

m&e case study

Flower Valley : A sustainable role model for wildflower harvesting #10



Flower Valley has been a powerful role-model promoting sustainable harvesting of wild flowers:

- ***It improved the whole industry by developing a scientifically sound permit system enforced by conservation authorities,***
- ***It directly influences its own suppliers to go beyond this to meet triple bottom line requirements.***

Delivering direct socio-economic benefits to local communities is one of the most important objectives of the C.A.P.E partnership. The objective of the Flower Valley sustainable flower harvesting project is to create an incentive for good practice for this industry. The Agulhas Plain is an excellent location for the creation of a role model for this industry because the wild flower harvesting in this highly diverse area is thought to be more intense, and to generate more work and income, than any other area in the fynbos bioregion.¹

Flower Valley aims to improve conservation, social and economic benefits to support the industry in the challenge of meeting triple bottom line objectives. In order to achieve these objectives, it supports research into sustainable harvesting and demonstrates the impact of improving skills in this sector. It has also given rise to commercial incentives through a relatively secure market which is now driving the sales of sustainably harvested fynbos. The inspiring story of Flower Valley's establishment and influence is described below.

ESTABLISHMENT OF FLOWER VALLEY AS AN INDUSTRY ROLE-MODEL

Like most coastal lowlands, the exceptionally diverse natural vegetation of the Agulhas Plain is threatened by alien invasives, as well as conversion to agriculture and development. Indeed, nearly 40% has already been lost. When Flower Valley, one of the important flower farms in the area, was threatened with conversion to conventional agriculture Flora and Fauna International (FFI) was approached by a concerned local resident to buy it.² The agreement was to develop it as a model for the industry to demonstrate how the triple bottom line of income, social sustainability and conservation, can be achieved through sustainable wildflower harvesting. The Trust charged with achieving this task has been led for the past five years by Lesley Richardson and her committed team.

CONSERVATION INFLUENCE

Although the flower harvesting industry had been operational for many decades there had been little formal research on sustainable harvesting. The threats to sustaining the biodiversity of the area were identified as poor harvesting techniques, excessive off-take and poor recovery after fire. One of the first priorities for Flower Valley was therefore to understand the local knowledge base, and to combine this with scientifically determined data on species that could be harvested and the amount of material which could be removed on an ongoing basis. On the basis of this information, an approved list of species and harvesting methods was developed. This list and code of good practice are being integrated into the harvesting license system for the industry as a whole. In order to implement these new requirements, those picking and sorting the flowers had to be trained. Accredited sustainable harvesting modules have been developed and registered with the training authorities and are now available. Long term research on the impacts of harvesting is continuing, in collaboration with universities.

In addition to material harvested on the Flower Valley farm itself, the processing plant sources sustainably harvested plant material from seven other local picking operators. This expanded footprint, which directly influences how biodiversity is managed in the broader landscape, makes a critical contribution towards conserving this important region.

SOCIAL INFLUENCE

The primary social challenge for the wildflower industry is the seasonality of the work, as peak flowering times are not distributed evenly throughout the year. This has been addressed in several ways: At Flower Valley secondary products such as recycled paper items were developed to provide work during the quieter periods. A new initiative to produce high quality charcoal from invasive alien plants will also provide more stable employment across the area while safeguarding the fynbos from one of the most pervasive threats.

Life skills training programmes are being promoted by Flower Valley as part of its social development programme. An early learning centre has been developed for the children of the area. This centre is an accredited "Eco-school" and part of the district-wide Eco-Schools programme. In addition to educating the children of their own workforce, this site is part of an early learning teacher training programme for surrounding schools. Together with Flower Valley farm, other supplier farms are being encouraged to improve their housing and access to good health care as part of their own social responsibility programmes.



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“Working within the industry enabled us to participate in developing sustainable solutions to common problems”

ECONOMIC INFLUENCE

In 2003 a private company, Fynsa Pty Ltd, was established by private investors to provide sustainably harvested wildflowers for the overseas and domestic markets. Under a partnership agreement with Flower Valley, Fynsa provides the commercial incentive for certified suppliers to "go the extra mile" by meeting the certification criteria. Currently the advantage lies in steady markets but ultimately the objective is to secure increased margins for sustainably harvested wildflowers.

An early partner was the Shell Foundation who facilitated the important Marks and Spencer's (M&S) outlet. Both of these companies bought into this project as part of their corporate social and ecological responsibility programmes. However, M&S found that shoppers were less willing to pay an increased margin for "green" flowers than they were for certified foodstuffs. Fynsa's bouquets were consequently not promoted as "green" products and to date the increased margins which were hoped for, to provide the Flower Valley Conservation Trust with royalties, have been difficult to achieve.

Fynsa is currently developing new markets in Europe which focus on marketing sustainable products. Locally, Pick n Pay has agreed to market their product as a "green" option. As their understanding of the market has improved, Fynsa has succeeded in growing its sales significantly. In 2007 its sales were over R5 million. As a result of increased sales, Fynsa's processing plant on Flower Valley farm and the seven certified picking operators have doubled their workforce to a combined staff of 150 in the past five years. This has made a concrete contribution to the local economy.

DIRECT INFLUENCE ON SUPPLIERS

A formal auditing and certification process is already in place for the seven picking operations supplying Fynsa's processing plant on Flower Valley farm. It is hoped that the system of accreditation will expand to other markets in future and more suppliers will be monitored against environmental, social and economic criteria to ensure the triple bottom line is achieved.

BROADER INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCE

Progress has been made by Flower Valley with others in the sector in establishing a wildflower harvesters' component within the fynbos industry body, thereby giving greater structure to the wild harvesting sector. This is critical because wild-harvested "greens" form an important part of the majority of fynbos bouquets, including those based on cultivated centre-piece flowers.

Flower Valley was initially established as an initiative of Fauna and Flora International (FFI) under the umbrella of the broader Agulhas Biodiversity Initiative (ABI). Participating in this C.A.P.E.³ initiative was invaluable as they were able to participate in developing sustainable solutions to common problems such as fire and invasive alien plants. These broader partnerships allowed them to extend their co-operation beyond the flower harvesting industry to other landowners.

In 2006, for example, when a wildfire burnt a large proportion of the Agulhas Plain, and much of the harvesting lands were burnt, Flower Valley joined the broader ABI initiative and approached government to assist in this disaster situation. As one of a group of influential stakeholders they were able to persuade government to provide funds for clearing fire-promoted alien invasive plants which are a very serious threat in this area. This provided alternative employment to harvesting teams left unemployed by the fire.

In this diverse area which has been identified by C.A.P.E as being an important area for biodiversity conservation, 40% of the area is comprised of private land committed to conservation through stewardship-type agreements. It is therefore critical that Flower Valley continues to support and promote sustainable wildflower harvesting to enable farmers to conserve natural veld without losing income.

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Key Words:

Sustainable harvesting, wildflower industry, Agulhas Biodiversity Initiative, business and biodiversity

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- 1 Heydenrych, B. J. (1999). An investigation of land-use practices on the Agulhas Plain (South Africa), with emphasis on socio-economic and conservation issues. Unpubl M.Sc. thesis, UCT.)
 - 2 1999
 - 3 Cape Action for People and the Environment