

Invasive aliens

and fire

by Dr Phoebe Barnard



courtesy: Cape Argus

It's a Friday afternoon, and you're unwinding from the week's stress as you crest the Glencairn Expressway coming home from work. False Bay and the Kogelberg are laid out before you like a personal paradise. It's a view so lovely that you hardly notice the contrasting ridges on either side, heading down to the bay: beautifully-restored fynbos in SANParks land to the north; a monotonous green carpet of invasive Australian plants on private and public land to the south.

For those who lived here during the traumatic Cape Peninsula fires of 1999-2000, or even saw the photos, views like these of invasive-alien-infested fynbos should sound a loud warning bell.

Those fires burned over a fifth of the Peninsula's natural vegetation in one week – more than 8 000ha – with many millions of Rands of damage to property. Intense firestorms were fuelled by a thick crop of aliens, especially Rooikrans, Port Jackson and Hakea. Nearly two-thirds of the burned area was thickly invaded, and only 10% uninhabited.

Fire is an instrument of swift and dramatic change, needed by fynbos at intervals. Yet the transformation of fynbos into single-species alien thickets is barely noticeable from one day to the next. Most of us hardly notice the shift, though in the wind of ecological time it is but an instant. If we return after an absence, we realise the land has changed dramatically ... fynbos and strandveld have been transformed to tinder-dry land, throttled by invasive alien acacias. The

impacts are clear -- reduced water-supply, loss of fynbos-diversity, and increased fire-risk.

Professor Kader Asmal, former Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, and his advisor Dr Guy Preston realised the enormous threat posed by invasive plants to South African landscapes. Knowing that it's much harder and costlier to get rid of invasive species once they're firmly established, they secured millions in public-works funds to launch the Working for Water, Ukuvuka and Working on Fire programmes.

Yet these programmes target public lands. Private landowners remain legally responsible for clearing their lands, at their own cost. They are liable for damages if fires start on, or even cross, their land if it has not been cleared of aliens.

The 1999-2000 fires were frightening, threatening properties on the urban edge, and unleashing mudslides in two areas which caused millions of rands in damage. Smaller fires have occurred since, but by 2009 the regrowth of Rooikrans, Port Jackson, Hakea, Pine, Eucalypt and Australian Myrtle was thicker than in 1999. And, says oceanographer Mathieu Rouault, a building El Niño event in the Pacific could mean a very serious summer fire season in 2009.

Three major landholders are the main problem in Glencairn: the Navy, which occupies Department of Public Works land; Cape Town Coastal Properties, which owns most of the Glencairn Ridge; and Gordons, which owns land bordering Table Mountain National Park and Glencairn Heights. The infestation on Gordons' land also allowed criminals to launch violent attacks on Glencairn Heights homes in May to June 2009.

Tragically, these three major landowners have neglected their legal responsibilities for so long that the costs of clearing and annual follow-up probably now exceed the value of the land, despite its superlative views. What a wasted investment – and what atrocious criminal negligence. Legal action may be needed before someone is killed, or their life savings lost.

Having witnessed the devastating 2008

Scarborough fire, a group of us established the Glencairn Fire Committee earlier this year to identify and prioritise alien-infested properties for clearing, and raise awareness of the risk and relevant laws. So far, a database of properties compiled by volunteers has helped the City serve notices on negligent landowners, and encouraged the clearing of plots. If owners fail to respond promptly to these notices, the City may clear the land and bill the owner for the costs.

Global-warming is increasing the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, like heat-waves and fierce winds in many parts of the world, leading to runaway fires and loss of life. Combined with the El Niño effect, this could have deadly consequences for us in the Peninsula. Australia, California, Spain and Greece have recently battled huge, destructive fires. Communities should not be caught unprepared again in the Cape.

Steve Coe's information website Cape of Fire, (www.southerncrossroads.info/community/cape-of-fire.php), is a South Peninsula community resource on invasive alien plants and fire, with news items, tips for identifying and clearing invasives from your property, and links to other organisations working on invasives and fire. Recently, the Glencairn Fire Committee has discussed establishing rapid-response teams in the Far South and a local depot for fire-fighting equipment.

Sustainable living requires us to put our house in order -- not only literally, at the small scale of our households, but also figuratively, in the broader landscape. Community partnership with the City of Cape Town and other organisations helps us take back some control of a situation where the complacency and criminal negligence of major landowners threatens the common good.

We encourage neighbourhood watches or civic associations in other areas of the South Peninsula to set up 'fire committees' and join us in pressurising authorities to reduce the invasives problem. Please contact the Glencairn Fire Committee (Steve Coe africoe@iafrica.com) to learn more, or to report properties infested by invasive alien plants. 



Comment on this article? SMS the word 'alien' followed by your name, suburb and comment to 32692 (R1/SMS).

NEVER...

- light a fire if there's a danger of sparks escaping
- leave a fire unattended
- discard cigarette butts or fire coals
- burn garden rubbish without a permit
- set off fireworks unless in a designated place

ALWAYS...

- have a hosepipe on hand when braaiing
- extinguish braai fires completely
- keep properties free of invasive alien plants
- keep tall vegetation away from windows and decks
- support local hacking clubs financially or physically



WATER

Save water - pee in the garden! In a secluded shrubby area, bury a PVC pipe vertically about a metre into the ground and insert the neck of a cut-off soda bottle into the protruding end at an appropriate height.