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Toyota Enviro Outreach makes single biggest contribution to International **DNA Project**

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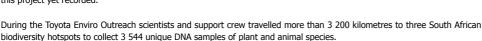
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3 544 unique DNA samples beats goal of 1 500 unique samples set at start of project

The Toyota Enviro Outreach, which set out on 21 September in support of an ambitious international DNA project, was concluded this week after making the single biggest contribution to this project yet recorded.



These samples are collected as part of the International Barcode of Life project (iBOL), which has set the ambitious goal of identifying and collecting the DNA codes (referred to as barcodes) for all living species. The information gathered will be stored in an international open source database called the Barcode of Life Database, or BOLD.

South Africa plays key role

As part of this project South Africa has committed to collecting the DNA of 20 000 species by April 2011 and a further 40 000 species by April 2013. South Africa is widely regarded as one of the most important role players in this project, partly due to its rich natural heritage and partly because the University of Johannesburg's Professor Michelle van der Bank was responsible for identifying the matK-gene, which is used as identifier for all plant species' DNA.

"We are truly proud of the contribution that South Africa and this group of 17 scientists have made during the 2010 Toyota Enviro Outreach," says project leader Gerhard Groenewald of the Klipbokkop 4x4 Academy in the Western Cape.

"By offering 3 544 species to the international DNA project, scientists collected more than 10 000 individual plant, animal and insect species over the two and a half week period. This is widely regarded the single biggest contributions to this project to date."

iBOL to protect biodiversity

Professor Van der Bank, of the Department of Botany and Plant Biotechnology at UJ, explains that the project offers a multitude of benefits to South Africa and the world in general. "The collection of DNA will support and speed up scientific research and traditional taxonomic descriptions of species. It will also allow us to better monitor the illegal trade of plant and animal species, while at the same time building the national collection of species for future generations.

According to Prof. van der Bank the team already identified several unique plant and animal species during the Toyota Enviro Outreach. The team consisted of specialists in fields as diverse as insects, birds, fish and plants and was led by the University of Johannesburg with the support of the University of Guelph in Canada.

The Toyota Enviro Outreach travelled to the Succulent Karoo, the Cape Floristic Region and the Maputuland-Pondoland-Albany region, which are listed amongst 34 biodiversity hot spots around the world that scientists will focus on as part of the 2010 celebrations of the Year of Biodiversity.

"For me the most wonderful experience was how people from different backgrounds and experiences can work as a group to achieve a common goal. The spirit and enthusiasm was fantastic. Special thanks must go to Gerhard and Elmarie Groenewald and their team; without the logistic support and constant encouragement we would never have achieved our goals," says Prof. Van der Bank.

Toyota committed to the Enviro Outreach

Toyota South Africa Motors (TSAM) supported the 2010 Toyota Enviro Outreach by providing the vehicles and financial support required to make the project a reality. It was the tenth year of the Enviro Outreach under the management of Groenewald and his team.

"I do not think that anyone expected the team of scientists to reach the milestones that they had, nor did anyone initially realise the importance of their work. I believe will change as South African scientists continue with this project in future.

"We are thankful to be a part of this project as the protection of the environment, as ensconced in the Toyota Earth

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The Toyota Enviro Outreach was sponsored by TSAM and supported by Cape Nature, Sanparks, the University of Johannesburg and the University of Guelph in Canada.

Read more about the Enviro Outreach on www.toyotaoutreach.com. More information on the iBOL project and the BOLD database is available on http://ibol.org.

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