

Bantamsklip: Eskom's extremely bad idea



MAARTEN GROOS

National electricity supplier Eskom has earmarked Bantamsklip on the southwestern Overberg coast as a preferred site for its next nuclear power plant. The problem is, it lies within the hottest of internationally recognised biodiversity hotspots. The plant and the resulting power lines would destroy the livelihoods of virtually everybody dependent on the natural environment of the area

Maarten Groos summarizes the issues

The Agulhas Plain, Africa's southernmost region between Walker Bay and De Hoop Nature Reserve, is the largest sanctuary for lowland fynbos and renosterveld habitats, considered the highest priorities for conservation in the world. The Agulhas Plain is one of Earth's most significant areas for biodiversity and even unmatched within the Cape Floral Region, itself one of the world's nineteen threatened biodiversity hotspots. The Plain's 270 000 hectares have a remarkable plant diversity, houses important bird areas and borders one of the richest parts of the world's oceans.

An exceptional number of 2 500 floral species are known from the area. Of these plant species, more than 100 are endemic to the Agulhas Plain (meaning these plants occur nowhere else) and close to 200 are listed as "Red Data species" – meaning that these species face a high risk of extinction in the wild. Close to 300 bird species have been documented on the Agulhas Plain, including the largest population of blue cranes in the world (South Africa's National Bird and a threatened species) and significant numbers of other Red Data listed birds.

The local coastline, connecting the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, has the



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The marine life – including great white sharks (pictured) and whales – and the dependent tourism industry would be harmed by the outflow of warm water from the nuclear plant

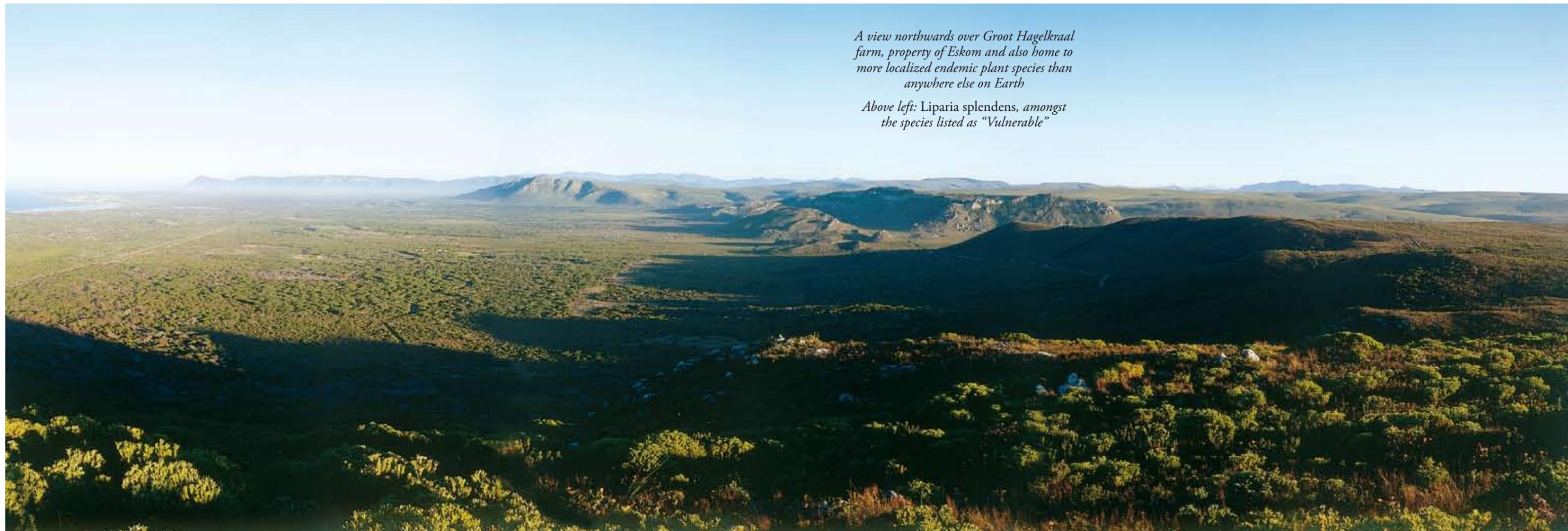
highest level of marine biodiversity and endemism found in Southern African coastal waters. Marine-based tourism activities such as shark-cage diving and whale-watching are amongst the main pillars of the local economy.

In the middle of all this natural splendour lies a property called "Groot Hagelkraal". Closed in by the Agulhas National Park, Cape Nature's Pearly Beach Reserve and the ocean, this piece of land is internationally renowned as "Earth's hottest spot for floral endemism". A higher

concentration of plant species, exclusively occurring in one restricted area, cannot be found anywhere else on this planet. Six plant species are entirely restricted to Groot Hagelkraal itself and another fifteen species are restricted to the Agulhas Plain with a total number of 800 plant species growing on the property. Several threatened amphibian species are known to breed on Groot Hagelkraal, including the critically endangered Micro Frog, the endangered Cape Platanna and the endangered Western Leopard Toad.

A view northwards over Groot Hagelkraal farm, property of Eskom and also home to more localized endemic plant species than anywhere else on Earth

Above left: Liparia splendens, amongst the species listed as "Vulnerable"



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No wonder that Groot Hagelkraal is a registered SA National Heritage Site. No wonder that such a special place will not be touched and that the natural integrity of the greater Agulhas Plain itself is safeguarded for future generations.

The problem with these last statements is that they are not true.

Groot Hagelkraal was purchased more than ten years ago by Eskom and earmarked as a site for the erection of a nuclear reactor. Recently Groot Hagelkraal was again identified by Eskom as a preferred site to erect a nuclear reactor without due consideration to the fact that in the past decade priorities and economic reality in this country have shifted.

Bantamsklip, the seaside spot on Groot Hagelkraal selected as the exact location for the nuclear reactor, is situated less than 10 km from Dyer Island. Dyer Island Nature Reserve is one of the most important islands on the Atlantic coast, one of the largest breeding colonies of African Penguins and in general a seabird sanctuary of global importance. The waters around Dyer Island and along the Bantamsklip coast have the highest concentration of Great White Sharks (feeding on the locally abundant Cape Fur Seals) in the world and are thought to also function as their breeding site. There are six



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A Western Leopard Toad, one of three endangered amphibians found at Groot Hagelkraal

Red Data bird species found breeding on the island.

The high biological productivity of the waters along the coast of the Agulhas Plain leads to substantial marine resources: dense kelp beds, abalone resources, Southern Right and Humpback Whales, the spawning grounds and nurseries of Anchovies, Pilchards and the endemic Red and White Steenbras, Roman and Red Stumpnose. This coastline witnesses the movements of cow-calf pairing of the Southern Right Whales moving between

the breeding grounds off De Hoop to nurseries in the Walker Bay area.

As a consequence the waters along the Agulhas coast between Danger Point and Quoin Rock (with Bantamsklip in the middle) are the operating grounds of both the whale-watching and shark-cage diving boats. These marine-based activities are internationally renowned and several of the operators have received major international tourism and environmental awards. From a tourism point of view, these marine-based activities are second



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Dyer Island near Bantamsklip sustains valuable bird and marine life crucial to tourism

only to the Kruger National Park when it comes to single nature-based activities attracting tourists to South Africa. The local economy traditionally depended on the fishing grounds, but now increasingly depends on tourism.

Building a nuclear reactor so close to one of the world's most precious ocean treasures is obviously asking for trouble. Permanent influx of hot water will alter the ecology of the Agulhas Bank and the sea around Dyer Island Sanctuary. Economically important fisheries and marine-

based tourism activities are at stake. Not only will the unique marine environment of these coastal waters likely be radically changed, the tourism attraction of the area around Dyer Island will be destroyed.

The vast infrastructure of the power plant and associated buildings will have a dramatic impact on the sense of space and scenic beauty of the coastline. Instead of a boat trip in undisturbed and pristine surroundings, tourists – if any – will float around in the shadow of an industrial zone. Imagine driving in a game-viewing

vehicle in the Kruger National Park along the fence of a new coal mine. Too ridiculous for words; yet, it is a real possibility. The waters along the Agulhas coast are the marine equivalent of the Kruger National Park in both its natural richness and in the economic importance for the country.

The tourism potential of the Agulhas Plain is not confined to the coastal waters. The Agulhas Plain is a growing tourism destination. The Agulhas National Park, into which all the animals which once roamed on the Agulhas Plain (“the Serengeti of the Western Cape”) will be released in the coming years, will be a very strong tourism drawcard. International tourism marketing experts expect the area between Gansbaai on Walker Bay and the Agulhas National Park to become one of the most attractive and diverse nature tourism destinations in the world. Apart from the fact that a whole plethora of high-quality tourism attractions are compacted in a relatively small area only two hours from Cape Town (whale watching, shark-cage diving, Agulhas National Park, botanical and horse trails, heritage sites, beaches, wine routes) it is in this respect also essential that most of the new tourism developments are expected to be organized along sustainable and responsible tourism standards. “Sustainable” and “responsible”



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Above: The actual Bantamsklip site is sandy and rocky beach and of little conservation interest (although the Black Oystercatcher in the picture is an endangered species), but the surrounding marine and terrestrial areas are all highly sensitive

Right: Unspoilt fynbos areas such as this at Farm 215 near Baardskeedersbos will be defaced forever by transmission lines – and the current tourism venture will be destroyed



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tourism is growing exponentially, especially in the European markets. Of note is that the Agulhas Plain, of all regions in South Africa, already has the highest density of tourism operators working on the basis of sustainable standards and certified as such by Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa.

Tourism will be severely impacted by the erection of a nuclear power plant and associated infrastructure since the tourism operators depend for the attraction of their product on a pristine natural landscape and a sense of space, which will be devastated by high-voltage transmission line corridors with several pylons next to each up to a width of over one kilometre.

The overall impact of building the new plant at Bantamsklip is aggravated because the site is so far away from the national high-voltage grid. A total of 13 power lines has been mooted to connect to the grid at three substations: Muldersvlei, Bacchus (between Villiersdorp and Worcester) and Kappa (between Ceres and Laingsburg). Other sites considered for the plant are Thyspunt near Port Elizabeth and Duynfontein next to the Koeberg plant, which is already on the grid.

Discussions with several national and international tourism professionals clearly indicate that the mere presence of a nuclear



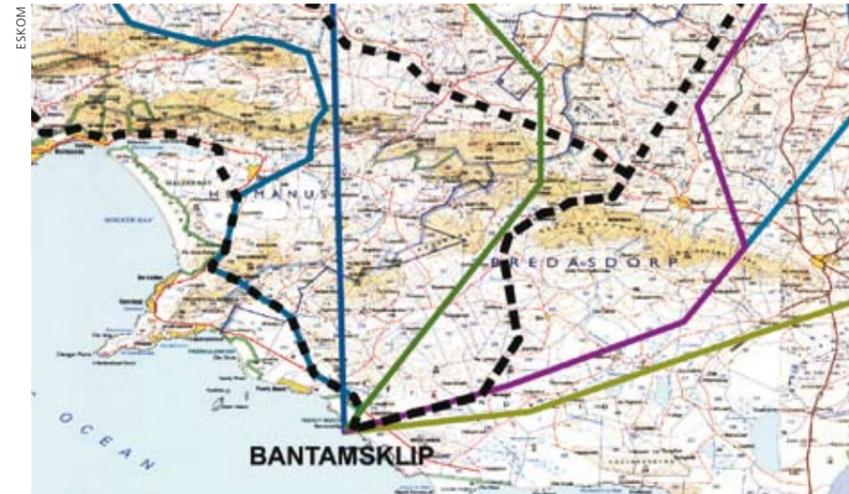
MAARTE MOULTON

Cultural-tourism destinations such as the historic mission village of Elim will be affected

reactor in the area will strongly decrease the attraction of the Agulhas Plain as a nature-based tourism destination. In a recent survey, 80 percent of tour operators said they would contemplate a different destination for their clients if a nuclear reactor should be constructed at the coastline between Gansbaai and Cape Agulhas. Especially European tourists appear to stay clear from destinations in the vicinity of a nuclear plant.

Next to tourism and the harvesting of marine resources, local communities are

dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods. Apart from cattle and sheep grazing, smaller-scale vegetable and essential-oil harvesting, sustainable harvesting of indigenous flowers and high-end wine production have grown in importance. The Agulhas Wine Region is the newest wine-growing region in South Africa (the first vineyard was only established in 2000) and – cooled by sea breezes – is increasingly popular for wine growing because the climate in the traditional wine-farming areas tends to become too



ESKOM

The power lines will run through sensitive conservation areas, regardless of the route taken

hot. Most of the wine farmers in the area are members of the Biodiversity and Wine Initiative (BWI), and most already have or aspire to an organic label. They make boutique and estate wines for which the scenic beauty of the vineyards and its surroundings is essential for marketing. A nuclear reactor in the vicinity and highly intrusive corridors of power lines will threaten the marketing capabilities of the winegrowers and endanger the development of an area which in the long run – with a view to climate change – might prove to be one

of the few sustainable wine-growing areas left in South Africa.

The loss of present and future permanent jobs in tourism, fishing and agriculture will not be compensated for by the creation of permanent jobs during the operational phase of the nuclear plant. Whatever the arguments for or against nuclear energy in general, one thing is clear: of all electricity-producing techniques, nuclear energy requires the least man-power. And, apart from some menial jobs, few of the employees will be locally

recruited. Admittedly a large number of people will be required during the building of the nuclear plant, but only on a temporary basis; once the plant is completed, no decent livelihoods will be available for these workers in the area.

Though the Agulhas Plain is still an impoverished rural area with visible social scars, clear inroads have been made to right the wrongs of the past. Projects such as Flower Valley and the Agulhas Biodiversity Initiative promoted progress and prosperity through ecotourism and sustainable use of the region's natural assets, and created an example for successful rural development all over South Africa. The achievements of these initiatives during the past years are now at risk.

A nuclear reactor at Bantamsklip will cause negative economic growth on the Agulhas Plain and in adjacent tourism and agricultural areas, deprive local communities from existing and future employment and training opportunities, and as a result disrupt an area which at present has a positive social and economic outlook. ■

If you would like to add your voice to opposing the nuclear plant at Bantamsklip, contact Danie de Villiers of the Strandveld Tourism & Conservation Association, cell 082 554 1762 or e-mail stca@omail.co.za



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Vulnerable : *Lobostemon lucidus*



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Endangered : *Aristea teretifolia*

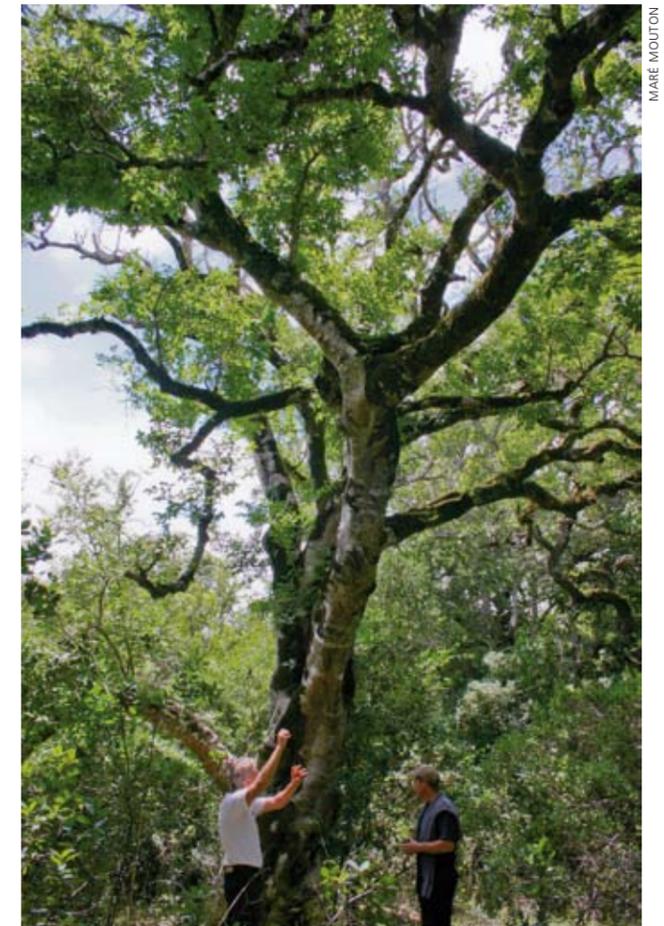


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Endangered : *Leucadendron elimese*

Left & above: The Agulhas Plain is home to 2 500 floral species, of which 200 are endangered or vulnerable

Right: Initial plans would have had power lines running through Platbos, the southernmost surviving afro-montane forest, as well as through the upmarket Grootbos Private Nature Reserve nearby



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