

## **Project Update: June 2009**

### **Staff development**

Since January 2009, Renu Karoo has had a staff complement of four full-time employees (Wilfred Luttig, Meraai Isaacs, Caroline van de Ross, and Maxelene Jaftha), two students (Aneleh Vorster and Rudi Swart) who are working with Renu-Karoo for a year to complete the experiential training requirement of their Nature Conservation degrees, and two temporary employees who have assisted with seed collection and compost making. All our staff gained skills in plant identification and propagation. Wilfred Luttig and Caroline van de Ross obtained learners' licences in February and are gaining confidence in driving. In addition, all full-time staff are involved in teaching school learners, in research associated with restoration projects, and in selling Renu-Karoo products through interacting with buyers.

### **Compost**

The compost making project is successful. Farmers and gardeners bring reject fruit and garden waste to the Renu-Karoo and we also collect dung and grass clippings from small holdings and gardens. These materials are chipped and layered to produce the compost that we use to grow indigenous plants. We also market our compost locally.

### **Indigenous plant cultivation**

Richard and the team completed the shaded nursery at Wolwekraal in January 2009. The new facility enables Renu-karoo to produce a larger volume of plant plugs for restoration as well as plants for sale to gardeners. Meraai Isaacs is doing great work managing the nursery and is now expert with seeds and cuttings. She has trained three other women to make cuttings, sow seeds and care for plants. We now have a wide range of locally indigenous shrubs and succulents on offer, and are selling these from the nursery as well as at the local market. Renu-Karoo employees sold R3000 of plants at the village festival in May 2009.

### **Indigenous seed production and collection**

Over the past 6 months we harvested 80 kg of shrub seed (including 35 kg *Tripteris sinuata*, 44 kg *Lessertia annularis*, 1 kg *Tetragonia spicata*, 2 kg *Gazania lichtensteiniana* and 4 kg of grass seed (*Fingerhuthia africana* and *Cenchrus ciliaris*) from the Renu-Karoo seed orchard. An additional 70 kg of grass and shrub seed was harvested along roadsides in the district. Collected seed is carefully documented (by species, date and collection site) and stored in a dark, well-ventilated room. Since November 2008 we have sold a total of 104 kg. Clients include a mining and telecommunications companies, the Ostrich Business Council, and sheep and game farmers, who placed orders after hearing our talks on rangeland management (Arid Zone Forum, Karoo Development Conference), reading our advertisements in the farmers' magazine "Landbouweekblad" and the local newspaper (Prince Albert Friend), meeting us at the market, viewing our website or seeing our project on the Afrikaans television feature programme "Passella". Stated objectives of our clients include repair of damage cause by development, return of reduced plant diversity to

overgrazed rangeland, increase in grazing value for game reintroduction, or improvement in scenery on areas that have been ploughed and abandoned.

### **Knowledge-based services**

Renu-Karoo is gaining experience and increasing our knowledge of ecological restoration through application and research. Restoration projects this year included planting 150 saplings and sowing 10 kg seed (7 spp) on abandoned agricultural land in the Little Karoo. We are also involved in the Ostrich Business Council Biodiversity project that aims to minimise the impact of ostrich production on the biodiversity Succulent Karoo near Oudtshoorn. Renu-Karoo staff sowed 34 kg seed and planted 2000 *Pentzia incana* and *Fingerhuthia africana* plugs in old ostrich camps on 4 farms following soil erosion control by another biodiversity-based business "Conservation Management Services". The Ostrich Business Council restoration project is providing an excellent opportunity for restoration research because, through collaboration with "Asset Research", we are supporting and supervising masters student Petra de Abreu to document seedling establishment on compacted soils ripped, pitted and or mulched to improve water infiltration and retention. The restoration sites have also been used as field training facilities for students from the universities of Cape Town, Stellenbosch and Nelson Mandela Metropol.

Renu-Karoo consults on various environmental issues in the Karoo. In March we formed part of a team that evaluated ecosystem services in the Little Karoo for the Succulent Karoo Ecosystem Project (funded by CEPF).

Caroline, Aneleh and Rudi assisted Western Cape Agriculture with surveys of rangeland condition on Treintjiesrivier communal farm and a commercial farm in the Prince Albert area in May. Caroline and Wilfred set up a restoration experiment on Renu-Karoo property (Wolwekraal), and Rudi and the team also established reseeding trails on a district roads borrow pit on a nearby farm. The land-owner was so interested that he has invited Renu-Karoo to present a farmers day focussing on restoration of rangeland in June 2009.

The environmental education that Renu-Karoo provides free of charge to local schools is popular. Staff presented a plant propagation workshop for 50 grade 8 learners from the Prince Albert Primary School on 21 May 2009. This included an introductory lecture on plant function followed hands on training in planting seeds and making cuttings. All participants took home their trays of indigenous plant cuttings and these hopefully will contribute to local gardens.

### **Publicity and conservation awareness**

There is a growing demand for nature walks on the Renu-Karoo property "Wolwekraal". Both locals and visitors are fascinated by the diversity and complexity of Karoo desert vegetation and by the animals, such as termites, ants, lizards, armoured ground crickets, whistling rats, aardvark, foxes and sunbirds that generate patterns and influence the evolution of plant life-histories. We hope that the awareness and support for conservation of the Karoo ecosystem that is generated during the walks will be discussed widely and remembered when decisions on development are made in Karoo towns.

The film crew of the Afrikaans television feature programme "Passela" a paid a visit to the Renu-Karoo seed orchard and work site in March to the great excitement of all the staff. A short feature on Renu-Karoo appeared on national TV two weeks later, helping to make our business and its objectives more widely known.

Sue Milton delivered a paper at the Karoo Development Conference on 25 March entitled "The basis for sustainable business in the Karoo: bringing ecological and economic issues together". (<http://www.aridareas.co.za/karooconference.htm>). Reports in local newspapers covered this conference, and of other activities involving Renu-Karoo partners and staff (Renu-Karoo supplementary material June 2009), have all contributed to raising awareness of Karoo conservation, ecological restoration and the activities of Renu-Karoo Veld Restoration.

### **Acknowledgements**

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