects focus on thicket replanting, invasive clearing and sustainable grazing. New pathways for investment, from payment for ecosystem services to biodiversity credits and eco-tourism, offer hope. By restoring ecosystems and creating jobs, this node strengthens ecological links between Addo and the Amathole highlands while building resilience for local communities.

Plot of land growing *spekboom* in the Eastern Cape.
Image: UNEP/Todd Brown

Project Site Profile



Hectares: Thicket node ~13,254 ha (node size evolving).



Land Use: Mixed rural/communal landscape.



Protected Areas: Limited formal protection but zoned as a Biodiversity Economy Node.



People and Livelihoods: Livestock farming, rural communities dependent on local resources.



Ecosystem Services: Biodiversity support, erosion control.



Strategic Water Source: Surface and ground water resources.



Degradation Challenges: Overgrazing, low-resource land use, land degradation.



Restoration Actions: Thicket replanting, invasive control.



Economic and Investment Opportunities: Payment for ecosystem services, carbon credits, replanting jobs.



Heritage/Cultural Sites: Shell middens archaeological sites.



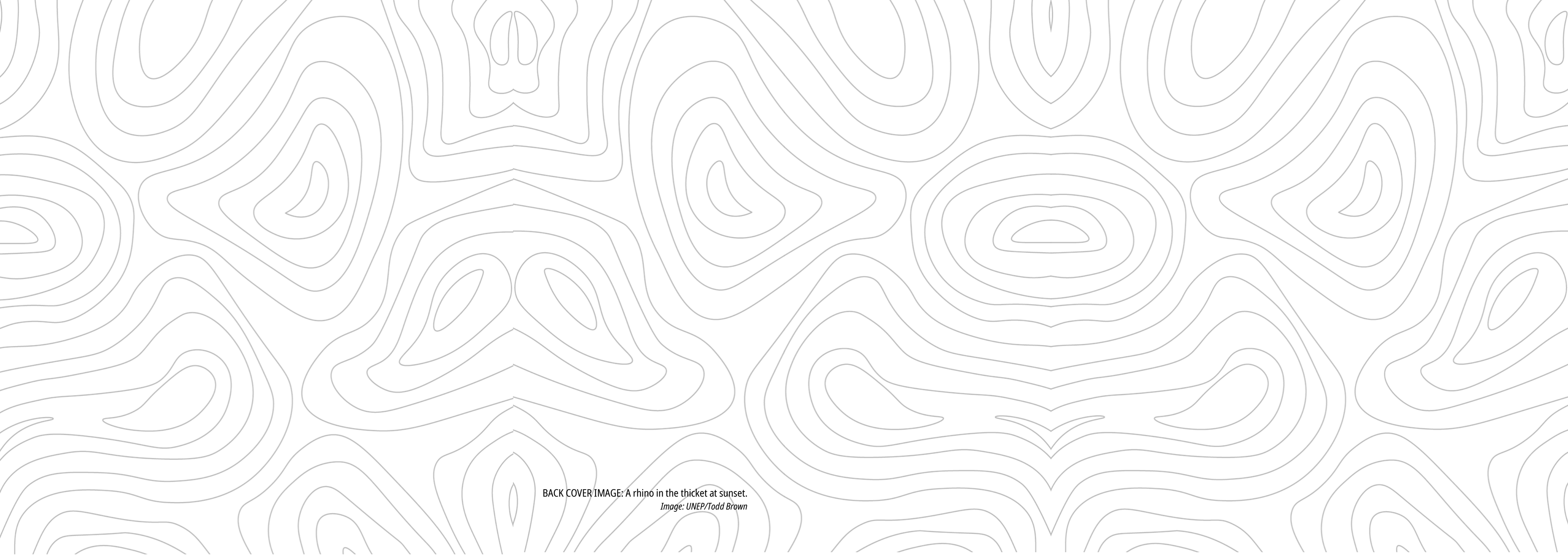
SDG Links: 6 - Clean Water and Sanitation, 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth, 12 - Responsible Consumption and Production, 13 - Climate Action, 14 - Life below Water, 15 - Life on Land.



Spekboom, grown for cows and restoration in the Eastern Cape.
Image: UNEP/Todd Brown



A team planting *spekboom* in the Eastern Cape.
Image: UNEP/Todd Brown



BACK COVER IMAGE: A rhino in the thicket at sunset.

Image: UNEP/Todd Brown

