

## **MEDIA RELEASE - 10 May 2002**

### TO BURN OR NOT TO BURN

A RECENT prescribed burn by the Cape Peninsula National Park (CPNP) on Trappieskop above Kalk Bay and Clovelly has elicited a vociferous response from residents.

"Many have questioned the reason for the prescribed burn and its effects on the animals and people in this area. The CPNP would like to provide some insight into this highly complex situation", says park manager, Howard Langley.

"The management of fires for the natural regeneration of *fynbos* is a difficult one for conservation managers. Throw into the mix, fire-prone invasive alien plants, human carelessness, arsonists, fragile soils and highly inflammable homes and this complexity increases exponentially.

"It is well documented that *fynbos* needs fire at regular intervals – generally 12 to 20 years – to maintain its globally unique biodiversity. In terms of its conservation mandate and in keeping with the policy arrived at during the extensive public process leading to its Integrated Environmental Management System, the park has to ensure that a proper fire regime is maintained. If not, it will lose some plant species forever.

"Fynbos is, however, susceptible to invasion by alien vegetation which greatly increases the fuel load on the Cape Peninsula. A major programme has been initiated by the park to clear invasive alien plants, but the resulting dead plant material often cannot be removed from the sites because of the inaccessibility of the steep slopes and the resultant high costs of removal. Wood from the cleared plants is stacked into piles, which if burnt can cause localised heat scars where little plant or animal life survives. Removing them, on the other hand, disperses alien seeds and causes erosion.

"A recent investigation has revealed that the majority of fires on the Cape Peninsula are caused by accident (cooking fires, discarded cigarette butts, etc.) or arson. Only about 5% are the result of such natural causes as lightning or rock falls. An increasing number of recent fires can be attributed to arson.

"Our fire-fighting capacity is also limited. Although response times are rapid, a wildfire typically occurs in extreme weather conditions and rages out of control very quickly. Fire management deploys large numbers of resources and is very expensive. A moderate-sized wildfire could cost in excess of R1m to bring under control.

"The natural fauna and flora of the park have co-evolved with fires over hundreds of thousands of years and are little effected by natural fires. A fire burnt in cool conditions allows animals to escape by either outrunning the fire or by hiding under rocks and in holes.

"Much of the historical town planning has made no allowances for a natural or wildfire regime and very few property owners have taken precautions to protect their properties from fire.

"There is perception in the minds of the public that fire is BAD and should immediately be extinguished. Fire is, however, an integral part of our natural environment and if properly managed, can become a constructive force in conservation," says Langley.

Precautionary measures instituted by the park include the creation of an extensive firebreak network, the clearing of all invasive alien plants, the burning of stacks of cleared alien plants, a programme of prescribed burns outside the high risk season, co-operative programmes with other fire-fighting agencies, the establishment of a volunteer fire-fighting unit, the mobilisation of fire-fighting resources and the initiation of public education programmes.

The park's invasive alien plant removal programme is financed by funds from the Global Environmental Facility and Ukuvuka/Operation Firestop. Thus, no taxpayers' money is used.

"Trappieskop was part of the park's prescribed burn programme as the vegetation was in excess of 50 years old," says Gavin Bell, CPNP Section Ranger.

As a result of alien clearing operations, as well as natural vegetation that had not burnt for many years, Trappieskop had a massive build up of flammable vegetation. In order to protect the surrounding properties and promote fynbos rehabilitation, the CPNP decided to burn the area under carefully controlled conditions.

"Once the first winter rains had fallen, it was a matter of waiting for cool windless conditions before the prescribed burn could commence," says Bell.

All residents adjacent to the firebreak were informed beforehand of the prescribed burn which started at 15h30 on April 15. For the first two days, a helicopter was used continually to wet the firebreak. It remained on standby at the golf course until it had to be withdrawn to assist with the wildfires at Millers Point. "We wish to reconfirm that the fires at Millers Point were NOT started by the park," says Philip Prins, the CPNP's co-ordinator of fire services.

For the Trappieskop prescribed burn, personnel were split into four groups, with one group manning a fire fighting unit above Kalk Bay and another manning a Unimog on the Clovelly side. The third group of 25 CPNP staff and trained volunteers started the prescribed burn on top of the gap between Kalk Bay and Clovelly. As the group moved down towards the main road a staff member was left every fifty meters to prevent any fire from moving out of the break.

Once the third group had reached the bottom slope at Clovelly, the fourth group started their burn exactly where the third group had started and commenced moving down towards Kalk bay. Once both groups reached the bottom of the slopes on the Kalk Bay and Clovelly sides respectively the fire simply raced up the slopes away from the firebreak and houses and extinguished itself at the top.

On 19 April, a large amount of unburnt material within the contained area caught alight and the CPNP called in the fire brigade as the wind direction and speed changed. However the fire remained contained within the break and the fire brigade later withdrew. For the full period of the burn, staff was present on the firebreaks 24 hours a day until the rains on 22 April permitted their withdrawal.

On 24 April, CPNP staff and City engineers inspected the area and concluded that there was no apparent risk of rock falls or mudslides. However, as a precaution it was decided to place sandbags along storm water channels through to the built up areas below Trappieskop.

"Park staff from Cape Point, Silvermine, Newlands, Kloofnek and the Technical Section worked together with volunteers under extremely trying conditions. The fact that the CPNP, the Ukuvuka team and the City authorities were able to successfully manage a prescribed burn within a city, and on such a large scale, is a momentous achievement," says Bell.

"In future, we will however intensify our communication with the public before undertaking a prescribed burn," he says.

"The decision to burn is clearly not one taken lightly. There are many interests to balance and many risks to take. There is no right answer in fire management – the challenge is to understand all the risks, select the most appropriate management option, implement it and learn from it," says Langley.

E-mailed photos available on request from Netacha Bessick, Afrikom, Tel: (021) 423-7263 or e-mail [bessick.afrikom@global.co.za](mailto:bessick.afrikom@global.co.za)

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