Wild rooibos tea

The leaves and young shoots of the rooibos bush (Aspalathus linearis) have been used by indigenous peoples of the Western Cape since pre-history to produce a health giving beverage known as rooibos tea. It was only in the early 1900s that the species began to be cultivated on a commercial basis.

The cultivated rooibos variety is fast-growing and high-yielding, but less resistant to pests and drought than wild varieties. Because of increasing demand, much of the specie's natural habitat has been ploughed up and put under intensive mono-crop cultivation. There are very few areas remaining where wild tea plants can still be found

-- in marginal and mountainous areas. Like the wild tea, small-scale "coloured" farmers were also limited to the more marginal areas by successive colonial and apartheid laws. Communities of small-scale rooibos farmers have been harvesting wild and cultivated rooibos for many generations, and have become the de facto guardians of the wild rooibos genetic stock.

EMG facilitated a programme of Action Research with small-farmers of the Heiveld Co-op and Wupperthal Co-op to identify, characterise and map populations of wild tea. Wild rooibos offers a potentially more reliable source of income, but farmers are keen to develop a sustainable harvesting strategy, and gain more insight into the ecology of the plant in the wild and its response to a changing climate.

The knowledge built up in this action-research programme has been collected in the publication **The Sustainable Harvest of Wild Rooibos**, also available in Afrikaans hard-copy from EMG. This body of knowledge serves as the basis for the Heiveld's policy on sustainable harvesting, which is adhered to by all producers.

The importance of managing and protecting this wild genetic stock cannot be overstated, particularly as climate change may put new pressures on the cultivated variety and threaten the viability of the industry.

Heiveld Co-op members with the support of EMG and scientific institutions are monitoring the recovery of wild tea after fire, and we anticipate that this will result in improved insight into fire management for production and conservation of biodiversity.