Livestock farming is the largest agricultural sector in South Africa, generating over R6.7 billion annually. Despite the size of this industry, red meat consumption outstrips production by 15%, making South Africa a net importer of red meat. Commercial farmers supply 95% of the red meat market in the country. Farmers on communal lands own 47% of the country’s livestock, but only 5% of the formal market comes from these smaller farming operations.

Red meat is primarily produced in the grassland and semi-arid shrub-land regions of the country, which fall within two of the three South African Biodiversity Hotspots: the Succulent Karoo and Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany Hotspots. These are areas with remarkably high levels of plant endemism as well as significant transformation. When well managed, livestock farming can be a highly conservation-compatible land-use, and thus supporting farmers to implement sustainable farming practices that restore and maintain healthy ecosystems can have far-reaching biodiversity and livelihood impacts.

Conservation South Africa’s (CSA) Meat Naturally Initiative works across all levels of the red meat supply chain to promote sustainable farming practices. CSA aims to create a positive enabling environment from government and industry; to facilitate awareness and skills development of good environmental practice amongst the country’s communal and private farmers, and to educate the retailer and the consumer on making choices that will promote healthy environments in their meat purchasing. The ultimate aim of the initiative is to support the production of red meat that is sustainable, traceable, and tasty; produced in a way that supports people and nature from farm gate to consumer’s plate.
**NAMAQUALAND DEMONSTRATION**

Namaqualand in the Northern Cape Province; with its big sky and beautiful open spaces; draws people from all corners of the globe to view its beauty and seasonal floral extravaganza. Despite the picture perfect landscapes, for much of the year living off the land is a hardship. For more than 2000 years goat and sheep farming has been one of the few livelihood options in the harsh regional conditions, and this activity has shaped much of the Namaqualand landscape and culture. With limited land and water and an already severe climate, communal farmers grazing practices have over the years led to degraded lands that reduce income generating potential from farming. Private farmers have more extensive lands, but loss of livestock from predation has resulted in the use of indiscriminate control measures such as traps and poisons that have had a disastrous impact on not only leopard, jackal, and caracal populations, but also on non-predatory animals such as bat-eared fox, duiker, and even tortoises!

The Meat Naturally Initiative pilots innovative ways to assist farmers with obstacles like predator conflict, unemployment, erosion, farm management, poor soil conditions and access to water. Collaboratively, it was identified that one of the most effective farming techniques is still the tradition of shepherding – staying with your animals and managing where, what and how much they eat. In response, CSA initiated a job creation programme called the Ecoranger Programme: where traditional herding techniques are applied to support environmental management and monitoring. Namaqua Ecorangers use GPS technology to take stock of species and veld condition, minimising stock loss to predators and preventing overgrazing or trampling of sensitive areas like wetlands. Currently, 11 previously unemployed people have been placed on farms and live in the veld with the livestock, acting as a deterrent to predators. At the same time CSA captures data sent from the Ecorangers, recording information on poisonous plants, predator movements, state of water infrastructure, condition of grazing lands and much more. This information is analyzed by our scientists and fed back to farmers to implement any adaptive management plans that may be necessary.

**UMZIMVUBU DEMONSTRATION**

The Upper Mzimvubu Catchment in the foothills of the Southern Drakensberg in the Eastern Cape is a landscape of rolling grassland patchworked with large wetland networks and small pockets of endangered mist belt forest. The total area of the Upper Mzimvubu catchment has over 30,000 ha of critical wetlands that feed aquifers and supply water to more than 1 million downstream rural users. Over 70% of the land in the entire catchment is under communal land tenure and was historically part of the Transkei Homelands. Damage from past overgrazing, combined with a shortage of skills on appropriate restoration management strategies has led to ever-increasing amounts of exposed bare ground, and consequently erosion, less water infiltration, and sedimentation of downstream water infrastructure. In addition, uncontrolled alien vegetation has significantly reduced water flow and available grazing land.

In this landscape, the Meat Naturally Initiative aims to improve the quality of the fodder availability and biodiversity composition of grasslands in an initial 18,000 ha of target communal rangelands, through clearing aliens as well as through transforming the grazing pattern from one of open access and annual burning to one of controlled seasonal rotation and reduced burning regime. The project has strong support from the community: as of 2014 planned grazing is being implemented in six villages with 48 Ecorangers. Communities have seen benefits beyond just job creation – rotational grazing has already proven to produce healthier cattle, allowing them to access formal markets to sell their animals.

**CREATING A RED MEAT REVOLUTION**

CSA knows that food security and rangeland health are crucial for South Africa’s future. As such, CSA is also working at industry level and with national government to embed environmental management into regulation and supply guidelines for red meat. As a first step, CSA partnered with SA National Biodiversity Institute and WWF-SA to develop a National Standard for Veld-Raised Red Meat which consolidates the environmental laws of the country that are relevant for South African farmers into a single, simplified code. CSA is now working to support various producers and the government to consider how best to integrate this information into their production protocols and labeling. By basing our landscape interventions around the Veld-Raised Standard we hope that sustainably produced red meat from Namaqualand and Umzimvubu will generate a new model of environmental, ethical and sustainable production standards applied in the farming process.