

Vergelegen celebrates research this Earth Day

On Saturday, 22 April, Earth Day, 317-year-old Vergelegen will celebrate over a decade of hosting field researchers undertaking ground-breaking work on the estate.



Local and international scientists visiting the estate have already investigated subjects as diverse as Argentinian ants, Nguni cattle, frogs, grasshoppers, bontebok, alien plant management and water quality. Following recent fires, researchers have also found Vergelegen to be an ideal site to investigate the post-fire recruitment of natural and alien plants, how Proteaceae compete after fire, and when and how insects return to these burnt areas.

Numerous scientific papers have been published in local and international journals and research findings are implemented into Vergelegen's environmental management plan where applicable.

Centre of Learning Excellence

Vergelegen MD Don Tooth explains that Anglo American acquired the estate in 1987 as a showcase of the best of South African heritage, culture and environment, to be shared with the nation. As part of this initiative, a Centre of Learning Excellence was established.



Representatives of six Western Cape tertiary institutions, plus overseas universities such as Bristol and Marburg, have undertaken field research on the farm. Four doctorates and seven master's degrees had been completed by 2016.

Interest from the scientific community has been supported by the burgeoning animal and plant populations at Vergelegen. These have grown rapidly in number and species diversity, thanks to an extensive programme of clearing invasive alien vegetation and facilitating land rehabilitation.

To help monitor the post-clearing ecosystem recovery, Vergelegen conducts monthly bird counts, identifies wild flowers and (using infra-red camera systems) monitors wildlife movement. Species such as the Cape leopard, caracal, grey rhebok and spotted genet are regularly viewed on the footage, reports Jacques van Rensburg, Vergelegen's environmental project manager.

Alien vegetation control programme

The farm's alien vegetation control programme is believed to be the largest private conservation undertaking in the country. Since the programme was launched in 2004, 2000ha of a planned total of 2200ha have been cleared, says Tooth.



“This project has not only created at least 230 jobs and many opportunities for worker training, it has supported a habitat for numerous species of mammals, birds, amphibians and insects to thrive.”

“The size and variety of Vergelegen’s plant, fauna and bird populations are proof that land degradation and threatened extinction can be reversed,” says Tooth.

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