

Salvokop flora and fauna rescued from the Gautrain

Ancestors give their blessing before the bulldozers move in

BARRY BATEMAN

The eastern slope of the Salvokop was a hive of activity yesterday as traditional healers and conservation experts combed the area in a search-and-rescue operation.

The Gautrain-organised exercise was aimed at saving indigenous plants and animals before the bulldozers flatten the area for the multi-billion rand rail system.

Traditional healers blessed the area and received the go-ahead from the ancestors before starting the operation.

Gautrain project leader Jack van der Merwe said this was the fourth such operation in a pristine natural area along the Gautrain route. "We have a team of experts, including traditional healers, who will collect plants, insects and small animals."

He said the blessing by traditional healers was an important part of the process. "We want to treat nature with the respect it deserves before we build the train line."

"Some trees have been marked to be taken to a nursery and to be replanted in the reserve," he said.

Van der Merwe said they used parolees who had been trained on how to identify the plants.

Paul Bruns, of Hlumelelisa, the programme in which inmates and parolees are taught horticultural skills, said they had 30 men on site to assist with the search and rescue.

The programme provided its members an opportunity to learn a scarce skill and helped them find work after serving their time, he said.

Bombela environmental manager Etienne van der Lith said the operation aimed to harvest what was useful and beneficial and to replant it or release it back into the wild. "We are going to destroy this whole area so we have to save what we can."

An area stretching 2km along the existing line on Salvokop and which is about 40m wide would be excavated.

Van der Lith said the search-and-rescue operation was accelerated because of the need to start work in the area soon. He said they expected to start construction in the area as soon as September.

Traditional healer Evelyn Muyimane said she had spoken to the ancestors and they had given their blessing to dig up the plants.

Traditional healer Marilyn McDowell said the main focus was to collect medicinal plants for use in their practice. "We'll take the plants to a nursery to be to be grown and then take them back to be replanted in wild places."

"We have to harvest them from wild places for the medicine to work," she said.



Traditional healer Martha Muiymane digs for plant roots while her colleagues Marilyn McDowell and Shaun Manyaliso discuss the plants they discovered. **PICTURE: BARRY BATEMAN**

Some of the plant species observed on the Salvokop have significant medicinal value. They include the Bushman poison bulb, doll's powder puff, African potato, dwarf mobola and wild carrot.

Third-year Wits zoology student Dawn Cory Toussaint said she heard about the relocation and thought it was a "cool opportunity to collect some spider and reptile specimens". Cory Toussaint had a backpack

filled with jars containing spiders, geckos and insects she had collected. "If I don't collect them they will be killed. It's exciting to find something new that I haven't seen before. I hope I find snakes," she laughed.

