

## Project Update: July 2014

The award of the Rufford Small Grant in October 2013 allowed us to continue our stakeholder engagement process and project planning with local conservation authorities, reserve managers and tortoise researchers, but this time we could make promises and plan in earnest. Knowing we could only begin fieldwork the next spring (August to October 2014), we held a series of meetings at university and conservation offices and undertook multiple visits to the field site to rehash the goals and potential outcomes of the project. This time has also allowed us to revisit and test the suitability of our original monitoring design, and update and adjust our plans in view of the



*A winter flowering Aspalathus species. Many species can only be correctly identified when flowering and most only flower in Spring, limiting the survey to the period August to October.*



*Reserve managers, conservation staff and the SAEON field team on a site visit to Elandsberg Reserve.*

revised goals and the results of preliminary field trials.

All parties were happy with the original goals to examine the impacts of alien grasses and large mammal herbivory on plant diversity and biomass but two additional threats to biodiversity were identified that were considered desirable to include in the study. Firstly, the reserves harbour a large population of feral domestic pigs that damage large tracts of vegetation by digging for bulbs. There was also concern about the increasing prevalence of an indigenous C4 grass species that is known to crowd out other vegetation and allow fires to burn more frequently. Including these impacts in our investigation required a complete rethink of the sampling design, but we feel that the new design is much better, with more extensive sampling allowing for the collection of more plant species and better sampling for comparison with remote sensing data and development of a vegetation map for the reserve.

In the meantime, tortoise researchers have started to find tortoise hatchlings in the reserve, a hopeful sign that the population is recovering.



*Luvuyo Dlamini (SAEON intern) and Abri de Buys (SAEON technician) test the multi mini-disc non-destructive biomass measurement technique.*