

## **Biodiversity mainstreaming at the Simbithi Eco Estate**

Simbithi, a 430 hectare Eco-Estate, is situated 30 minutes north of South Africa's third largest city, Durban, on the KwaZulu-Natal coast. It's a tranquil hideaway nestled between the coastal towns of Ballito and Salt Rock. The King Shaka International Airport is only 10 minutes away making the North Coast more accessible for commuters, foreign tourists and investors.

### **What is the business case for biodiversity at Simbithi Eco-Estate?**

Biodiversity is under crisis along the KZN coastline, with much of the natural habitat having been converted to agricultural and urban land uses. To attract investors and home owners, Simbithi Eco-Estate was planned with one thing in mind: to give buyers the opportunity to reconnect with nature and embrace a lifestyle in harmony with biodiversity.

### **What are the biodiversity impacts and dependencies of the Simbithi Eco-Estate? What matters to the Simbithi Eco-Estate community?**

Most of the property was previously under sugarcane. Simbithi Eco-Estate used the restoration of biodiversity (e.g., wetlands, indigenous forests) as a key marketing strategy to attract prospective home owners and investors. Restored biodiversity components now provide critical services to the Simbithi Eco-Estate community, notably amenity values (e.g., vistas, secluded properties) and recreational services (e.g., birdwatching, walking).



Figure 1: Eco-estate with natural vegetation

### **What strategy and action plan have Simbithi adopted towards biodiversity?**

Biodiversity has been integrated throughout the life cycle of the Simbithi Eco-Estate, from planning through to ongoing management. In terms of planning and construction, special care has been taken to strategically locate each site and property to protect critical habitats (e.g., waterways) and to allow for free movement of wildlife. Every possible precaution has been taken to minimise environmental impact: geology and soil assessments, water resource and drainage appraisals, land use and vegetation studies, and aesthetic, historical and cultural appraisals - ensuring a development that is in harmony with the natural surroundings, with the goal of developing an Eco-Estate of international acclaim.

In terms of the management of the estate, many biodiversity supporting measures are being put in place. Such responsible landscaping and gardening practices include:

- The use of a minimum of 65 different plant species in all landscaped gardens of which at least five must be edible by the local fauna. Only locally indigenous plant species listed in the Simbithi Eco-Estate Planting Palette are permitted.
- No formal landscape features (including lawn or hardscaping) may encroach over the three-metre and five-metre building lines of the development. These areas must blend in gradually

with the natural vegetation, and not be cut to form a sudden shelf or valley between the two. Three-metre side spaces should be planted with a high variety of species to create corridors for the movement of wildlife.

- Gardens are designed not to be cut off from the estate by fences and hedges but to blend and integrate with the natural habitat. No planting should become a solid hedge or be managed as a hedge. Planting should be spaced naturally so that wildlife can still find a way through. Visually, there is no place for the rigid edges created by the square clipping of hedges in the natural planting ethos of the estate.
- Clipping or pruning of plants should be done sensitively to maintain the natural shape of plants. The clipping of plants should not take place within one month prior to the natural flowering season of a plant.
- Lawn is considered to be a “sterile” environment which does not harbor much diversity. As such lawn areas may not exceed 25% of the landscapable area and no more than 75% of the platform area. Lawn may only consist of the following grass species: *Cynodon dactylon*, *Dactyloctenium austral* and *Stenotaphrum secundatum*.



Figure 2: Restored wetlands on site

- Use of the pesticides, fungicides and herbicides should be avoided where possible. Should they become necessary, then organic environmentally sensitive products should be used in preference to non-sensitive types.
- The Simbithi Eco-Estate reserves the right to conduct garden audit inspections to assess the compliance of gardens with its landscape protocols. Gardens that do not comply with the required maintenance standard will be given an opportunity to rectify the noncompliance. After a follow-up inspection, fines will be issued until the noncompliance has been rectified.

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