



ENDANGERED WILDLIFE TRUST

26 August 2021

Start

Farmers lead the way in cultivating solutions to climate change

A farmer in the Free State broke new ground last week when, working with the Endangered Wildlife Trust, he became the first landowner in South Africa to sign a carbon project development contract, heralding the use of an innovative mechanism for land management that will benefit landowners and secure biodiversity and ecosystem services using carbon trading. The EWT is proud to work with this landowner and other partners in exploring the opportunities presented by carbon trading and the South African Carbon Tax Act (15 of 2019) for biodiversity conservation in South African farmlands.

The Carbon Tax Act (15) gives effect to the “polluter-pays-principle”, whereby large greenhouse gas (GHGs) emitters, the most significant drivers of anthropogenic climate change, are penalised through taxation for their emissions. Apart from the obvious benefits of encouraging reduced carbon emissions, the Act has also created a market for those who can sequester (trap) carbon, such as those with suitable farmlands, to receive payment from polluters in carbon credits.

As far back as 2017, the EWT and the [International Crane Foundation](#) have undertaken feasibility studies to harness the power of carbon trading to protect the sensitive South African Grassland Biome, using Chrissiesmeer Protected Environment as a test case. After establishing the feasibility of carbon trading in SA’s grasslands and recognising the potential benefits for farmers and the long-term funding opportunities it could unlock for improved grassland and wetland management, the EWT began to look for partners who could take the carbon credits offered by our farmers to the global market. The EWT finally partnered with [WeAct](#) in January 2021 to initiate carbon projects in targeted areas. As a close ally and partner on many of the EWT’s grassland conservation projects, [BirdLife South Africa](#) also became an implementing partner for WeAct in May 2021.

The Endangered Wildlife Trust and BirdLife South Africa work with landowners in the Grassland Biome to unlock opportunities to protect and better manage their grasslands for improved biodiversity conservation and environmental health. Carbon trading has presented a unique offering to these farmers who can now reap the benefits of managing a landscape such as their farm in a manner that allows for the verifiable sequestration of carbon through a tangible improvement in veld condition. Carbon can be trapped in the soil through management mechanisms such as improved grazing and fire management of grasslands and wetlands, alien invasive vegetation removal, wetland rehabilitation, and improved management of agricultural lands through reduced tillage and careful fertiliser management. The verified carbon sequestered during the lifespan of such projects can be converted into carbon credits, which liable entities can then purchase, to reduce their carbon tax liability, thus creating a steady revenue stream for those who implement effective carbon projects.

The landowner pioneering this approach in South Africa is a passionate conservationist residing in the Upper Wilge stewardship area near Nelsonskop, north of the town of Van Reenen in the eastern Free State. The Wilge River that flows through the area is characterised by large areas of Endangered Eastern Free State

Sandy Grasslands and wetlands that provide habitat for resident breeding Blue Cranes, Endangered Grey Crowned Cranes, and a population of threatened Sungazer Lizards. The farmer is a founding member of the Nelson's Kop Conservancy and has implemented important conservation initiatives on his farm, including wetland rehabilitation and the adoption of sustainable grassland management principles to provide the market with rangeland raised beef. He is also a Sungazer Lizard Custodian. The discussion on carbon trading has been taking place in the Nelson's Kop Conservancy since 2014 and has at long last become a reality, an exciting moment for the conservancy and the NGOs involved (EWT and BirdLife South Africa). While it will take some time for the farmer to reap the project's financial benefits, his commitment will have immediate and lasting benefits for biodiversity and ecosystems and the services they provide.

The EWT and its partners consider carbon projects and the revenue they will generate as an important benefit to enhance biodiversity protection, improve catchment management, and increase water security by providing financial incentives for landowners to improve their land management practices. The EWT has committed decades of extension work to building partnerships with landowners, and these trust-based relationships now enable us to develop carbon projects that assist farmers with long-term land management plans and provide ongoing support to improve the management of their lands to sequester carbon and curb the effects of global climate change. The ambitious but achievable goal of EWT's carbon trading work, in partnership with the International Crane Foundation, is to create landscapes of sustainably managed grasslands, savannahs, thickets, and forests that provide not only agricultural and other essential products but also provide critical ecosystem services and support the rich biodiversity that we are so fortunate to enjoy as South Africans, and as fellow inhabitants of thriving landscapes.

End



Photo: Aerial view of the Wilge River with Nelson's Kop Mountain in the background.

Photo credit: Rick Dillon

About the Endangered Wildlife Trust

Founded in 1973, the Endangered Wildlife is driven by a team of passionate and dedicated conservationists working through 13 specialised programmes across southern and East Africa, each falling under one of our three key strategic pillars: Saving species, conserving habitats, and benefitting people. Our critical work includes conducting applied research, supporting community-led conservation, training and building capacity, addressing human-wildlife conflict, monitoring threatened species, and establishing safe spaces for wildlife range expansion. The EWT works alongside key partners, including communities, business, landowners, academic institutions, and governments, to create a sustainable future for wildlife and people. Find out more at www.ewt.org.za.

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