

1.3 AT6 Sundays Thicket

This vegetation is protected statutorily in AENP, Groendal Wilderness Area as well as in Swartkops Valley and Springs Nature Reserve (Mucina & Rutherford 2006). This include lower Sundays River Valley to east of Colchester and northwards to the base of the Zuurberg Mountains. The local dominance of *Portulacaria afra* increases and the relative abundance of woody species present decreases with increasing aridity. There is structural heterogeneity within this vegetation unit. Vlok & Euston-Brown (2002) classify this vegetation under the Sundays Spekboomveld.

STEP (Vlok & Euston-Brown 2002): Sundays Spekboomveld

There is a negative correlation between the relative abundance of *Portulacaria afra* and those of *Euphorbia coerulescens*, which occurs sporadically in this unit. The species present in the Sundays Spekboomveld and its general structure does not differ much from those of the Sundays Noorsveld, with the obvious difference in having Spekboom dominant in most areas. There is, however, a slight shift in the tree component present with *Pappea capensis* and *Schotia afra* usually more abundant and *Acacia karoo* absent in the Spekboomveld. Even when the Spekboom component has been removed completely by overgrazing, *Acacia karoo* is only rarely able to establish on the open slopes where the Spekboom use to occur. *Euphorbia coerulescens* is, however, able to establish in the sites where the Spekboom has been removed. When in a pristine condition the Spekboomveld also contain an abundance of *Crassula ovata*, but it disappears rapidly with the Spekboom when this unit is overgrazed. The perennial grass component (*Cenchrus ciliaris*, *Digitaria argyrograpta*, *Fingerhuthia africana*, *Panicum maximum*, etc.) is also well developed here when this vegetation is pristine. When degraded only the woody trees remain in a matrix consisting of a few karroid shrubs (e.g. *Pentzia incana* and the alien weed *Atriplex lindleyi*), annual grasses (e.g. *Aristida congesta*, *Cynodon dactylon* and *Enneapogon desvauxii*) and a few resilient herbaceous species such as *Sansevieria aethiopica*. The latter species is a useful indicator of sites where the Sundays Spekboomveld once occurred, especially where it has been degraded over vast areas.