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Burning Renosterveld less often better for its survival, urges UCT researcher

University of Cape Town researcher Dr Odette Curtis has found that for the threatened Renosterveld ecosystem to survive and be properly managed, it should burn less frequently as believed – preferably at intervals of between eight and 15 years. Previously, ecologists have advised burning it every three years.

Renosterveld – literally translated from Afrikaans as “rhinoceros field” – is a term used to describe one of the major and most diverse plant communities and vegetation types of the Cape Floral Kingdom. Human activities such as farming have decimated these fertile fynbos havens, and Dr Curtis is hard at work trying to preserve the critically endangered survivors. She says: “It is estimated that there is less than between four and six percent of the Renosterveld left. Even this is an optimistic estimate; the true figure could be significantly lower, because a large percentage of what remains is not intact, due to mismanagement.”

Dr Curtis recommends that Renosterveld should burn, on average, every 10 years. “The reason for that is just to use a precautionary approach, and because there are also some slower-maturing plants that probably need time to develop properly. If you burn it too often, you will turn it into grassland.”

Dr Curtis started and directs the Overberg Lowlands Conservation Trust in the Western Cape. Its vision is to work with local farmers to secure the long-term conservation and management of the remaining fragments of threatened natural vegetation in the lowlands of the Overberg.

She says it is a tough ask getting farmers to change decades-old habits, but little by little, farmer by farmer, she and her colleagues are changing mind-sets and ensuring the survival of the region’s fynbos. Much of the farmers’ thinking has been based on the fact that Renosterveld is viewed by many as a wasteland – useless to farming. Dr Curtis’s doctoral research, *Management of critically endangered Renosterveld fragments in the Overberg, South Africa*, explored how often the veld needed to burn, whether it needed to burn at all, how diversity varies within and across remnant patches, and how best to manage grazing in

the region.

She says: "It is a long road that we have to travel to change mind-sets on a scale that means we can actually change the future for Renosterveld. There are not enough people alerting farmers to the beauty on their lands, and these are the same farmers who will pay thousands of rands to sit in a game reserve."

Probably the biggest chapter of her thesis is the debate around whether the Renosterveld is a grassy shrubland or shrubby grassland. Dr Curtis says: "It probably sounds very arbitrary, but it affects how you manage it. If you are managing it as grassland, you are burning every two or three years. If you are managing it like shrubland, you will be managing it much more like fynbos."

The conservationist and ecologist, who graduated with a doctorate in botany from UCT in December 2013, has made her home in Napier in the Overberg, about two hours' drive outside Cape Town. It is here where she puts in the hard yards to preserve the delicate Renosterveld ecosystem – an issue she describes as "too close to my heart". Such is the diversity of the Renosterveld that Dr Curtis discovered three new species of plants in 2012 (and another three, together with colleagues Professor Charles Stirton and Professor Muthama Muasya), of which two were named after her.

She holds a BTech from the former Cape Technikon and an MSc in Zoology from the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology at UCT. Dr Curtis has also been a committee member of the Fynbos Forum since 2009, a board member on the Breede-Overberg Catchment Management Agency (BOCMA) since 2007, and served as a committee member of the Botanical Society, southern Overberg branch, from 2009 to 2011.

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