

Making conservation personal: creating threatened Cape lowland habitat beds at Stellenbosch University Botanical Garden

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The Cape flora at the southern tip of Africa is a global biodiversity hotspot rich in species, but also in vegetation types that are home to habitat endemics. How do we convince

non-botanists that this variable landscape, packed with local endemics, is not just more 'green stuff' and is worth conserving? Bombarding people with depressing statistics of habitat loss and threat status does not work. Even decision makers like environmental case officers consistently deviate from biodiversity spatial plan recommendations whenever human development is the alternative. Cape lowland habitats, which are severely transformed, often only survive as fragments between farmlands and consequently are not only threatened but also often invisible and inaccessible to most people. We need to make people relate to all these places with a stronger personal connection to meaningfully contribute to the long-term conservation of these habitats. Stellenbosch University Botanical Garden designed, created and curated display beds of threatened Cape lowland habitats with the aim of making them visible, accessible and personal. The beds are designed to be a holistic representation of each habitat. Interpretation boards engage with various audiences, stakeholders, and age groups. The beds also support *ex situ* conservation and recovery of populations at immediate threat of extinction, and provide conservation-relevant research material. This is a long-term and evolving project. We hope to instil lasting changes in the hearts and minds of visitors and display diversity of species and habitat in a way that sways opinions about the aesthetic and inherent value of our flora, which will ultimately lead to stronger support for its conservation.