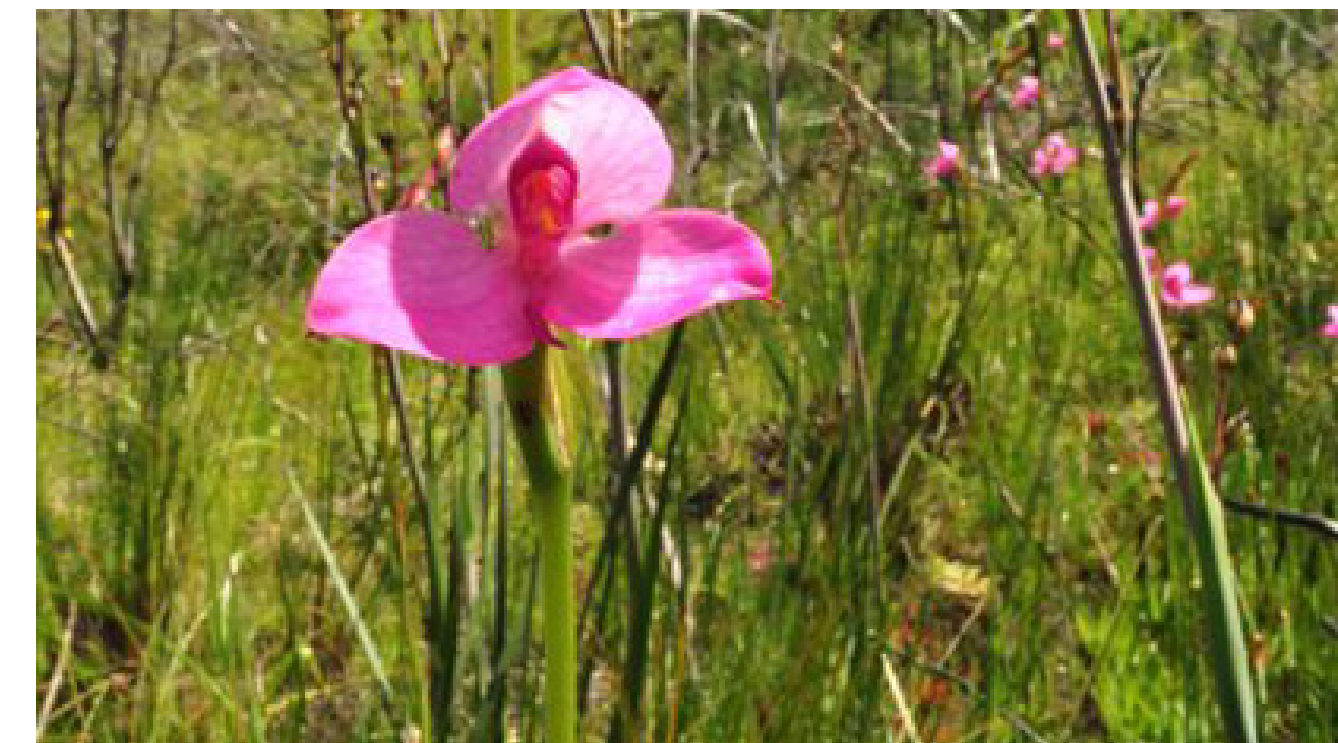




ARISE FROM THE ASHES





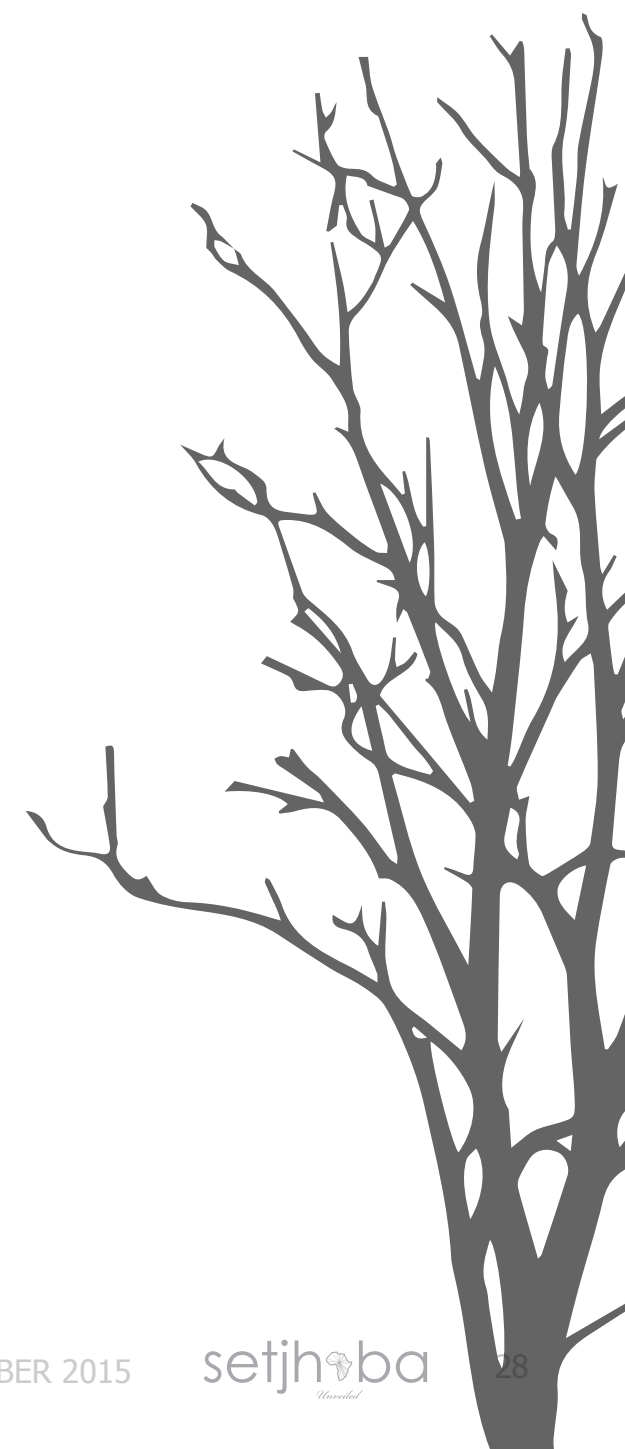
Nestled in the Klein River Mountains between a municipal and a provincial reserve is Vogelgat Private Nature Reserve (recently awarded Provincial status). Lying only 125 east of the hustle and bustle of Cape Town on the outskirts of the World famous, whale-watching picturesque town of Hermanus. 700 hectares in extent, this fynbos rich, alien vegetation free land boasts many flowering species only to be found on these slopes. A kloof reaches deep into the mountains, cleaving it in half. On each side of this kloof rise majestic, sometimes treacherous cliffs, which gradually unfold into gentle hiking slopes where an array of natural wealth is revealed. 35kms of well designed and kept paths lure its private members to plunge into dark, deep, invigorating tannin leached plunge pools and waterfalls.

A storm was brewing in late December 2012. An electric flash was the only sign of a lightning strike on the mountain. However the billowing smoke that followed were the first signs of a ferocious fire that was going to sweep across over 8000 hectares in the coming days. The initial fire was put out, but strong winds fire fanned flames back into life! Giorgio Lombardi the warden on his way to collect his family at the airport from their Christmas in Johannesburg was called by a hiker, Peter Phillips witnessing this new event. Quick thinking was required to make safe hikers overnighing at the mountain cottages. I got into communications with 4 ladies that were going to overnight at Leopard Camp in Maanschynkop, hiking up from Sip Lodge. I said they must be on standby to evacuate. Overberg Fire and Rescue then notified me they were going to evacuate the ladies with a helicopter. I said let us not put the pilot and his craft in danger as the terrain there is not suitable for evacuation, but rather let the ladies evacuate on foot via Moonshine Pass, an easy and safe passage. This message was given to the ladies and they began their descent. I then called a friend of mine Peter Dizzy to hike up to Sip Lodge as there were no communications there to evacuate a lady that was there. This was done with extreme efficiency.

Phew everyone was safe! The reserve was closed to avoid any fire junkies to explore the dancing fires.

You may all recall the recent fires in Cape Town as “devastating” – only if there is loss to of life and property can we really place this tag to it. Natural ecosystems in the Cape require fires in the region of every 12 years. Any fires arriving before this period could have negative effects on the recovering fynbos, reverting it to low biodiversity if this sequence persists on a regular basis. So we at Vogelgat last had a fire 12 years ago, so it was decided to let the fire burn the moribund vegetation and therefore give new life to the ageing fynbos. The amazing story of fire is captured by the story of the unpredicted fire in the Kogelberg Nature Reserve years ago when the strategy by Cape Nature was to put out veld fires. The Marsh Rose, *Orothamnus zeyheri* that is endemic to this area and Maanscynkop hadn’t been seen for many years and thought that it was extinct! After the fires literally hundred of these stunning plants grew back. It was this incident that made scientists and conservationists alike to realize that fynbos requires a fire for regeneration. It has now become common practice to burn any veld that is over 12 years old.

As the fire continued its slow downward movement the main Vogelgat complex was at risk of burning down. At 23h00 Giorgio’s family was in evacuated in their pajamas and passports in hand, not know if they would come back to their home. Luckily Giorgio had seen a residence down the road burnt to the ground only 2 months prior and decided to create a 15m fire break around this complex – as the fire reached this boundary at..... with the help of the Municipal fire team and local neighbours, a back burn was ignited and provided the necessary safety barrier between the office and homestead.





It was only when the fire crept eastwards and then down wards along our southern boundary with Fernkloof that the inferno was upon us. Flames of 4 stories swept past my office, licking the eves of the roof, cracking a window, the fire jumping unto both sides of the road, therefore not allowing anyone us to escape down the road. The private cars and a motor cycle were parked right up close to the house. The fire truck clamped between some rocks, nowhere to go! Spraying water 5 m away from their tyres! Embers flying around our bodies.

The fire truck ran out of water and Anthony Bishop was able to dose the beechwood clump close to the office and keep extra water to dose us if needed. The fire was ferocious turning everything into flying embers and instant ash! Members and neighbours risked their lives to fight the fires, even going through such trouble in taking Giorgio's staffie "Shaka" to a safe home. Members avoiding the traffic curfew, walked from Voelklip to lend a hand! What a community of unselfish angels! In the morning the drone of helicopters dropping water on neighbouring properties shocked many into disbelief. The whole of Vogelgat resembled a moonscape! Blackened fynbos stumps and grey ash was all around, as far as the eye could see!

Some of our loyal members arrived to a moonscape, it look like the aftermath of Hiroshima. They openly wept as Vogelgat, their place of spiritual refuge was gone. But gently I cradled them, softly whispering "it was 11 years ago that we had the last fires and the veld needed a fire, to burn away the old fynbos to allow the new to emerge triumphant. Just wait only 7 days and the fire-lilies *Cythranthus ventricosus* will arise from the ashes. From its long sleep, only to be awakened by the raging fire and smoke, its pulse quickened to unveil its splendor"! will emerge and in September there will be a floral explosion in spring..never to be repeated till the next fire". This reassured our members and they left excited at the prospect to adventure in the land of Lazarus. Well we were not disappointed! In a two hour hike 18 different orchids were gazed upon with disbelief.



The raging fire that swept through had triggered underground bulbs from their 11 year old sleep and a spectacular floral display lay at our feet for months to witness. Hiking members arrived in an uncontrollable state, sobs and tears.....their place of solitude was desolate. Giorgio whilst hugging them reassured them, “ you will not believe the transformation that will happen to this scarified land.....within only 7 days the blood red fire lily Hidden for over 40 years Satyrium foliosum was discovered for the first time in Vogelgat. Known before only on Table Mountain. It is these gems that baffle scientists and nature lovers to wander into the mountains in search of “sleeping treasures”. One would think with all our technology we know everything.....

a snigger.....with raging, orange flames and smoke nature’s wonders unveil their uniqueness. To revive our visual and oral senses to a point of exacerbation!

Vogelgat has also opened its doors to conservation research, with many international papers written on valuable aspects of conservation biology. Giorgio has just obtained his Masters in Science, Botany from Rhodes University. After many hours of field observations no pollinators were seen on Erica lanuginosa an endemic Erica species. After installing trap cameras a mouse Aethomys namaquensis was captured on a photograph. This was the first ever photograph in the nature of a non-flying mammal pollinating an Erica. Giorgio’s Masters also unearthed the first visitation of a long-proboscid fly on an Erica, Erica aristata, The Pride of Hermanus.

This has shown the fine connection that all things have with nature and that we must live with the precautionary rule – illuminate any activity that may have an impact on the very environment we live in. In the spring, a botanical explosion displayed floral extravaganza! Oranges, yellows and pinks lit up the ash-grey slopes. The striking organs blossoms of Pillansia templemannii carpeted the slopes likened to a spectacular fire.

On one hike 18 different orchids unveiled themselves to hikers. The majority of these flowers exhibited only for this one season after the fire and never to be seen again until the next fire...maybe in only 12 years to come! Excited hikers came from all corners of the globe to gaze on the once of a life time show. We lost 2 overnight facilities and our automatic weather station. My Masters research sites went up in flames as well as 2 digital trap cameras to photograph any pollinators. Well this fire has also transformed our experience at Vogelgat. Sip lodge that burnt is now a beautiful 6 bed cottage with a wooden “Swedish” plunge pool. This has led to many families now able to hike with extra friends as it is only a 2 hours hike to overnight in comfort. It is wonderful to see captains of international industries coming to hike now. This “new birth” has led to many blessings. People realizing that time with family is paramount and hiking doesn’t mean “roughing it”!

For those having an inquisitive nature by heart follow **Vogelgat Private Nature Reserve** on facebook.

