



MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate use

A world leader in Key Biodiversity Areas

In 2016 the global conservation community developed a globally recognised standard to identify KBAs - the most important sites for biodiversity globally.

In 2019/20, South Africa became the first mega diverse country to practically test the KBA standard across a full range of species groups and ecosystems. This global standard and its practical application will be vital at a time when the world, through the international Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), is deliberating a new plan for nature – the Global Biodiversity Framework 2020-2030.

The global standard for recognising Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) sets out criteria for the identification of sites contributing significantly to the global persistence of biodiversity, in terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystems. Leading the initiative are 13 of the largest conservation organisations worldwide, including WWF, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), BirdLife International and Conservation International. They came together to develop the KBA Standard.

‘The KBA Standard provides clear global guidance on where conservation efforts should be focused, including for international financial investments, protected area establishment and avoiding further loss of important biodiversity,’ says Daniel Marnewick, the KBA Community Africa Representative and Manager of the Regional Conservation Programme at BirdLife South Africa.

South Africa is the first in the world to complete a comprehensive national KBA assessment for all ecosystems and across multiple groups of species (i.e. for mammals, birds, plants, fish, amphibians, invertebrates, butterfly, dragonfly, amphibians, and reptiles). Preliminary results from this assessment have identified more than 540 KBAs in South Africa. These KBAs collectively cover approximately 370,000 km² of South Africa’s terrestrial and freshwater environments, equivalent to 30 % of South Africa’s mainland extent. Further, an approximate 173,200 km² of KBAs are located beyond the mainland due to the presence of significant seabird colonies.

‘The large number of sites qualifying as global KBAs highlights South Africa’s incredible biodiversity wealth, using a standardised global currency, so to speak,’ says Marnewick. ‘KBAs will support South Africa’s reporting to the international community on the

uniqueness of our biodiversity and its potential to contribute to the country's development. This network can now complement the existing national spatial biodiversity prioritisation, in which South Africa is a global leader.'

In 2018 BirdLife South Africa and the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) partnered to initiate a KBA process in South Africa. The partnerships' first output was the establishment of a KBA National Coordination Group (NCG), which BirdLife South Africa and SANBI co-chair. Other members of the NCG include the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF), WWF-SA, the Endangered Wildlife Trust, and other species and ecosystems experts and leaders in biodiversity spatial prioritization. The NCG commissioned the national KBA assessment which was undertaken by leading biodiversity planners to identify South Africa's comprehensive network of KBAs. The final step in the process is for the NCG to invite input from key stakeholders; and then submit the proposed KBA network to the KBA Secretariat in Cambridge, UK, for final approval and inclusion on the World Database of Key Biodiversity Areas, aiming for early 2021.

'We have been in the fortunate position to be able to draw on a massive amount of data from SANBI's National Biodiversity Assessment, and data from other partners, including NGOs and universities, to assess sites as KBAs for a number of different ecosystems and species,' adds Marnewick. The KBA assessment was an inclusive process, with input from national stakeholders and the global KBA partnership.

The WWF Nedbank Green Trust and SANBI funded the national process to identify South Africa's KBA network. The WWF Nedbank Green Trust funding also supports Marnewick's national role in leading this process and his regional support role in Africa as the KBA Community Chair and African representative.

'The fynbos biome in the Western Cape is a good example of where we have identified a multitude of sites that meet the global criteria to qualify as KBAs, as it has so many threatened and endemic species (i.e. species that occur nowhere else in the world),' says Marnewick. 'Another KBA is the area containing the last remaining patches of mistbelt grasslands in KwaZulu-Natal. These are key grasslands and form part of South Africa's Strategic Water Source Areas, as well as holding several threatened species such as the Blue Swallow and Oribi. Preliminary results from the identification of KBAs show that 92% of South Africa's existing protected area network incorporates KBAs, confirming that National Parks, nature reserves and other protected areas play a key role in protecting South Africa's globally significant biodiversity assets.

South Africa is a world leader in systematic biodiversity planning, as well as other area-based recognitions for important sites, such as Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs). What the new KBA network does is to complement nationally identified biodiversity priority areas, such as Critical Biodiversity Areas and Freshwater Ecosystem Priority Areas, with a globally recognised network of sites, which will help motivate for and direct international financial investments and conservation efforts into landscape conservation.

In many other African countries advanced conservation and spatial planning programmes do not exist, and areas that could qualify as KBAs have not been identified. 'South Africa has

assumed a regional responsibility to support the biodiversity assessment process in African countries, and we are currently working with a number of African countries to identify threatened species and ecosystems, which they can then use to identify their KBAs,' says Marnewick. 'Part of the objective is also to work with local NGOs and experts in these countries to develop local capacity and skills to identify and manage KBAs.'

Marnewick has supported several African and non-African countries with the establishment of their KBA programmes, primarily through advising on how to establish NCGs. These countries include Madagascar, Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Canada, Nigeria, Australia, Kenya, and Greece. In his role as the KBA Community Africa Representative, he is currently reviewing the 38 KBA proposals being submitted by Mozambique.

How well we safeguard our KBAs is directly related to how well we conserve the vital biodiversity assets and ecosystem services that sustain every person on this planet, such as healthy air and water. 'Safeguarding our KBAs in South Africa will contribute to global conservation efforts and help to communicate these contributions, as will be the case for other countries that are signatories to the Convention on Biological Diversity,' adds Marnewick.

'A robust network of KBAs gives us traction to lobby for the protection of these sites on a global scale, and to be able to apply for support from global funders and NGOs who want to focus their resources on KBAs. If all countries can safeguard the most important sites for biodiversity, then we will begin reversing the decline of biodiversity and seeing natural areas recover and persist.'

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