

THE MAKING OF A LEGACY

No one has contributed more to the conservation of South Africa's exceptionally rich succulent flora than Leslie Hill. His long association with and passion for the remarkable flora of the winter rainfall region of South Africa is reflected in the conservation legacy he has left to future generations. Born in Claremont, Cape Town in 1908, he was educated first at the South African College Schools and later at the University of Cape Town where he graduated with a commerce degree in 1930. Following the completion of his articles, Leslie Hill worked as an accountant for several local firms before becoming group accountant with the Grovesnor group of companies in 1939. After his service in the Second World War and together with several other local businessmen, Leslie Hill was afforded the opportunity to acquire and later transform the core asset of Grovesnor Consolidated Motors into a large and prosperous company. A distinguished business career over many decades followed in association with other well-known Capetonians, Frank Robb and Hans Middleman.

In the last two decades Leslie Hill contributed generously to his two main interests. The first contribution, still little-known, was accomplished via the Leslie Hill Higher Education Trust. This trust, established in 1981, was established for the purpose of providing support to students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those living in the Western Cape. Over the years a staggering 350 students, pursuing studies at local universities, technicians and teacher's training colleges, have benefited from this generosity.

The second contribution was to a cluster of strategic initiatives that will have a lasting impact on the conservation of the flora of the fynbos and the succulent Karoo. Leslie contributed generously to the establishment of several institutions dedicated to the cultivation, research and conservation of the flora of these two internationally-recognized biodiversity 'hotspots'. His long-standing interest and passion for succulents of the Karoo stems from his association with horticulturalists and taxonomists, such as Harry Hall, Piet van Heerde and Carl and Hilmar Luckhoff, whom he often accompanied during their collecting trips in the 1950s. Leslie was a trustee of the National Botanical Gardens from 1963 to 1972 and also served on the Council of the Botanical Society for more than a decade. His involvement with Kirstenbosch continued throughout his life and he gave generously to the development of the conservatory (glasshouse) at Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens. A section of the conservatory, called the Leslie Hill Stone Plant House and dedicated to the cultivation of leaf succulents (primarily vygies), commemorates this gift.

The University of Cape Town received a substantial endowment from Leslie Hill in 1991, used to establish the Leslie Hill Chair in Plant Conservation. The Leslie Hill Institute for Plant Conservation (with the Chair as its Director), established in 1992, was an obvious development and has made a significant impact on the conservation of the fynbos and Succulent Karoo Biome in its ten years of existence. Staff from the institute contribute substantially to the teaching and research life of the university, particularly within the Department of Botany. The development of several noteworthy

conservation-planning initiatives under the institute's first director, Professor Richard Cowling, stems directly from this endowment.

Aware of the threats facing the flora of the succulent Karoo, Leslie Hill also established the Leslie Hill Succulent Karoo Trust in 1995. This trust, administered by the World Wide Fund for Nature-South Africa, is dedicated to the creation of a conservation network for the flora of the Succulent Karoo Biome. This semi-desert with over 5 000 plant species, many of which are succulent, has been poorly conserved. Since its creation, the Trust has contributed to the purchasing of nearly 100 000 ha of land in the more critically threatened areas. These include the purchase of land for the Namaqua National Park, the Addo Elephant National Park, the Anysberg Nature Reserve and several other areas in the Little Karoo. Because of Leslie's foresight and careful planning, this trust will have a significant impact on the conservation of the succulent Karoo biome for decades.

Leslie Hill's most recent major contribution to the conservation of the flora of South Africa has been the establishment, in 2000, of the Leslie Hill Molecular Systematics Laboratory at the National Botanical Institute's Kirstenbosch Research Centre. Dedicated to the study of the phylogenetic systematics of the flora of the winter rainfall region of South Africa, the researchers working in the laboratory have already made significant contributions to an understanding of the evolutionary relationships of some of the region's unique plant groups.

These contributions have recently been acknowledged by the international community. In 1999 he became the first individual worldwide to be recognized as having made a Gift to the Earth in line with the World Wide Fund for Nature's Living Planet Campaign. He has also recently been acknowledged locally by receiving the South African College Schools Spectemur Agendo Award 2000, which recognized him as one of South Africa's leading succulent growers and conservationists. As a dedicated gardener, he assembled remarkable collections of both succulents (his first love), and unusual shrubs, initially at Bosheuvel on Wynberg Hill and later at Simonsvlei, Constantia. It was at Simonsvlei that he indulged in his passion for waterfowl, providing a sanctuary for several dozen local and exotic duck species. Leslie was also a keen collector of fine art and built up an outstanding collection of South African art during the course of his lifetime.

Leslie Hill's generosity and visionary approach will impact the field of plant conservation for many years to come. Although he was a self-effacing man who shunned publicity, future generations will look back on his philanthropy and foresight with gratitude and admiration. It is with great sadness that we note the passing of someone who has made such a marvelous contribution.

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