

The Southern African Botanical Diversity Network (SABONET) is essentially a regional network of botanical institutions (Huntley *et al.* 1998). One of its key activities is the Southern African Plant Red Data List Project which started in May 1999. The Project aims to produce a comprehensive account of plant species threatened or potentially threatened with extinction in SABONET's ten member countries. South Africa's National Botanical Institute is responsible for the overall management and administration of SABONET. The Southern African Plant Red Data List Project is funded by the NETCAB Programme (Regional Networking and Capacity Building Programme) of the World Conservation Union's Regional Office of Southern Africa (IUCN-ROSA). It is co-funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) which is implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The countries participating in the Southern African Plant Red Data List Project are Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The Project relies on information from people working for State, parastatal and non-governmental institutions, from plant scientists (ecologists and taxonomists) within and outside the region, as well as from amateur botanists, many of whom have extensive knowledge of southern Africa's threatened flora. This collaborative approach is important as there is frequently a fragmented understanding of the region's plant species that are threatened or potentially threatened with extinction, the key threats involved, and the environmental, social and economic consequences thereof.

In addition to the publication of Red Lists for the ten countries, a secondary objective is to establish a network of southern African threatened plant professionals, competent to undertake Red Data List assessments, which will lead to more informed conservation and research decisions, and increased knowledge and awareness.

A task faced by botanists in many countries and regions throughout the world is to assess plant species

according to the IUCN Red List Categories and Criteria which were developed by the IUCN's Species Survival Commission (SSC) and adopted by IUCN Council in 1994 (IUCN 1994). The 1994 Red List Categories are standardized categories with quantitative criteria that are used to determine the threatened status (Red Data List status) of species. The criteria help to provide some justification and transparency to the assignment of a particular threatened status to a species. See the IUCN's web site for the IUCN Red List Categories at <http://www.iucn.org/themes/ssc/redlists>. At the first World Conservation Congress held in Montreal in 1996 a resolution was adopted by the IUCN membership requesting the SSC to review the Red List Categories and Criteria, and in particular, to see if they were applicable to all organisms, especially marine species and those which were targets of management programmes. Since 1997, the SSC has conducted an intensive review of the Red List Categories and Criteria, culminating in a revised system, which was formally adopted by the IUCN Council in February 2000. This revised system, which will be made available later in 2000, arose out of a wide consultation process conducted under the auspices of the IUCN/SSC Red List Programme. The review involved the 7000 members of the SSC network and the direct participation of more than 70 scientists (including the 22 members of the Criteria Review Working Group) in seven workshops. The revised system includes changes to the Red List Categories and their definitions; revised definitions of certain terms used to improve clarity; substantial changes to the criteria including the thresholds used; clarification of conceptual issues, with particular emphasis on the use of uncertainty in assessments for poorly known or understood species; and guidance on the use of the system at national or regional levels.

The activities of the Southern African Plant Red Data List Project include identifying country endemics, consolidating existing information through collaboration and training (regional and national) as a basis for undertaking Red List assessments. The anticipated project outputs include: 1, published Red Data Lists for the ten SABONET-member countries; 2, a trained cohort of

southern Africans knowledgeable about threatened plant issues; 3, electronic databases of threatened plants and associated regional human resources; 4, regular articles on issues concerning threatened plants in SABONET's newsletter, *SABONET News*, published in April, August and December; and 5, a web site dedicated to southern African threatened plant issues at <http://www.sabonet.org>.

Global plant Red Data Lists have been compiled by the IUCN and the World Conservation Monitoring Centre—the 1997 *IUCN World List of Threatened Plants* (Walter & Gillett 1998) and *The World List of Threatened Trees* (Oldfield *et al.* 1998). Future listings need to consider over-utilized species, country endemics, species known from only the type locality and those known from only single herbarium collections. In particular, Angola and the *Flora zambesiaca* countries require urgent attention. The *Flora of southern Africa* countries have been afforded more comprehensive accounts owing to the relatively long history vested in Red Data Lists (Hall *et al.* 1980; Hall & Veldhuis 1985; Hilton-Taylor 1996a, b, 1997; Scott-Shaw 1999).

Red Data Lists reflect to some extent, changes in plant population dynamics, and therefore, attempts to monitor and document these changes need to form part of an ongoing process. If Red Data Lists are not compiled, then many extinctions, including those of potential economically and socially important plants, may occur before effective conservation action can be taken. IUCN Red Lists are widely known for their objective and rigorous scientific approaches for evaluating the extinction risk faced by plants and animals. It is in this spirit that the Southern African Plant Red Data List Project aims to lay the foundations for showing the reality of plant biodiversity degeneration and the potential extinction crisis in the region.

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