

Crack teams safely clear Chappies of invasive alien plants

Working on Fire's Wednesday mission to go on for years

JOHN YELD

YOU WON'T actually see them dangling in their ropes and harnesses from the steep cliffs high above you as you negotiate Cape Town's Chapman's Peak Drive in your car, but their presence is helping to make your trip significantly safer.

Actually, these men and women from the national Working on Fire (WoF) programme's high-altitude invasive alien plant clearing teams won't be in the field when you drive past anyway, because they're working only on Wednesdays when the drive is closed to traffic – for the safety of motorists and workers.

And this will be the situation for another five consecutive Wednesdays this year, and probably similarly in each of many years to come.

It's common cause that invasive alien vegetation like rooikrans, Port Jackson and some hakea growing on the steep slopes and cliffs of the drive pose a major safety problem for the toll road, as well as having a negative ecological impact. This became all too evident after the devastating fires of 2000, when the slopes became dangerously unstable because of the way the alien plants reduce soil structure and stability.

But many of these alien plants are growing in dangerous, often

near-inaccessible areas, and the only way to remove them is by hand, after getting there by rope access. And it's a big, time-consuming job.

"The project has been planned over 12 years which allows for each section of the dangerous area to be cleared at least five times," explains Leighan Mossop, Table Mountain National Park senior section ranger. "The area to be worked in this plan totals

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93 hectares, and this year work will be over eight weeks.”

The project is estimated to take 7 950 “person days” at a cost of R4.9 million, and currently the cost of the clearing is being covered by the WoF programme with funds from the national Expanded Public Works Programme, through the Department of Environmental Affairs.

There are two of WoF's 10-person teams on the Chapman's Peak job, while a third is working to remove pine trees on the cliffs above Noordhoek valley.

Team members are drawn from local communities such as Masiphumelele, Hangberg in Hout Bay and Ocean View, who undergo intensive training that includes rope work, first aid, herbicide application, search-and-rescue, and firefighting.

Mossop said the density of the alien vegetation posed an ever-increasing risk.

“By clearing it now before the plants get bigger and denser, the risk is reduced. Our priorities are to remove the invasive plants to allow lower-fire-risk indigenous vegetation to recover, which in turn reduces risk to the drive, and also to do this in a way that minimises the impact on the drive and the users.”

Jason de Smidt, WoF's high-altitude team project manager for the western half of the Western Cape, said Chapman's Peak was a difficult site to work on. “Partly because of needing to protect the road as much as possible (from falling debris) and having to clean it afterwards, but also because the site is often weather-affected, with strong winds and wet rock faces,” he explained.

“But the most difficult part is the rock itself. The Malmesbury shale is very brittle, so just the technicalities of having safe anchoring and of not dislodging loose rocks as you go past make it very difficult.”



GREEN TEAM: A member of a high-altitude invasive alien plant clearing team from the Working on Fire programme in action on the steep slopes of Chapman's Peak Drive.

PICTURE: JOHN YELD