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In a salute to the last Knysna elephant, this South African NGO established a 50,000-hectare biodiversity corridor

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www.jacquesmarais.co.za/SONY

The Eden to Addo Corridor traverses seven mountain ranges and five biomes. Credit: Jacques Marais.

In 2003, Joan Berning—an environmentalist and entrepreneur—had a visionary idea. She wanted to create a biodiversity corridor spanning several thousand hectares (ha) of South Africa to connect three of its most significant parks, the Garden Route National Park, Baviaanskloof World Heritage Site, and Addo Elephant National Park. Today, the Eden to Addo Corridor Initiative protects about 50,000 ha of South Africa, reestablishing connectivity and ecosystem functioning from Eden in the west to Addo in the east.

Ultimately, the initiative aims to formally declare all sections of the corridor, which would bring the total protected area to 100,000 ha.

The initiative—a funding dependent Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) now chaired by Berning—was inspired partly by the last remaining Knysna elephant, the only free roaming elephant in South Africa. Elephants are ancient path makers and their migratory routes have always been vital to other species, but conflicts with human settlements in the 1900s led them to be hunted into near extinction. The Eden to Addo Corridor Initiative aims to facilitate free movement of all species by combatting landscape fragmentation and restoring the integrity of biodiversity in the region.

While conservationists have long protected individual tracts of land through parks, reserves, and other protected areas, research demonstrates that interconnected protected areas lead to far more resilient ecosystems. This is especially important in the face of climate change. Fully functional ecosystems, where plant, animal, and soil systems are not disrupted by human activities such as agriculture, have the greatest positive climate impact.

Stretching from verdant forested coastline to arid plains, the ecotones of the Eden to Addo Corridor create a mosaic, encompassing five different biomes with biodiversity hotspots, red-list species, and threatened ecosystems. It spans afrotemperate forests; the fynbos shrubland; the desert biome Succulent Karoo; the woodland Albany thickets; and the xeric shrubland Nama-Karoo.

The initiative's primary goal is to assist and engage landowners and other stakeholders in identifying and developing a living corridor. It aims to link ecologically important areas by applying sound land-use practices and encouraging sustainable livelihoods through ecotourism. The NGO focuses on long-term impact by declaring land within the corridor as nature reserves or protected environments. This ensures that the areas remain intact even if a landowner sells or bequeaths the property. It works closely with landowners to respect and value their knowledge of the land and to foster a collaborative and respectful culture.



Hikers climb a mountainous trail in the Eden to Addo Corridor. Credit Jacques Marais.

The Eden to Addo Initiative's two flagship programs showcase its success. The Robberg Coastal Corridor, an 18-kilometer stretch of pristine coastal land, links the Robberg Nature Reserve in the east to the Garden Route National Park in the west. The newly established Inqua Trail traverses this corridor, allowing hikers to enjoy the magnificent coastline and unique paleontological features. It also created new sustainable jobs in the community, earning it a CapeNature Best Stewardship Site award.

The Langkloof Corridor, spanning 21 kilometers, connects the Baviaanskloof World Heritage Site to the Formosa Nature Reserve, which further links to the Garden Route National Park. The 400-kilometer Eden to Addo Great Corridor hike traverses this, and other corridors, to raise awareness and funds for

conservation. The Langkloof Corridor is a nature reserve, while the Robberg Coastal Corridor is a protected environment.

As fences are removed across the South-African landscape, degraded land naturally rehabilitates and species flourish. The Eden to Addo Initiative measures its success by conducting regular biodiversity audits and annual or bi-annual management audits. These help track ecosystem intactness and ensure that landowners are acting on the management plans they commit to.

In coming years, the initiative will play an important role in South Africa's commitment to the United Nations Global Biodiversity Framework, which aims to protect and conserve 30 percent of land and sea area by 2030. Establishing ecological corridors, mainstreaming sustainable land-use and stewardship practices, and fostering community engagement are core to this mission.

The Eden to Addo Corridor Initiative stands as a testament to the power of visionary thinking and collaboration in preserving and restoring biodiversity. Through its commitment to creating natural corridors, engaging with landowners, and adhering to a strong code of ethics, the initiative has successfully protected vast areas of South Africa. Moving forward, it remains dedicated to its mission and actively contributes to global efforts to conserve and restore ecosystems for future generations and all living systems.

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