

What is the Grassland Biome?

Biomes are regions that share similar ecological and climatic characteristics. The Grassland Biome, covering roughly a third of the country and occurring mainly across 6 provinces, is the largest of South Africa's 9 biomes.

Grasslands cover almost one third of South Africa's land surface, stretching from the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, over the high escarpment and onto the central plateau of the country. They extend across the boundaries of seven provinces, spanning a complex array of socio-economic situations and landuse contexts. Although the bulk of grassland landscapes fall into the 'Grassland Biome' (see image to the right), there are also patches of grassland vegetation that occur elsewhere in the country, forming a mosaic with other vegetation types in other biomes, such as the Indian Ocean Coastal Belt (along the coast of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal).

Grassland – a biodiversity asset underpinning SA's economy



South Africa's grasslands are a remarkable and irreplaceable biodiversity asset of global significance.

In South Africa, grassland plant diversity is second only to that of the Fynbos Biome and grassland ecosystems are home to a large number of the country's rare, endangered and endemic animal species (see the Grasslands at a glance section below).

Grasslands are critically important water production landscapes and also provide the natural resources and ecological infrastructure that supports most of South Africa's important economic activities, and millions of rural livelihoods.

Grasslands at a Glance

The majority of South Africa's grassy vegetation types occur in the Grassland Biome, although 'grassland' is also found in small patches forming a mosaic with other vegetation types in other biomes. The Grassland Biome is:

- The 2nd largest of South Africa's nine biomes, covering nearly 30% of the country's land surface area.
- A rich store of biodiversity assets, including 52 of South Africa's 122 important bird areas, almost one third of the country's 107 threatened butterflies, 15 of its endemic mammals and nearly 3,500 plant species.
- A region of global significance that is also home to 3 natural and cultural World Heritage Sites – the Cradle of Humankind, the Vredefort Dome and the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park – and five Ramsar wetlands of international importance.
- An important water production landscape, containing 42 river ecosystems and most of the country's threatened wetland ecosystem types; 5 of South Africa's major river systems that have their headwaters in grasslands. Nearly half of the country's Strategic Water Source Areas are in the Grassland Biome.
- Home to South Africa's economic heartland: Grasslands support the cultivation of 60% of South Africa's commercial crops and 50% of subsistence croplands; 44% of the country's cattle and 32% of its sheep find their nourishment in grasslands; more than 40 % of all mining activities and 92 % of commercial plantation forestry takes place in grasslands, and 40% of the country's human population live in grassland landscapes.
- One of the most at-risk of South Africa's biomes: more than 40% of it has already been irreversibly modified, 60% of remaining grassland is considered to be threatened and less than 3% of it is under formal protection. Grassland is also considered to face the greatest risk of significant change due to climate change.

Grasslands are a valuable national asset, and their protection, enhancement and sustainable use should be a national priority. In addition to their own intrinsic value, grasslands are a valuable yet vulnerable source of natural solutions to the challenges posed by poverty, unemployment, and climate change. Their rich store of biodiversity, diverse ecosystems and abundant ecological infrastructure provides the foundation for economic growth, social development and human well-being.

Grasslands under pressure



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