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Plant Extinction Crisis

Memorial Garden Highlights Plant Extinction Crisis SOUTH AFRICA

27th October 2006



The garden is reminiscent of a war memorial, with 15,000 species named on the handmade flowers.

Image © SANBI

"We are destroying the Earth at a rate comparable with the impact of a giant asteroid slamming into the planet." (Richard Leakey)

"All the indications are that we are standing at the opening phase of a mass-extinction event comparable in scale to the previous five, the most recent of which eliminated the dinosaurs 65 million years ago." (Dr Russ Mittermeier, President, Conservation International, USA)

With quotes like this from eminent scientists, you might imagine that the world would sit up and take notice. Yet the crisis only seems to be accelerating, and is being compounded by the effects of climate change that has already begun to adversely affect many regions.

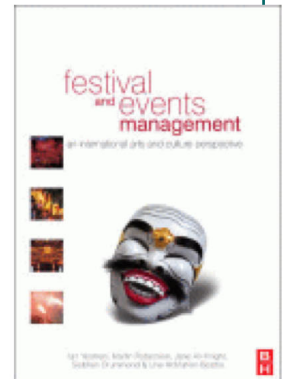
Art can communicate more directly than science to many people so at Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens artist Willem Boshoff has built a memorial to 15,000 rare species that could be gone very soon. It is reminiscent of the monuments and graveyards dedicated to fighters in wars, particularly the First World War, and brings into stark relief the ugly drama that is unfolding in the plant world.

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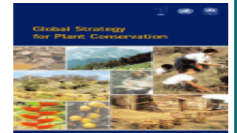
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Behind the work lies 25 years of research that Boshoff spent recording the names of the 15,000 threatened species represented in the display. There are currently around 30,000 species on the IUCN Red List, which provided both information and inspiration for Boshoff's work. This is about 10% of the world's known total, but many species are likely to become threatened if climate change accelerates as predicted.

Boshoff explained how he works: "I study all the plants species I can find. I want to know their names and where they grow. Since 1981 I have made notes on more than 15 000 plant species on trips to natural areas and botanical gardens all over the world.

"Each one of these species is printed onto cloth to make up the 15 000 memorial flowers, which are "planted" on the main lawn at Kirstenbosch.

"The idea of using flowers as a memorial device came after I visited the fields of poppies at Ypres in Flanders. Like those memorial gardens in northern France and Belgium for soldiers who never returned from the war, the purpose of this memorial garden is to illustrate the loss to the world should threatened plant species become extinct.

"I have chosen red for the cups as red is the colour for threatened species - the red data list. Red is also the colour of the poppies in the memorial fields of Flanders.

"The white cloth is used to print the botanical and every vernacular name I can find of each plant. In addition the native country of the species is printed on the cloth, as flowers, like people, have an identity and an origin. The cloths are small handkerchiefs pointing to abjection and vulnerability. One uses a handkerchief when one is sad."

Plants and animals are disappearing faster than at any time in the past. Of South Africa's 22 102 plant species, over 1,500 face a high risk of extinction in the near future and are therefore classified as "threatened". At the present rate, half of the species that were alive in 2000 could be extinct by 2100. The survival of many thousands of plants and animals is under threat. The highest concentration of threatened plants in the world is in southern Africa, and many of them are in the Cape Floral Kingdom. Scientists predict that 4 out of every 10 species of the protea family will be extinct by 2050.

Find out more about the display at www.sanbi.org/whatson/boshoff.htm

Find Out More

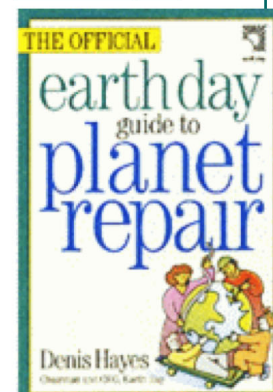
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28th August 2007