

# International Year of



biodiversity

South Africa's living wealth...



Text by Louise van Niekerk

The United Nations declared 2010 the International Year of Biodiversity. The aim is to spread awareness about the loss of biological diversity worldwide and to motivate individuals and organisations, ranging from governments and local authorities, to businesses and civil society, to take action. The South African Post Office is drawing attention to this important topic by issuing a set of four stamps and a commemorative cover reflecting our country's remarkable "living wealth".



Biodiversity describes the variety of life in an area, including the number of different species, the genetic wealth within each species, the interrelationships between them, and the natural areas where they occur.

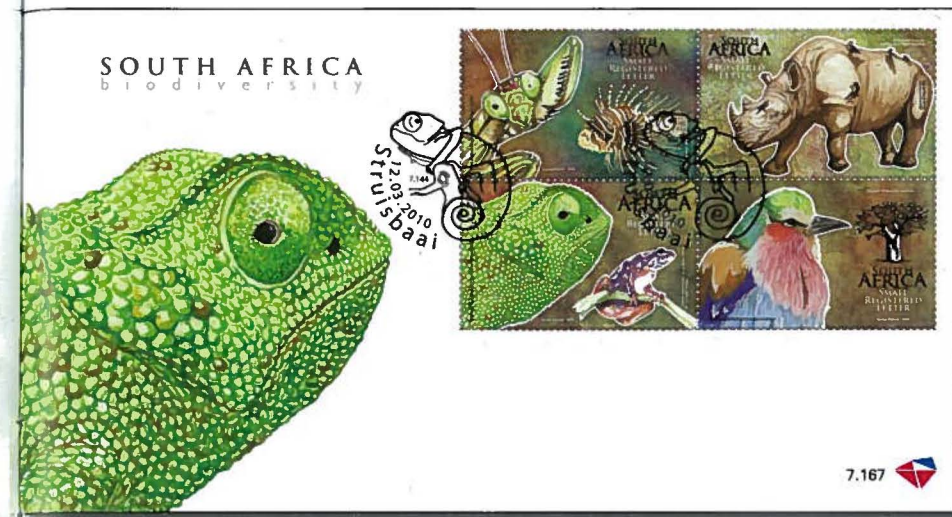
South Africa is greatly blessed in this regard boasting a wealth of species diversity. With a land surface area of 1,1 million km<sup>2</sup>, representing only 1% of the earth's total land surface, South Africa contains almost 10% of the world's total known bird, fish and plant species, and more than 6% of the world's mammal and reptile species. However, this natural wealth is threatened by growing human populations and their demands on the environment.

The reason for our rich variety of species, is that South Africa has a wide range of climate conditions and many variations in topography. These include narrow coastal plains, steep escarpments and large plateaus. In combination, climate and topography lead to broad vegetation zones, which, together with their associated animal life, are called biomes.

South Africa's biomes are the Karoo, fynbos, forest, grassland and savanna biomes. Each of these supports its own collection of plant and animal species. The Karoo, for example, is home to plants and animals such as the gemsbok, and succulent plants, which are well suited to hot, dry conditions. Fynbos is home to a variety of plants that are suited to a Mediterranean climate and the poor soils of the south-western Cape.

Tyrone Parks, a student at the Open Window School of Visual Communication, did the artwork for this set of four stamps. They reflect some of our living wealth, including plants and birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish and insects.

The statistics below from "Biodiversity in South Africa" by Jocelyn Collins, gives an idea of our country's amazing living wealth and their status.



## Plants

More than 20 300 species of flowering plants occur in South Africa. One of the six most significant concentrations of plants in the world is the Cape Floral Kingdom, with its distinctive fynbos vegetation, in the south-western Cape. Most of South Africa's 2 000 threatened plants are found in fynbos.

## Mammals

About 243 mammals are found in South Africa. Seventeen species in South Africa are threatened, including the black rhino, pangolin and giant golden mole. The riverine rabbit, roan antelope and wild dog are endangered. Two mammals have become extinct, namely the blue antelope and the quagga.

## Birds

Of the more than 800 bird species, 26 are threatened, including the jackass penguin, Cape vulture, martial eagle, bateleur and Cape parrot. Five species are endangered, namely the wattled crane, roseate tern, Egyptian vulture, blackrumped buttonquail and blue swallow.

## Reptiles and Amphibians

In total 370 reptiles and amphibians, of which 21 are threatened, occur in South Africa. Six of these are endangered.

## Fish

Some 220 freshwater fishes occur here, of which 21 are threatened. There are more than 2 000 marine fish species, for which no information is available about threatened species.

## Insects

Some 80 000 insects are known to occur in South Africa, many of which are endemic. There are many more as yet undescribed species.

Technical information will be published in the next issue of *Setempe*.

References:  
<http://www.botany.uwc.ac.za/envFacts/facts/biosa.htm>  
<http://www.countdown2010.net/year-biodiversity>

