



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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UCT research examines relationship between Eskom and bird conservation

New research out of the University of Cape Town investigates the effects of an Eskom development in an area that is important for bird conservation. It also highlights the protection of grasslands areas which are increasingly threatened due to increasing demands for water and electricity.

Nature conservation is often complicated by conflicting land-use demands. David Maphisa's PhD thesis, "Towards adaptive management of high-altitude grasslands: Ingula as a case study", focuses on a moist, high-altitude grassland where Eskom is building a pumped storage scheme. To offset the negative effects of this development, Eskom has bought additional land that is to be managed for bird conservation.

Using sophisticated statistical tools, Maphisa's thesis examines the habitat needs of typical grassland bird species and how their habitat is affected by different management options. It develops the scientific basis for adaptive management of this area in particular and provides critical knowledge for the protection of grasslands more generally.

"The aesthetic beauty of the region and the many animal and plant species that only occur in these grasslands drive my desire to see this area protected given the current threats. Many species in the area are living at the edge of their range and may come under increasing pressure from climate change."

Statistical Ecologist for the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), Maphisa says he hopes his research will initiate debate on how best to conserve the area. He is also hoping to attract funds to initiate research studies not only to protect birds, but plants and animals in general.

"Our lives and that of the species and ecosystems are entwined and we ignore this at our own peril."

Maphisa's research is an example of UCT's contribution to solving South Africa's development challenges through research.

Maphisa has an MSc in conservation biology from UCT and received his PhD in statistical sciences on 19 December 2015. His doctoral thesis emerged as a result of his work for a partnership between BirdLife South Africa and Eskom, and since 2013, the South African National Biodiversity Institute. His doctoral research was supervised by Associate Professor Res Altwegg in the Department of Statistical Sciences and Emeritus Professor Les Underhill in the Department of Biological Sciences at UCT.

For more information or to set up an interview with David Maphisa, please contact Azwi Mufamadi on 021 650 5427 or email azwi.mufamadi@uct.ac.za.

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Azwi Mufamadi

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 5427 Fax: (021) 650 3780
Cell: (078) 528 6065
Email: azwi.mufamadi@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za