

Trees

for tomorrow

PROVIDENCE BROUGHT FRANCOIS AND Melissa Krige to the scenic and windswept De Kelders coastline of Walker Bay in 2004. They were looking for a seaside cottage for Melissa's father, who was thinking of returning to South Africa from Canada. Call it serendipity, but what the young couple found instead – for themselves – was a priceless, indigenous forest that was actually for sale.

Now could it be that arborist Francois and horticulturalist Melissa were lured to ancient, enigmatic, wild and magical Platbos, the southernmost forest of Africa, by the spirits of the Bushmen who'd

that we replenish every bit of the planet we deplete – with interest. And we should be mindful of how we do it and keep it all in the right ratios. And that is exactly what the Kriges are doing. "To manage, preserve and expand this forest is the greatest and most rewarding challenge of my life," says Francois.

The project began in May 2008 and at present about 100 trees are being planted every month. Saplings are gathered in the forest thickets and propagated with love in bags in an on-site nursery. The nursery is guarded by seven ancient white stinkwoods that encircle it – a species which, fittingly, is believed by some African cultures to bestow fertility.

As Melissa explains, "Our intention is to reinstate the forest in areas where it originally occurred. Anecdotal evidence suggests that not long ago, much larger parts of our valley were forested. By replanting these areas we are extending the forest ecosystem with all its biodiversity. In addition we will in time create an effective barrier against further penetration by alien species whose seeds battle to germinate in shady conditions. Very importantly, we will also reduce the threat of fire to the forest."

She adds, "Because the work is being done under our auspices, we make sure to plant the correct mix of species and to water and care for each specimen until it is self-sustaining. Best of all, it is a carbon neutral project because the saplings are grown here naturally, then wheelbarrowed to the new site to be planted.

She continues, "Some people still prefer to plant trees in their gardens or to replant a street or the parking lot of a factory. That is good. But the trees planted here will be protected for posterity, if not >>

The owners of unspoilt Platbos Forest are not only ensuring it's survival, but its growth

□ **Melissa Krige with an untouched specimen of *Olinia ventosa*, or hardepeer. Many of these trees in the forest are multi-stemmed, indicating that they were once cut to provide wood for musical instruments or furniture.**

inhabited the area 125 000 years ago? For, like the Kriges, the Bushmen too believed in walking gently on the earth and caring for the whole web of life, not just a bit of it. As physicist Werner Heisenberg puts it: "If we set a single strand of the cosmic web into motion, we affect the whole system."

The Kriges bought Platbos and have since come up with an initiative that is certainly setting strands of the cosmic web in motion. Named 'Trees For Tomorrow', it's designed to restore the borders of Platbos, which have been withered by felling, cultivation and fire.

Whether one talks of 'carbon footprints' or 'ecological footprints' is of no matter. What matters is





□ Melissa, Francois and their children, Gustav and Ayanda, in front of their 'touch the earth lightly' forest home.

□ Francois with the leaf of a wild peach tree, a fast-growing garden species that's a must for attracting birds.

□ A white pear tree in the forest.

□ Old man's beard thriving on the branches of a white milkwood.

>> by us, then by the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF). They'll never be felled at the whim of a homeowner or to extend a parking lot, for example."

The Kriges have been fortunate in getting the full support of not only DWAF, but also conservation-conscious neighbours. They're also collaborating with a company named Carbon Ethics, which assesses the environmental footprints of companies and recommends projects to reduce and offset their 'footprints'.

Carbon Ethics have put their money where their mouth is and to date have committed themselves to planting 1 000 trees to compensate for their own footprint. These are now being planted by the Platbos team at the rate of 25 a month.

But it is not only big businesses that are sponsoring trees. Local baker and artist on the Baardskeedersbos Art Route, Niël Jonker, for example, is bartering the Krige family's daily bread for trees. Others in the area sponsor trees for fuel-miles driven to work, while any member of the public who wants to offset their footprint can sponsor a tree for R50 a time. The old adage of 'every tree counts' is indeed alive and well and growing in this neck of the woods.

And what of the future?

Sadly, a boundary of the magical forest is being threatened by an alien invader: That horrid Australian fire hazard, rooikrans (*Acacia cyclops*), has started marching across a neighbouring property. A huge interim fire break has been cleared at the Kriges' expense, but more serious intervention is urgently needed, as the great fire of February 2006, which destroyed much of nearby Grootbos, indicated.

The Kriges would therefore like the reforestation project to include eradicating surrounding aliens. It is an enormous task and to be successful in it they would need, besides the cooperation of neighbouring farmers, additional machinery, such as a chipper, as well as funding.

But, knowing the Kriges, I'm sure they will soon have all of that. □

**Map reference G2
see inside back cover**

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□ One of the signs inviting the public to become a part of Platbos's Trees for Tomorrow project.

□ One of the seven gnarled white stinkwoods that 'guard' the nursery.

□ Swartbas, or bladdernut (*Diospyros whyteana*).

□ The nursery team: Melissa, manager Xolile Ntlangeula, Nzuzo Dabula and Monica Bangani.

□ A labyrinth created from alikreukel shells left by earlier forest inhabitants in one of the forest clearings.

Footnotes

Platbos lies on a gentle open slope and contains both kloof and coastal thicket species, as well as having strong afromontane attributes. It has been compared to the Tongaland and Pondoland forests of KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, and has also been defined as a sandforest.

Tree Species found at Platbos: White stinkwood (*Celtis africana*), white milkwood (*Sideroxylon inerme*), white pear (*Apodytes dimidiata*), rock alders (*Canthium mundianum*), pock ironwood (*Chionanthus foveolata*), bladdernut (*Diospyros whyteana*), sea guarri (*Euclea racemosa*), wild peach (*Kiggelaria africana*), wild olive (*Olea europaea subsp africana*), hard pear (*Olinia ventosa*).