

PRESS RELEASE for launch of SARCA – Kirstenbosch, 10 May 2005

A four-year conservation assessment programme – aimed at identifying reptile species threatened by extinction in South Africa – was launched today at Kirstenbosch Gardens in Cape Town. The event was attended by Holly Dublin, chairperson of the World Conservation Union's (IUCN) Species Survival Commission, Brian Huntley the CEO of the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), and a range of other prominent members of the conservation community.

“We know very little about the conservation status of reptiles, despite the fact that South Africa has an extremely rich reptile fauna – over 360 species from 22 families. This information is essential for identifying priorities for conservation action, which are likely to include regulation of collection for the pet trade and minimising habitat loss”, said Kristal Maze, Biodiversity, Policy and Planning Director of the South African Biodiversity Institute (SANBI).

SARCA – the Southern African Reptile Conservation Assessment – hopes to rectify this. Funded and developed by the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), the project will be driven by experts from South African universities, museums, conservation agencies and the Herpetological Association of Africa (HAA). SARCA intends to engage the public to help in describing the distribution of all reptile species in the country.

“The last time any attempt was made to record the distribution of South Africa's reptiles in a co-ordinated way was 16 years ago. Many new species have since been discovered and there is an extreme shortage of information on these and several other species that are most in need of conservation management. It is clear that a new conservation assessment is critical for the conservation of reptiles in South Africa,” said Professor Graham Alexander, a prominent reptile researcher at Wits University and editor of *African Journal of Herpetology*.

Reptiles include turtles, tortoises, lizards, snakes and crocodiles. This varied group has an important impact on ecosystems – most reptiles are predators, which can help to control the populations of pest species such as rats, mice, mosquitoes, flies, and termites.

South Africa has about five times more reptile species than would be expected for a country this size, and many of them endemic (found only in South Africa). South Africa has the third highest number of lizard species in the world, after Australia and Mexico.

The Avian Demography Unit (ADU) at the University of Cape Town will co-ordinate the project, which involves gathering thousands of records of reptile sightings from all over South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland. The ADU has previously successfully atlased the birds and frogs of Southern Africa, and this has proved invaluable for SANBI, which has a mandate from the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism to monitor and plan for the conservation of South Africa's biodiversity.

Holly Dublin, chairperson of the World Conservation Union's (IUCN) Species Survival Commission, commended South Africa for carrying out the SARCA project according to internationally accepted criteria, developed by IUCN. South Africa is a signatory of the international Convention on Biodiversity, and proper monitoring and assessment are essential if it is to meet its international obligations, and comply with the biodiversity legislation of the country.

“It is astonishing how much valuable and useful information can be gathered by the public if their contributions are organized appropriately,” said James Harrison, SARCA Project Coordinator at the ADU. “The bird and frog atlas projects proved this, and I believe that the wildlife enthusiasts of South Africa will support SARCA in the same way.”

The public can help in this task by taking digital photographs of any reptiles they see, and submitting them to the project – together with accurate locality information of course. Photos that are good enough to allow identification of the species will become part of a “virtual museum collection” of photographic specimens, available for inspection on the project's website. For details on how to participate, visit the project website at www.saherps.net.

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What is SARCA?

SARCA is the Southern African Reptile Conservation Assessment, a project to describe the distribution of all the reptile species in South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland, and to assess their conservation status. SARCA will run for four years, 2005–2008.

Who is responsible for SARCA?

The South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) is providing core funding and logistical support for SARCA. SARCA is the first major project on fauna (animals) being undertaken by SANBI since its transformation from the former NBI (National Botanical Institute). SANBI is a statutory body under the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, charged to monitor and report on the status of biodiversity in South Africa and help the South African government meet the requirements of the international Convention on Biological Diversity, to which South Africa is a signatory, and to implement provisions of the new *National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act* of 2004 (NEMBA).

SARCA is to be coordinated from the Avian Demography Unit (ADU) at the University of Cape Town. The ADU is the research unit that successfully coordinated the bird and frog atlas projects. The methods and skills developed for birds and frogs will now be applied to reptiles.

What is a conservation assessment?

A conservation assessment describes the status of species and identifies those species which are threatened with extinction. Conservation assessments are carried out according to internationally accepted criteria, developed by the World Conservation Union (IUCN). They provide the baseline information needed to do conservation planning and to prioritize particular species for conservation action.

Why reptiles?

Reptiles are the only group of vertebrates that have not recently undergone a conservation assessment in South Africa. Mammals, amphibians and birds were done relatively recently, and a process is underway for freshwater fish. The previous conservation assessment for reptiles was done in 1988, and is now very out of date.

South Africa has an exceptionally rich reptile fauna with more than 360 species in 22 families. This is approximately five times as many species as one would expect based on land area alone. South Africa has more lizard species than almost any other country in the world, with the exception of Australia and Mexico. A high proportion (>35%) of our reptile species are endemic to the country, that is, they are found nowhere else in the world.

Reptiles include turtles, tortoises, lizards, snakes and crocodiles. While tortoises are herbivores, most other reptiles are predators. As predators, reptiles play an important role in ecosystems by preying on abundant species, including species that may become pests, such as rats, mice, flies, ants and termites.

Can the public help SARCA?

Yes! Members of the public can participate in SARCA by taking digital photographs of wild reptiles and submitting these to the project, together with accurate locality information. Photos that are good enough to allow identification of the species will become part of a “virtual museum collection” of photographic specimens, available for inspection on the project’s website. For details on how to participate, visit the project website at www.saherps.net.

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