

History of the Overberg and southern Cape Forests

(pre-modern history to 1795)

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Pre-modern history

The Outeniqua region was inhabited by the Khoi (Hottentots) and San (Bushmen), collectively known as Khoisan, who lived off the land for thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans. The San were semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers. They occasionally visited the forests, but did not dwell in or exploit them. Groups of San hunters occasionally smoked animals out of the forests during hunts, and this could have been the cause of some forest fires in the past which possibly contributed to the fragmentation of the forests. The Khoi people were pastoralists and frequently burned the veld to obtain grazing for their cattle. The coastal plains and forests teemed with wildlife, including large numbers of elephants and buffalo. Khoisan hunters had a small impact on the wildlife due to their small numbers and primitive weapons. When the Europeans arrived, the clans gradually disintegrated, and ended up in the employment of farmers. The densely forested Tsitsikamma region further to the east remained sparsely inhabited until the late nineteenth century. A thinly scattered Khoi population known as Strandlopers (*Beachcombers*) lived in caves along the rugged coast (Van der Merwe, 2002).

1630-1795

The first known Europeans to inhabit the area were a group of Portuguese seamen that were stranded in Plettenberg Bay (*then known as Bahia Formosa*) when their ship the Sao Goncalo was wrecked in 1630. The survivors lived in the Piesang Valley for 8 months, and were the first Europeans on record to cut wood from the southern Cape forests. The wood was used for the construction of huts, a church and the building of two small boats. They planted seeds and harvested it, and lived off rice and other supplies found in the wreckage whilst their boats were being built. They also exchanged metal for sheep and cattle with the indigenous Khoi people. The survivors praised the fertility of the soil, and also the wealth of wood, fresh water and wildlife (Sleigh, 1993).

The Dutch knew about the Overberg forests as early as the seventeenth century. During his journey in October 1688, Simon van der Stel travelled through the kloof between the Bergrivier and Sonderend River. He visited the forests at the last mentioned river, and saw that it was well supplied with timber. During the following year Isaak Schrijver travelled south of the Langeberg Mountains, and noticed that the mountains were overgrown with huge forests in the area of the current Swellendam (Appel, 1966).

The closing of the Mauritius outpost in 1709 dried up the small supply of timber and wagon-making wood from that area and aggravated the existing problem in the Cape. The natural Cape forests like those in Hout Bay, 't Paradijs (*Newlands*) and De Hel was mostly worked out, and the European trees that were planted by Simon and W.A. van der Stel among others were too young to utilize (Sleigh, 1993).

The "Politieke Raad" held a meeting on 11 March 1710 in order to discuss the condition of the Cape wood supplies. All members of the "Raad" were asked to report on possible solutions to combat the wood shortage in the Cape. Captain Adolf Jan van der Laan and merchant Willem van Putten, who personally visited the forests, reported that there was enough firewood. Landdrost S.M. de Meurs and master gardener Jan Hartogh told about various indigenous forests occurring east of the Hottentots Holland Mountains which contained good trees that could be used for timber, construction wood, wagon-making wood and also firewood. A short report from the burgher Andreas Finger, who travelled through the southern Cape as a soldier whilst on official trading expeditions, was also submitted. He knew about the occurrence of large tracts of forests at the Sonderend River, "Outeniqualand" (*George and Knysna*) and "Gamtouwerland" (*Tsitsikamma forest*) (Sleigh, 1993).

These reports, however, were not the results of thorough investigation. It was necessary to get the correct facts before the exploitation of these areas could commence (Appel, 1966). At the same meeting of 11 March 1710, Van der Laan and Van Putten were appointed to inspect and explore the forests found further inland. In the report, they firstly mentioned “Land van Waveren” (*Tulbagh*) as a place where a good quantity of different wood-types could be found and that felled wood could be fetched by wagons. They also mentioned the Sonderend River where good timber and wagon-making wood could be obtained for a good number of years. But the wood would have to be transported overland to the Cape over rivers and mountains where there were no roads as there was no appropriate port. The nearest forests were situated a number of miles from the sea. Moreover, the wood could not be floated downstream as it was too heavy. It would not have been worth it to acquire the wood with small river vessels (Appel, 1966; Sleigh, 1993). In view of these problems, the “Politieke Raad” decided not to further investigate the possibility of water transport until a better method could be found (Appel, 1966).

The “Raad” again appointed Van Putten and master gardener Jan Hartogh to thoroughly inspect the Sonderend River forests on 13 April 1711. They had to report on the distances, wood types, transport issues etc. They handed in their report on 16 March 1712, and reported on two forests in the area, a small forest and large forest. Van Putten and Hartogh crossed the Sonderend River at ‘t Ziekenhuijs (*Het Ziekenhuis*) and reached the small forest in 2 hours. It contained various timber and wagon-making wood trees, such as “Geel Assegaeije wit, en roodt Peere Elsen Ijser, en Stink houte bomen...” Most trees were 12, 2 to 15, 2 m (40-50 feet) high, with a width of 25, 4 to 76, 2 cm (10-30 inch). It was thus very suitable for the sawing of 8” × 10” and 10” × 12” beams, as well as other size beams. If the Company should use this forest, the waste-wood could be used for crossbars, spars and purlins. There was a perennial river near the forest where a water-driven saw mill could be established. The forest was about 3 to 4 hours travel on horseback in circumference and almost all the trees grew in ravines. According to Van Putten and Hartogh wagons should be able to reach the small forest easily. From ‘t Ziekenhuijs they travelled an hour and a half and went through another drift. After another hour they were at the entry point of the kloof where the large forest stood. It seemed about four times bigger than the small forest, and contained the same tree types. It was also easily accessible for wagons and had various suitable places for the establishment of more than one saw mill. They also mentioned that all the wagons needed at the Cape could eventually be made here. It could then transport a load of wood to the Cape, after which the oxen were driven back to repeat the process. It was predicted that it would provide wood to the VOC for 100 years (it did not even provide for 50 years) (Appel, 1966; Sleigh, 1993). Furthermore, Van Putten and Hartogh made a few recommendations. To make transport easier, the best woodcutters, blacksmiths and wagon makers should be placed at the small forest as it was the nearest forest to the Cape. If a Company’s outpost should be established in the Overberg, the small forest would be the best place for it. A master woodcutter and deputy, with 10 or more woodcutters could look after the post. Their first task should be the preparation of timber for the building of a saw mill (Appel, 1966; Sleigh, 1993).

Governors W. Helot (1711-1714) and M.P. de Chavonnes (1714-1724) abandoned the task, afraid of the Hottentots Holland Mountain, which stood like a wall between the Cape and the forests. Transport issues made the exploitation of the forests impossible, and the need for wood needed to be more demanding and more serious before a solution was required (Sleigh, 1993). In the meantime, some colonists settled in this region to make a living out of wagon-building. However, they could hardly earn their food. That was the reason almost nobody requested permission to fell wood in these forests. If there was any benefit, permission would often have been requested in light of the shortage of wood according to the Governor (Appel, 1966).

In 1724, 12 years after Van Putten and Hartogh handed in their report on the Sonderend River forests and reported about the transport issues relating to timber extraction, a copy of the report was sent from the Netherlands to the Cape, with an order from the Lords XVII to Governor M.P. de Chavonnes to again

inspect the economic worth of the forests. Acting Governor J de la Fontaine received the letter, and Landdrost Martinus Bergh and Johan Tobias Rhenius were appointed to thoroughly investigate these forests (they also had to trade livestock and oxen). They handed in their report on 24 October 1725. Bergh and Rhenius left the Cape on 17 September 1725, and after their two wagons and baggage were carried over the Hottentots Holland Mountain, they drove over a very rocky road, over the Palmietrivier and Knoflokskraalrivier (*Kromrivier*), until they reached Houwhoek. From there, the wagons were restrained by the brakes while going downhill, until they reached Botrivier. Later, at “Jan Boontjes Craal” (*Boontjieskraal*) drift, they also crossed the Swarte Rivier (*Swartrivier*), and reached “Warme Water” (*Caledon*) where the people and cattle rested. Thereafter they crossed the Sergeantsrivier (*Serjeants River*) and reached the Sonderend River on 26 September and crossed it at “Ganze Craal” (*Ganskraal, the closest drift to the forests*). A few days were spent here trading cattle before they visited the forest on 1 October. There was a 300-step grass embankment/hill which separated the large forest from the smaller forest. Both these forests were located in kloofs against the mountain slopes and had an abundance of high and thick trees such as yellowwood, assegai, white pear, red pear, hard pear, ironwood, stinkwood etc. Bergh and Rhenius mentioned that, if these trees were located at a more suitable place or closer to the Cape, it could have been used for timber and wagon-making wood, and would have been very useful for the VOC (Appel, 1966; Sleigh, 1993).

With regard to the transport possibilities, the report was extremely unfavorable. The road over the Hottentots Holland Mountain and Houwhoek was virtually impassable for wagons. From the river to the forests it was relatively bad. The possibility of transporting the wood down the river was slim. There were many rocky outcrops in the middle, and many water accelerations occurred after the river’s junction with the Breede River, where the water poured high onto the underlying rocks. This would have crushed everything. Most of the indigenous wood-types were too heavy to float. Another issue was the large amount of oxen needed to drag the wood out of the forests. During that time the Company had an oxen shortage. In the future they could no longer depend on the trade with the nearby Hottentots (Khoi) as the latter’s cattle died in large numbers. In addition, they were robbed by Bushmen (San). The Hottentot population was also largely obliterated by the smallpox epidemic of 1713. With all these issues taken into account, the transportation of the wood, according to Bergh and Rhenius, would be very difficult and a financial loss for the VOC. The main obstacle in the exploitation of the Sonderend River forests was therefore the transportation problem (Appel, 1966; Sleigh, 1993).

Meanwhile, timber that had come from the outpost Rio de Lagoa (*Mozambique*), established in 1721, was exported to the Netherlands to be tested as a trade item, but the quality was so poor that it could only be sold as firewood. Attempts by the Post holder at Rio de Lagoa to find wagon-making wood further inland was prevented by the indigenous people (Sleight, 1993).

In 1726, about 8 months after the (then) acting Governor J de la Fontaine had reported to the Lords XVII about the difficulty of transporting wood from the Sonderend River forests to the Cape, he none-the-less decided to establish an outpost at ‘t Ziekenhuijs close to the Sonderend River. However, the main reason for the establishment of the outpost was for the cattle trade with the Khoi, and not specifically for wood extraction, furthermore it protected the Khoi and their cattle from thieves. The ‘t Ziekenhuijs outpost started to deliver semi-prepared wood to the Castle in Cape Town from 1728, and the population was enlarged from seven men to fifteen men. Apart from woodcutting and cattle trading, they also had to protect the forest from destruction and waste by the burghers (Sleight, 1993).

The directors of the VOC decided to utilize the Overberg forests as an alternative after what happened at the Rio de Lagoa outpost. The new Governor, P.G. Noodt (1727-1729), was asked by the “Raad” in 1727 to lay out a road (*with the use of explosives*) over the Hottentots Holland Mountains toward the strategic forests of the Sonderend River. After a very short visit, he reported that the transport distance was too

great, that the trees could only be taken out of the ravines with difficulty and that the road from the river to the forests was very bad. He was convinced that the VOC could not exploit the forests economically. Noodt's report was thus in stark contrast with the report of Van Putten and Hartogh in 1712 (Appel, 1966; Sleigh, 1993).

The authorities in the Netherlands were not pleased with Noodt. He failed to give detail about the transportation of wood from the Sonderend River to the Cape, and did not investigate the area thoroughly (Appel, 1966; Sleigh, 1993).

The VOC established another two outposts close to the Sonderend River called Zoetemelks Valleij and Tijgerhoek. The Zoetemelks Valleij outpost was established in 1727 and was situated on the northern side of the Sonderend River, about 3 km from 't Ziekenhuijs. Its main functions were seasonal cattle grazing, cattle trade, protection of the cattle, and woodcutting (*only at a later stage*). The Tijgerhoek outpost was established between 1727 and 1729 and was situated near the present day town of Riviersonderend. Its main functions were the preparation of wood from Oliphants Bosch (*only at a later stage*) and to manage a herd of milk cattle for the making of butter. All three outposts next to the Sonderend River were mostly under the control of one Post holder and were known under one single name, the Rivier zonder Eijnd (Burrows, 1994; Sleigh, 1993).

The new Governor J. de la Fontaine visited the "Outeniqualand" forests between 30 July and 5 August 1734. He was impressed by the size and number of trees, but also saw that it was no benefit for the VOC as the wood could not be transported to the Cape (Sleigh, 1993). European hunters and illegal cattle traders were close behind the tracks of the VOC. By 1730 the first "Trekboere" reached the eastern side of the Groot Brak River, and many were already settled along the south coast by the mid 1730's (Appel, 1966).

In view of this the Governor suggested to the "Politieke Raad" to give the settlers, who lived in the area of the Sonderend River forests, permission to cut wood for their own use. The VOC could then get an income from the permission letters that enabled burghers to cut wood. De la Fontaine's suggestion was accepted by the "Raad" in 1734, and the forests in the area of the Sonderend River were thus now placed under the control of the VOC. The burghers were now allowed cut timber and wagon-making wood in the forests for their own needs, provided they pay the specified fee for a permission letter (Appel, 1966).

The contact point for cattle trade with the Khoi was moved eastwards to a new outpost called Riet Valleij, next to the Buffeljagsrivier, in 1734. This outpost had the additional function to extract timber cut for poles, planks beams etc. from the Grootvadersbosch. This forest was located 5 hours on horseback to the west of the outpost, south of the Langeberg Mountain. One of the Post holder's tasks was to supply the Cape with semi-processed wood (Burrows, 1994; Sleigh, 1993).

Burghers were allowed to cut wood in the Sonderend River forests from September 1734, but because of waste and damage (they cut more wood than their permission letters allowed them to), the burghers were no longer allowed (prohibited) to cut wood from the forests from September 1741 onwards. In 1743 the settlers in the area complained to the Governor, and said that they were in desperate need of timber, they wanted to have permission to cut timber again. The "Politieke Raad" therefore lifted the ban in May 1743 and burghers in the area were once again allowed to cut timber and wagon-making wood in the forests (except for the forests in the area of the Rivier zonder Eijnd) for own use and to transport it from there. But it had to be done discreetly (Appel, 1966).

As time went by the VOC began to use the forests near the Sonderend River for its own benefit (Appel, 1966).

Exploitation of the surrounding indigenous forests in the Knysna area started around 1763 and continued for over 200 years.

Secunde J.W. Cloppenburg travelled through the Colony in October 1768 and made a few recommendations. The waste which he saw in the area of Swellendam made him very upset. He suggested that permission letters should no longer be issued for the cutting of wood in these forests anymore, except where the applicant could prove that he had planted a forest of Oak trees on or near his farm. The government should also take part in this. The naked ridges in front of the forests should be planted or sowed by the Landdrost with 'Bergeyken' or young trees from the forest two months before the start of winter (Appel, 1966).

At Grootvadersbosch, Cloppenburg observed that no new trees had been planted in the worked out areas since the VOC had started to exploit this forest 34 years previously, and that the woodcutters wasted a lot of wood with their messy working methods (Sleigh, 1993). Cloppenburg suggested that the Post holder at the Riet Valleij outpost should plant young trees from the forest and Oak trees on nearby hills and plains with lots of water in the area of Grootvadersbosch (Appel, 1966). There is no evidence available to show that these recommendations were followed. Between the Riet Valleij outpost and the forest were 4 burgher farms, and the Secunde recommended that the farms should be taken back by the VOC. The outpost could then oversee and protect the forest in a more effective way and keep burghers out of it (Sleigh, 1993).

When Cloppenburg visited "Outeniqualand" he was worried about the settlers' injudicious exploitation of the forests. The Secunde recommended that permission for the cutting of wood in "Outeniqualand" should only be given after 3 years and only to those who had planted a forest (3 morgen in size) of Oak trees or other usable trees. Cloppenburg believed that the woodcutting had to be regulated before the forests were destroyed. A caretaker over the area's forests was urgently needed (Appel, 1966).

The timber resources of the Cape were under significant pressure as early as the 1770's. Encouraged by VOC Governor Baron Joachim van Plettenberg, a Swedish naturalist, Carl Peter Thunberg, did a reconnaissance of the eastern and southern Cape in 1772 and produced reports of lush forests and an abundance of wildlife. Thunberg came via the Attaquaskloof Pass; linking the area around Mossel Bay with Kannaland in the vicinity of Oudtshoorn. The Attaquaskloof was used by elephants until the official pass was built (Plettenberg Bay, n.d.; SA Venues, n.d.).

During the 1770's permission was frequently given to burghers to cut 12 loads of timber and wagon-making wood east of the Hottentots Holland Mountain. J.S. Jurriaansz in 1772, A. Trouts in 1773 and H. Detlefs in 1774 got permission by the Governor. They were not allowed to cut wood in the Sonderend River forests. Permission letters needed to be first presented to the Landdrost in Swellendam. Records suggest that 9 permissions were given, which means that 108 loads were cut (Appel, 1966).

After the establishment of the Swellendam drostdy (*in 1747*) the VOC started to look at the forests of the Langeberg Mountains in order to provide for the local wood needs. Three forests were investigated. Two of them could be easily seen from the Landdrost's house, and the other forest, the so-called "wagen makers bos" was further up towards the Appelbosrivier. The other forests were not very attractive to the burghers, as they were only found high up in the smaller kloofs. The burghers in the area received permission letters that enabled them to cut 12 loads of timber, but without an added timeframe. As a result, lots of fraud, damage and waste occurred in the forests (Appel, 1966).

Anders Sparrman, a Swedish scientist and traveller, explored the southern Cape in 1775. He estimated the number of elephants at between 400 and 500, and noted that they had been driven into the forests by relentless hunting. He predicted that the establishment of a suitable port and the transportation of forest timber to Cape Town by sea would be more profitable, which turned out to be true. He also described the few Khoisan clans and hardy European pioneers, who by that time had already settled on the open coastal plains and in the forests at intervals of twelve to twenty miles. The farmers were generally wealthy, had many Khoisan servants, large herds of cattle and sturdy homes. Forest dwellers and the early woodcutters, on the other hand, were impoverished (Van der Merwe, 2002).

It seems that most woodcutting and waste that Cloppenburg saw in "Outeniqualand" during 1768 had taken place without the permission or knowledge of the Government. The first instance where permission was given by the VOC to cut wood in "Outeniqualand" was in the same year that Sparrman visited the area (1775), when three burghers were each given permission to cut 12 loads of timber from the forests (Sleigh, 1993).

H. Swellengrebel (son of a former Cape Governor) travelled independently through the Colony and visited the Grootvadersbosch and "Outeniqualand" forests in 1776. Swellengrebel described the Grootvadersbosch and stated that it was stretched out between ravines about 1 to 2 hours on horseback wide. The timber was already worked out, and all that was left was crooked and useless trees. There still were 4 farms between the outpost and the forest, and the burghers acquired their wood from the forest (Sleigh, 1993).

In "Outeniqualand", P. Cloete (Swellengrebel's travel companion) described the big, heavy trees of which most were already cut out. Between the ocean and the forests there were about 14 farms, where the owners made a living from the cutting, transportation and sale of wood. They over-exploited the forests, and the falling trees damaged new forest growth (Sleigh, 1993).

Three months after Swellengrebel and Cloete's visit, and possibly because of a conversation between them and Post holder Lorens at Zoetemelks Vallei, a first attempt was made to place the "Outeniqualand" forests under the command of the VOC. Lorens wrote to the Landdrost in Swellendam that the forests at the Sonderend River were worked out. Even a forest that was left to rest for 18 to 20 years, was worked-out within 9 months when it was exploited again. The remaining trees could only still be found at dangerous, unsafe places. The contracted woodcutters to the VOC became afraid and worked for local burghers as servants instead, which meant that the VOC lost some of its best workers. Another wood source was needed, and Lorens therefore suggested that the VOC must begin to use/utilize the "Outeniqualand" forests. Governor of the Cape of Good Hope, Baron Joachim Ammena van Plettenberg, received the information in February 1777. A couple of weeks later a few contracted woodcutters were transferred over to the "Outeniqualand" forests (*area of George*) from the Riet Vallei outpost next to the Buffeljagsrivier and the outposts next to the Sonderend River. Van Plettenberg first wanted to gather information such as where the best places were to harvest wood for wagons and carriages before a VOC outpost could be established (Sleigh, 1993).

The establishment of a Woodcutter's Post at the Zwart River (*the Outeniqualand outpost, near the present-day town of George*) was approved in July 1777, and three loan farms were resumed by the VOC for this function. The scarcity of timber and wagon-making wood in the VOC's other forests was the reason given for the establishment of the outpost, and these forests needed time to recover. Large sections of the Sonderend River forests were thereafter closed in order for them to recover and re-grow (but these forests never 'rested' as wagon-making wood was still cut from these forests during the following years). The section of forest between Madagascarscraal and the Kaaimans River was closed for the public, as they could find an abundance of wood at other places. Commandant J. Muller was appointed as Post holder, in charge of 16 men who cut and transported wood for the VOC overland to Cape Town (Sleigh, 1993).

Lieutenant William Paterson visited "Outeniqualand" in November 1777, and wrote about the extent of the forests as follows:

"The woods are very thick, and produce some of the tallest trees I have ever beheld...The mountains are extremely steep, and many of the most stately trees grow out of the naked strata of the rocks...These woods have their beginning to the north of Mossel Bay, and extend about 120 miles to the east, ending at a place called Sitsicamma. Between the woods and the Indian Ocean lies an extensive plain well inhabited by Europeans, who traffic mostly in wood which they bring in planks to the Cape." (Plettenberg Bay, n.d.)

In 1778, Governor van Plettenberg travelled to the north-eastern borders of the colony and, on his return, visited the area of Plettenberg Bay. He decided to name the bay after himself and erected a possessional stone on the hill that overlooks Central Beach, indicating to all that the Bay would belong to the VOC from this time on (Storarr, 2001).

The 1770's forest policy established by the VOC for the forests of Swellendam, Mossel Bay and George reached the forests near Plettenberg Bay in 1778. Briefly the policy was this: Servants of the Company worked under contract and were placed at Woodcutters posts, under command of Residents or Landdrosts, whose duties were the felling, conversion, and transport of timber required the Company's use at Cape Town. The fellings were not entirely uncontrolled, the attention of the authorities was focussed on the supervision of forest irregularities and mismanagement. Even the outlying burghers were not given their own way, they were held responsible for any acts of vandalism traceable to them (Phillips, 1963).

The VOC signed a contract with the burghers in "Outeniqualand" in 1779 for the delivery of Assegai wood that was used to make gun-carriages. This was apparently one of the "Outeniqualand" (Zwart River) outpost's main functions (Appel, 1966).

The early European explorers and travellers tended to avoid the Tsitsikamma area for a long time, because of the deep gorges and dense indigenous forests. It was only after 1780 that timber was exploited between the Soutrivier and Groot River (*Nature's Valley*) (GRNP: State of Knowledge, 2014).

French naturalist Francois Le Vaillant explored “Outeniqualand” for nearly six months during 1782, and made Plettenberg Bay the eastern most point of his journey. His visit to the region is described in his five volumes of *Travels Into the Interior Parts of Africa by Way of the Cape of Good Hope*. Written in a lively, entertaining style, his books were widely read, even though they contained many inaccuracies. Le Vaillant shot many game, including elephants, and added dozens of birds to his collection. He also discovered the beautiful Narina trogon, a forest bird that he named after a Khoi woman (Narina) whose beauty he admired. Le Vaillant was critical of the poor conditions of the woodcutters he encountered and was full of suggestions for the betterment of the whole area. He saw magnificent forests in the vicinity of Plettenberg Bay and told that the forests could be cut down easier than anywhere else; as the forest was found in mountains that were not too steep, where it was difficult to search for timber. Le Vaillant said that the Bay's waters were deep enough for the largest vessels, and that a port could be established. The timber could then be transported to the Cape and goods could be shipped from the Cape to Plettenberg Bay that would contribute to the happiness of life of the society. He was convinced that the Bay's natural resources could not have escaped the eye of the Governor on his visit four years previously, but that Van Plettenberg simply failed to make any effort to develop them. Le Vaillant apparently had a low opinion of Governors in general (Storarr, 2001; Van der Merwe, 2002).

Le Vaillant's gratuitous advice about opening up the forests and improving the conditions of the woodcutters in the vicinity of Plettenberg Bay appeared in print too late to influence the development of events there. The first two volumes of his books were published in 1790, but Governor Van Plettenberg, whose name he had so abused, had not been idle during the years following his visit in 1778 (Storarr, 2001). On his visit to the area, Van Plettenberg was worried about the Dutch settlers' enthusiastic destruction of the natural surroundings, especially the forests. On his return to the Cape he proposed to the Lords XVII of the VOC that a timber port and control post be erected to prevent the over-use of natural timber in the area (Plettenberg Bay, n.d.).

But it was eight years after Governor Van Plettenberg's visit before any positive official action was taken...

The transportation of wood overland from the Post at Zwart River to Cape Town was very difficult and expensive. The VOC wanted a cheaper and faster way to transport the wood, and also had a shortage of wood in the Cape (*as the forests which originally grew in profusion around Cape Town were mostly exhausted*), especially for the building of a new hospital which needed large supplies of timber. Most of the timber needed for the construction of the hospital had to be imported, but the Lords XVII asked in July 1785 whether it will be possible to at least acquire one portion of the required timber from one of the Cape's bays. The “Politieke Raad” discussed cost-saving methods in January 1786 and decided that the shipping of wood from Plettenberg Bay to the Cape would be the best method (Appel, 1966; Sleigh, 1993).

Landdrost M.O. Woeke of Graaf-Reinet inspected the availability and transportability of wood from the Plettenberg Bay area early in 1786. He also visited the Zwart River outpost where he ordered Post holder Muller to transfer a portion of his woodcutters to Plettenberg Bay where they were to start with woodcutting immediately. Landdrost Woeke's report was discussed on 4 August 1786 by the “Politieke Raad”. Woeke recommended that an outpost be established on the farm of Cornelis Botha next to the Piesang River, as it had plenty of water and was well situated. He also reported that there was a detached forest (*De Poort; now known as the Harkerville Forest*) with a circumference of about six hours by horseback, abundant in timber, wagon-making wood and furniture-making wood. He also recommended a Post holder who is a wood expert, and that a woodshed was needed (Sleigh, 1993).

An official commission (J.G. van Reenen, A. Holtzhausen and H. Mulder) was sent to Plettenberg Bay to make a survey and to identify those settlers who were interested in producing grain for the VOC (the commission did the same in Mossel Bay earlier in 1786). The burghers of Plettenberg Bay told the commission that the soil and weather were not suitable and that they would rather supply the government with wood (Sleigh, 1993).

A second commission (F. Duminy, E. Bergh and J. G. van Reenen) was sent to Plettenberg Bay to finalise an agreement with the burghers (who were already felling wood in these parts) to cut and supply wood to the government on a contract basis, to investigate the safety of the bay for ships, and to determine the best season for the shipping of wood (so that, if possible, the grain from Mossel Bay and the wood from Plettenberg Bay could be fetched on the same trip). The commission also had to determine the best location for the woodshed, draw up the building contract with a local contractor and arrange that the necessary timber was cut and prepared for him. They also had to determine the duties of the Post holder. They also had to arrange that a number of the Zwart River post woodcutters were transferred to Plettenberg Bay, and had to ensure that the burgher woodcutters did not destroy the forests and waste wood (Sleigh, 1993).

The commission's suggestions were discussed by the "Politieke Raad" on 27 December 1786. They cordoned off 25 plots next to the Piesang River and Wittedrift River (*Bitou River*), where burghers who wanted to participate in the wood supply (woodcutters) could establish themselves. The woodcutters had to work under contract for the VOC (beams and planks were to be delivered to the VOC at tariff rates) and they were required to renew their contracts with the Governor each year. However, they did not accept the Government's proposed tariffs for wood. The commission calculated that it would not cost the VOC very much to keep its own woodcutters in Plettenberg Bay, but then the Government's aim, to provide the burghers of the area with a stable life, will not be achieved. The burghers would then continue living an indolent, lazy and nomadic cattle farming life. The Government therefore agreed to pay the burghers higher tariffs. The commission also recommended that the detached forest at De Poort, which was mentioned by Landdrost Woeke, be divided in two by a wagon road. The VOC would cut wood from the part closest to the beach, and the burghers' the other part. The plan for the division was to thin out the forest evenly (Sleigh, 1993).

A Poster dated 27 December 1786 authorised the contracted woodcutters to start with the cutting and delivering of wood, whilst all other residents in the area were forbidden to sell wood to ships. Contracts were renewed each year (Appel, 1966; Sleigh, 1993).

Johann Jacob Jerling, a local farmer living east of the Keurbooms River, was contracted by the commission to build a woodshed (*for storage of wood prior to shipment by sea*). The outpost at Plettenberg Bay enabled the VOC to ship the wood from the Bay's harbour to Cape Town. The Government wanted the building of the shed to be completed by the end of December 1787, but it was only finished in October 1788 (Sleigh, 1993).

Johan Friedrich Meeding was transferred from the downsized Zwart River Post to take over command as the Post holder of the newly created Woodcutter's Post at Plettenberg Bay and signed the "instructie" in February 1787. He can be regarded as the first forest management pioneer in South Africa. One of Meeding's main tasks was to try and curb the rate of exploitation in the Knysna and Plettenberg Bay forests. He was directly in charge of the extensive forests around Knysna and Plettenberg Bay, where a number of contracted woodcutters were active. The woodshed was built under his supervision close to the bay, where the wood was loaded on to ships bound for Cape Town. Meeding ensured the orderly and profitable exploitation of the forests, and his strictly enforced protective measures greatly diminished the wasteful and destructive practices of the woodcutters (Sleigh, 1993; Van der Merwe, 2002). Unfortunately controlling and limiting wood harvesting to a 'sustainable' level in the southern Cape forests was a long and difficult task as woodcutters were a stubborn race to deal with.

In Meeding's term in office, he succeeded in providing satisfaction to four different superiors – the Dutch from 1787 to 1795, the British from 1795 to 1803, then the Dutch again from 1803-1806, and finally the British when they re-occupied the Cape in 1806 (Van der Merwe, 2002).

On request by the “Politieke Raad”, the burghers who wanted to deliver wood to the VOC in 1788, had to provide the “Raad” with the amount of wood loads they were planning to deliver. This needed to be done before the middle of March (18 suppliers promised 279 loads of wood). The woodshed in Plettenberg Bay was not completed yet, which meant that the wood needed to be kept outside where the sun and rain damaged it. The appointed Cape officials that were sent to Plettenberg Bay informed that there was enough wood for a full ship cargo, but because of only one available coastal ship (*Meermin*) for the Cape, it was uncertain when the wood could be fetched (Sleigh, 1993).

The first shipment of wood left Plettenberg Bay for Cape Town at the end of August 1788 onboard the *Meermin*. The ship was commanded by Captain Francois Duminy. The second shipment of wood was shipped by the hired *Jonge Franck* and *Duijffe* in August 1789, and the third by *Sterrenschans* in 1790 (Sleigh, 1993).

After the establishment of the Plettenberg Bay Woodcutters' outpost, the Lords XVII showed a lively interest in the exploitation of the forests. They were especially interested in the types of wood that could be found. They asked Governor van de Graaff in December 1788 to send samples of the different wood types utilized at the southern Cape outposts, with a description of the characteristics and the best usage of each type. But it took a while, and was only exported in November 1790, when the VOC was so weakened financially that the directors could not benefit from the information. Relations between the Lords XVII and the Cape Governor, C.J. van de Graaff, had deteriorated so much that his total order of Dutch wood was denied. The directors were annoyed about his ill-considered demand for Dutch wood, where two ships would be needed to transport everything, and advised him to use the southern Cape forests as a source of wood instead (Sleigh, 1993).

After the beginning of the timber industry in the area, the settlement of Plettenberg Bay showed rapid signs of growth (*which Governor Van Plettenberg had hoped could be established*); arrangements to control the depletion of the forests became necessary. Huge trees were being felled, the length of bole required for a specific order cut while the rest of the trunk and the mighty crown were left to rot where they fell, very often killing off 15 to 20 of the surrounding trees (Storror, 2001). Certain measures were proposed in March 1790. The forests from Mossel Bay needed to be divided into sections (“vacken”). The cutting had to start in the first section, and had to be exploited until it was exhausted or left with only young trees. Thereafter the woodcutters had to move to the following (second) section. The outpost had to be moved simultaneously to an adjacent bay. In this manner, section after section had to be exploited until it became undesirable to move the cutting further away from the main outpost (*settlement*). Then the cutting had to return to the first section (it was unlikely that it would happen within 50 or 100 years) by which time the young trees would have reached mature growth. *This was an early attempt at systematic forestry, based on sustainability of supply, by working through the forests in a systematic way, on a rotational basis* (Appel, 1966).

The woodcutters were also instructed to process all the remaining wood; lots of treetops and branches were usually left unprocessed in the forests. The “Raad” mentioned that the destruction of these forests could only be avoided if management stayed under the direct control of the appointed commission, and future commissions (Appel, 1966).

By 1790 it was no longer necessary to cut wood in “Outeniqualand” (*George*) for the production of gun-carriages, and the “Raad” considered abolishing the Zwart River outpost. One of the reasons for the mentioned consideration could be because of the fact that the forests of the Sonderend River had, by this time, regrown reasonably well. It was decided in October 1790 to rather downsize the Zwart River outpost as the VOC did not need to use the George forests anymore. The reason why it was downsized instead of being abolished was because the Zwart River outpost was the VOC’s only wagon-maker and smithy in the southern Cape, and therefore essential to the Government’s seven outposts and two drostdys east of the Hottentots Holland Mountains. The Post holder and a few woodcutters were given the task of protecting the forests and maintained the VOC’s authority in the area (Appel, 1966; Sleigh, 1993).

The VOC started closing outposts in 1791, but out of all the woodcutters posts only the Riet Valleij outpost, next to the Buffeljagsrivier, was closed due to the Grootvadersbosch being worked out. This decision did not have an effect on the government’s wood supply. A Postholder and two workers were appointed at the Riet Valleij outpost from January 1792. They had to ensure that the burghers did not cut or damage new and young trees in the nearby forests (Appel, 1966; Sleigh, 1993).

Because of the downsizing of the VOC’s activities in the Cape at the beginning of the last decade of the eighteenth century (*1790’s*), the import of wood from Europe could be reduced. But it was because of the VOC’s financial decline and not because of an improvement in the long-neglected availability of wood. The free woodcutters became totally impoverished due to the reduced demand from the biggest consumer. The VOC’s other woodcutters posts Zoetemelks Valleij, Outeniqualand (Zwart River), Von Kamptz Baaij, Hout Baaij and Plettenberg Baaij were considered strategic assets and their abolishment was not considered (Sleigh, 1993).

Financial cuts during the final years also had an effect on the Overberg forests. Because of the closing of outposts the VOC could only get little or no benefit from these forests. The “Raad” instructed Landdrost Faure of Swellendam in December 1791 to determine how these forests could be exploited and protected in the best and cheapest way. With regard to the exploitation of the forests, Faure proposed that the burghers who applied to cut timber and wagon-making wood in the “Outeniqualand” forests should be allowed to do so, but only if they had a permission letter given to them by the Swellendam Landdrost (Faure). The permission letters had to be issued at 10 Rijksdaalders for 12 loads instead of the usual 3 Rijksdaalders. The wood was then sold to the VOC in order to make a living. The “Raad” decided in January 1792 that permission would be given from then on for the cutting of one load of wood in “Outeniqualand” for the price of 1 Rijksdaalder. The other suggestions made by Faure were approved (Appel, 1966).

The burghers in the Overberg rejected the provision, and it was repealed in December 1794. The price of 3 Rijksdaalders for 12 loads was re-instated. The “Raad” also decided that Post holders were not allowed to cut wood for themselves or for others (Appel, 1966; Sleigh, 1993).

When the Commissioners-General Nederburg and Frijkenius arrived in the Cape in July 1791 on their cost-saving inspection trip, the Plettenberg Bay outpost was one of the few outposts which still existed, and it drew their attention. They were forced to investigate if the wood trade-and transport from Plettenberg Bay and other forests could be handed over to the burghers, so that the VOC could be freed from labour costs and other expenses, whilst the burghers could enjoy a stable life and regular income. They found that the profit made did not make the current situation worthwhile, as the VOC was no longer able to provide sea transport for coastal trade, as most ships that were used for the wood and grain trade

were hired. The Commissioners-General announced on 26 September 1792 that the VOC will open free merchant shipping along the east coast of Africa and further to India for the burghers, and that the transport of grain from Mossel Bay and wood from Plettenberg Bay henceforth also be handed over to private businessmen. The contract between the burgher woodcutters of Plettenberg Bay and the VOC which had been signed in October 1786 was cancelled. They advised the “Politieke Raad” to lease the VOC buildings (in Plettenberg Bay) to burghers who established themselves in coastal shipping (Sleigh, 1993).

The Commissioners-General appointed a commission on 26 November 1792 to investigate how the VOC could use the bay and the forests of the area to their biggest advantage into the future. The commission consisted out of E. Bergh, F. Duminy and A. Faure. Their report was handed in on 2 November 1793 and accepted by the “Politieke Raad” on 4 February 1794. It was decided that the burghers could cut wood in the forest under certain conditions. It was no longer necessary to have a contract with the government, but they needed a permission letter from the Landdrost at Swellendam in order to cut 12 loads of wood at a cost of 12 Rijksdaalders. The government received a direct income from the selling of permission letters, whilst the woodcutters received raw trade items (wood) in order to take care of their families. The woodcutters had to give the permission letters to the Post holder, who had to protect the forest (frequent inspections) and prevent corruption (fraud) with the letters. Persons (woodcutters) who broke the rules were to be banned from cutting wood in the VOC managed forests. The Post holder had to choose a number of trees for the woodcutters and mark them. No other trees were allowed to be felled. For each marked tree, the Post holder received six Stuivers from the government, and also received a commission for each wood load that was delivered by a burgher to the Cape. The commission further suggested that Post holder Meeding should be promoted to the rank of bookkeeper, with a personnel of eight; consisting of four workers, a carpenter, a blacksmith, a wagon maker and a mason (Sleigh, 1993). It was decided not to lease the VOC buildings in Plettenberg Bay to burghers (as advised by Commissioners-General Nederburg and Frijkenius). When they inspected the woodshed, the commission saw a variety of artillery parts, stinkwood, yellowwood planks, yellowwood beams etc. stored in the woodshed. The “Raad” did not expect the wood in the shed to be loaded and transported to the Cape in the near future (Sleigh, 1993).

These new regulations did not result in the intended welfare of the burgher woodcutters. The price of 12 Rijksdaalders for a permission letter for 12 loads of wood was too high. They also found that trees that had been barked by the Post holder, were sometimes unusable after cut down. They submitted a complaint to the Landdrost and asked for an improvement in the situation. The “Raad” received their complaint in September 1794, and on 12 December discussed how they could accommodate the woodcutters without compromising the VOC. The price for 12 loads of wood was reduced to 3 Rijksdaalders. Post holders were not allowed to cut wood for themselves (or allowing others do it for them) with a fine of 200 Rijksdaalders for an offence (Appel, 1966; Sleigh, 1993).

The exploitation of the Plettenberg Bay forests provided for a great demand in timber and wagon-making wood. Due to the prevailing economic situation in the Colony (during the early 1790's) a large portion of this provision, and the participation of the burghers in it, was disrupted. With this large scale exploitation taking place, the value of the wood types of the mixed yellowwood- and broadleaf forests on the south coast were undoubtedly recognized (Appel, 1966).

The destruction of the forests in the district of Graaff-Reinet aroused particular concern as the area was mostly devoid of indigenous forests. Reports of wanton destruction forced the local Landdrost in November 1794 to ban all burghers from the district from cutting wood in the forests of Elandskloof at the Swartkops River if they did not have specific permission to do so (Appel, 1966).

Because of suggestions made by Meeding in March 1795, the “Politieke Raad” decided not to sell the forests and VOC buildings in Plettenberg Bay, and ordered Meeding to keep the buildings in a good condition (Sleigh, 1993).

There was a big demand for wood by the Government and burghers in June 1795, and the ship Castor was sent to the Plettenberg Bay outpost to load and transport the stored timber and artillery-wood (Sleigh, 1993).

The British occupied the Cape for the first time on 16 September 1795...

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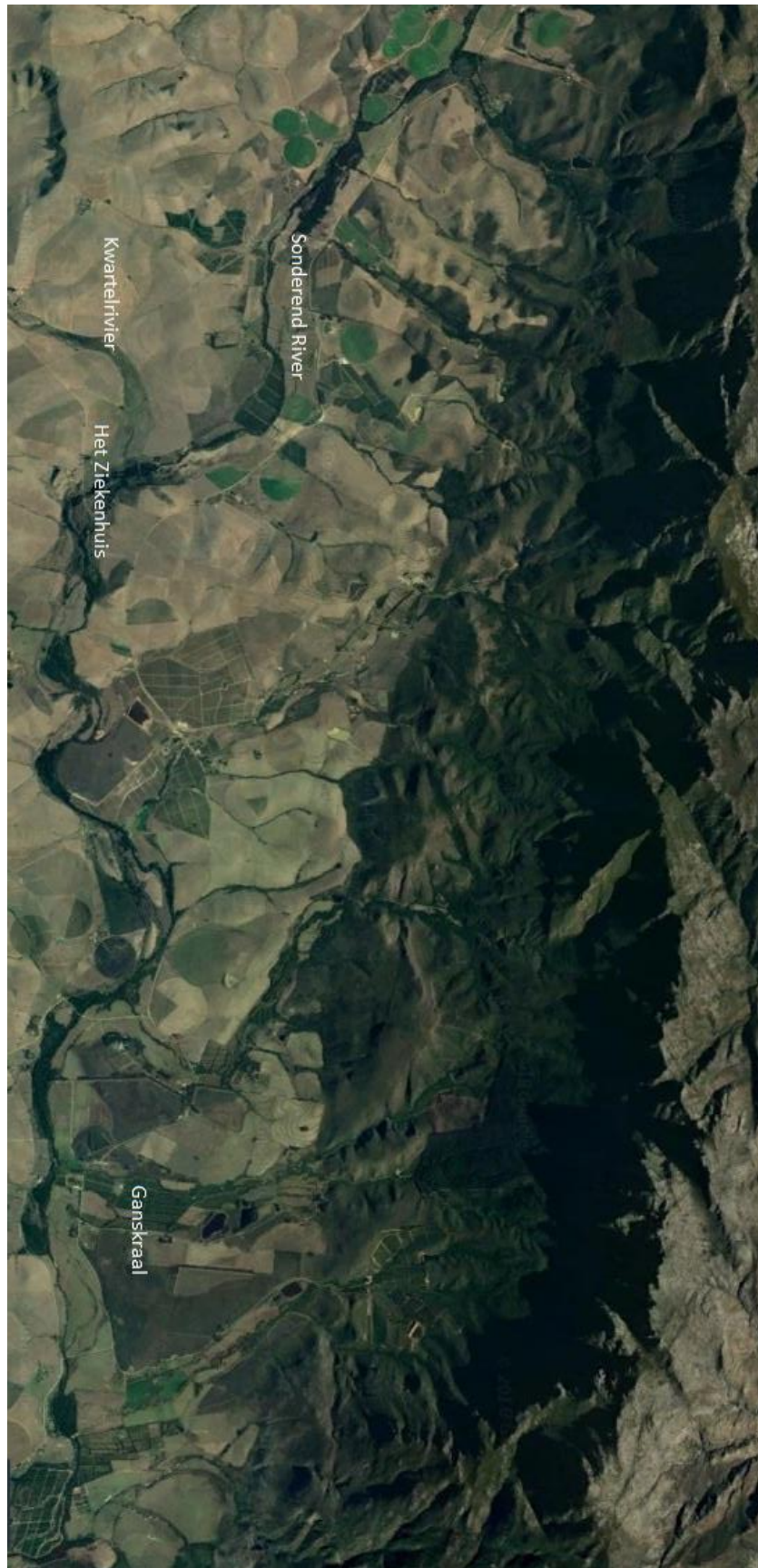
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MAPS

A

Sonderend River (Riviersonderend) forests

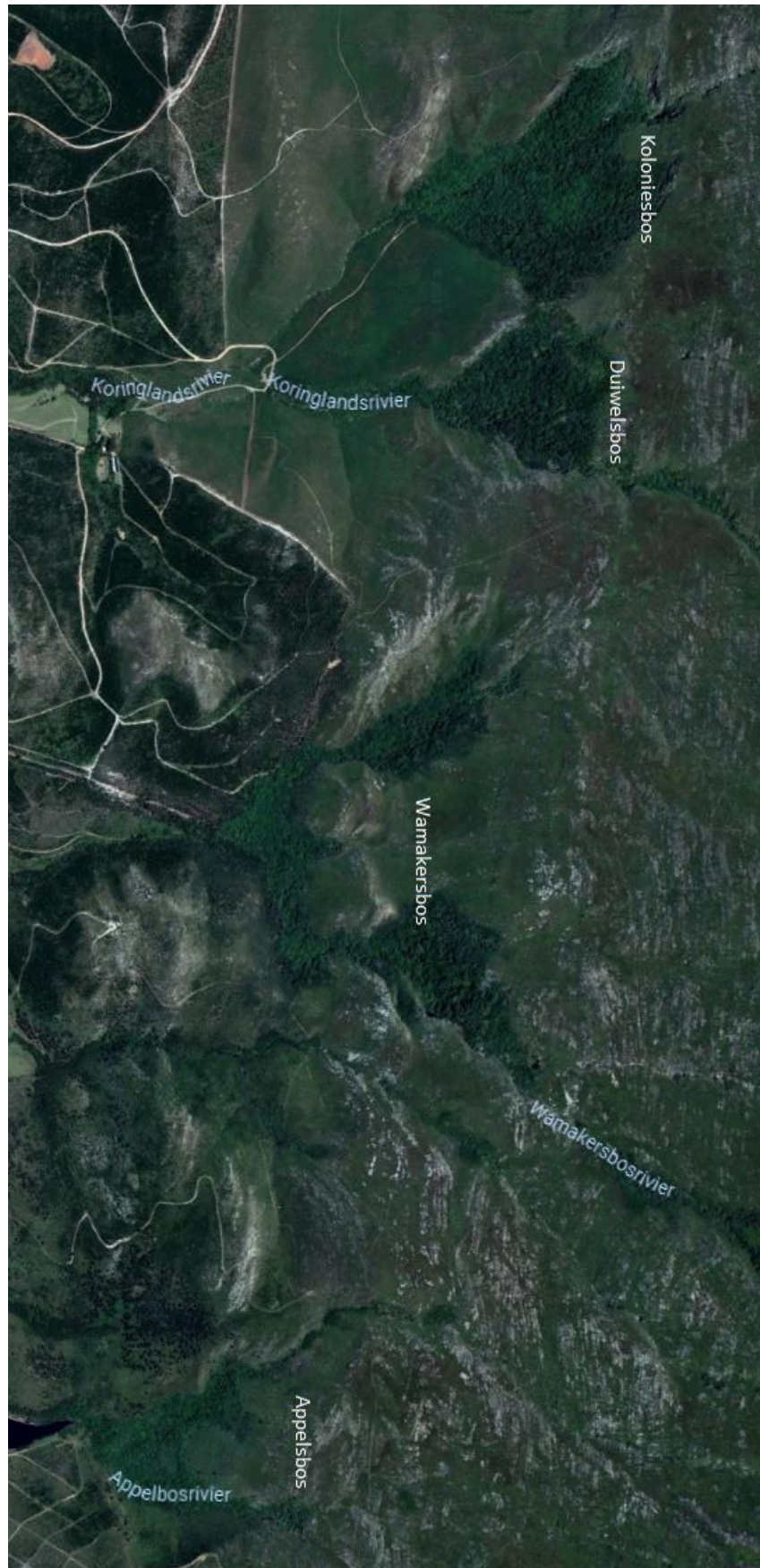
Source: Google Maps



B

Langeberg Mountain forests

Koloniesbos, Duiwelsbos, Wamakersbos and Appelsbos



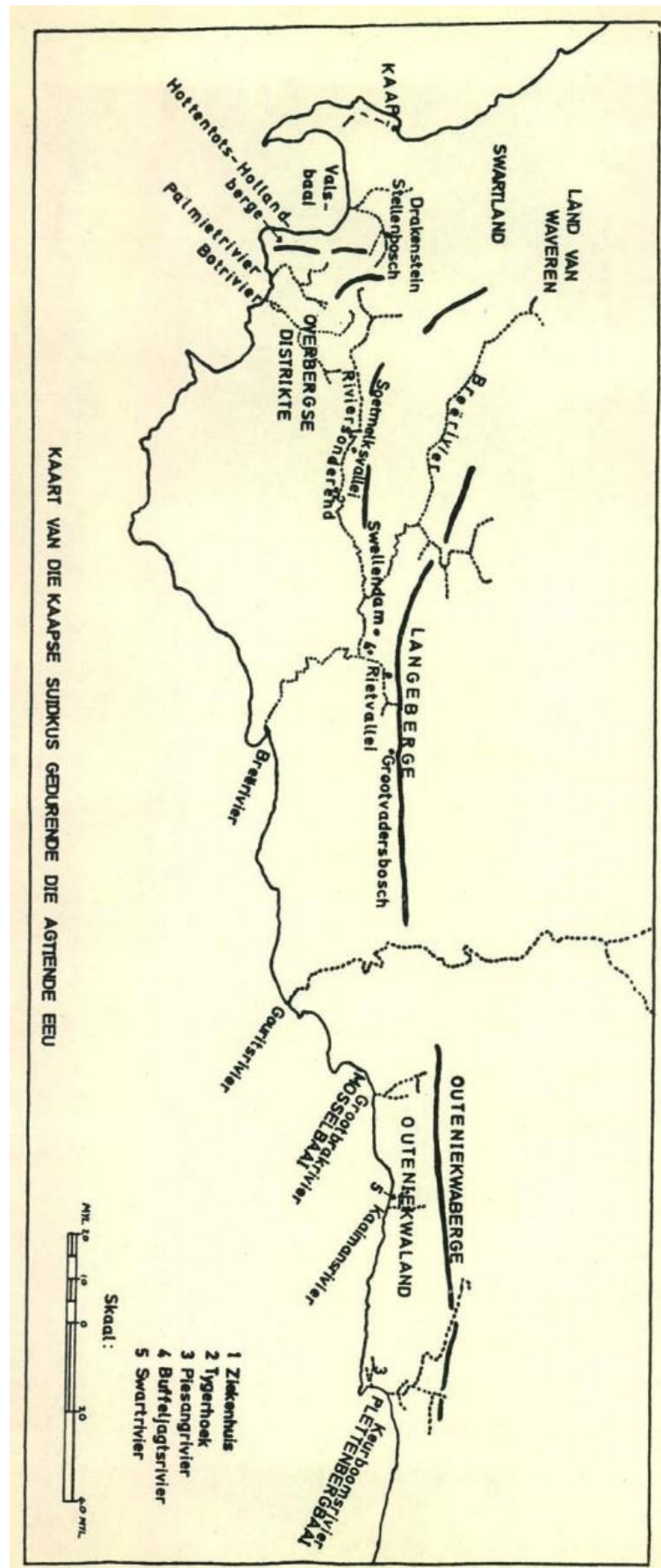
Grootvadersbosch



Source: Google Earth

Map of the Cape south coast during the 18th century

Source: Appel (1966)



D

Map of the Riviersonderend which indicates the location of the VOC's forests in 1894

Source: Appel (1966)

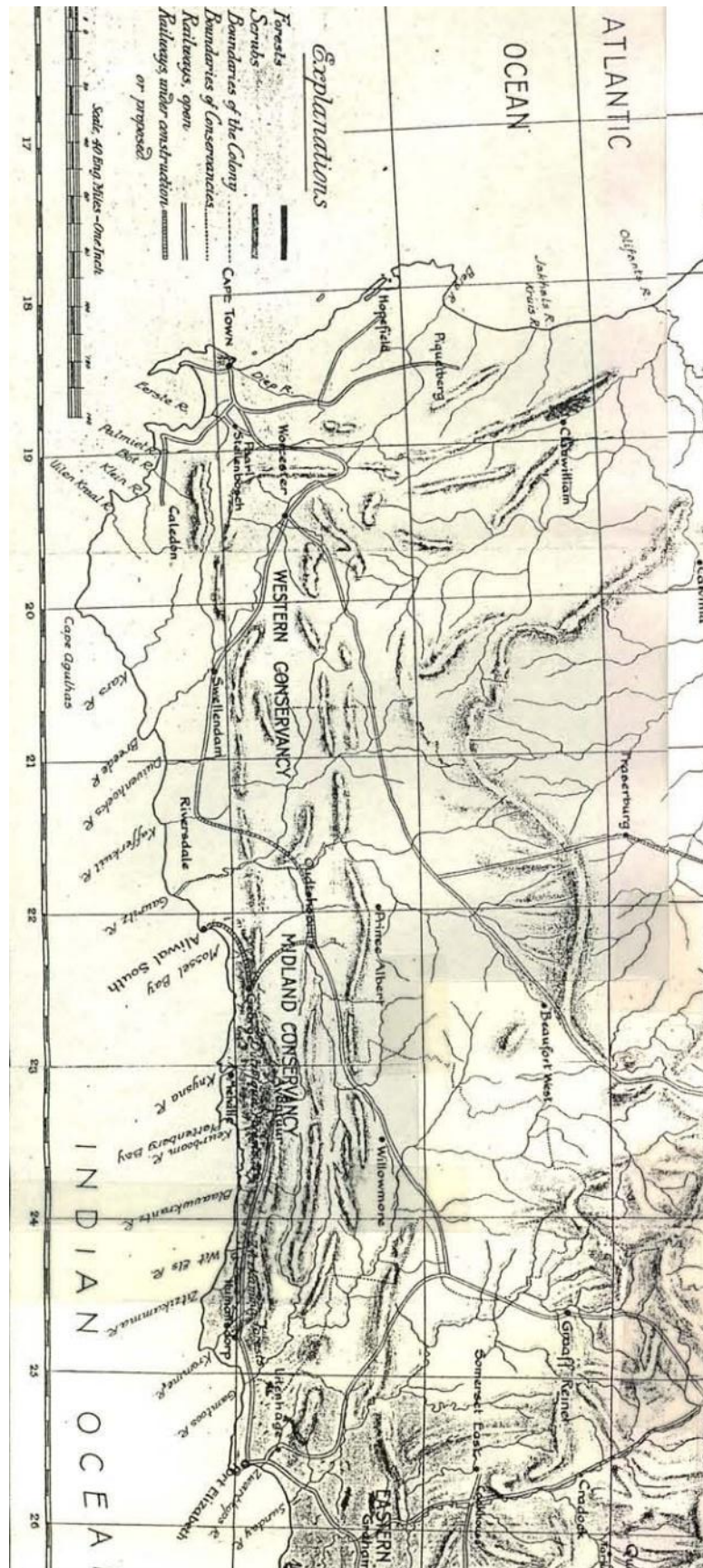


E

The Colony of the Cape of Good Hope: Showing approximately the position of the forests and scrubs

Drawn by: T.R. Sim in July 1906

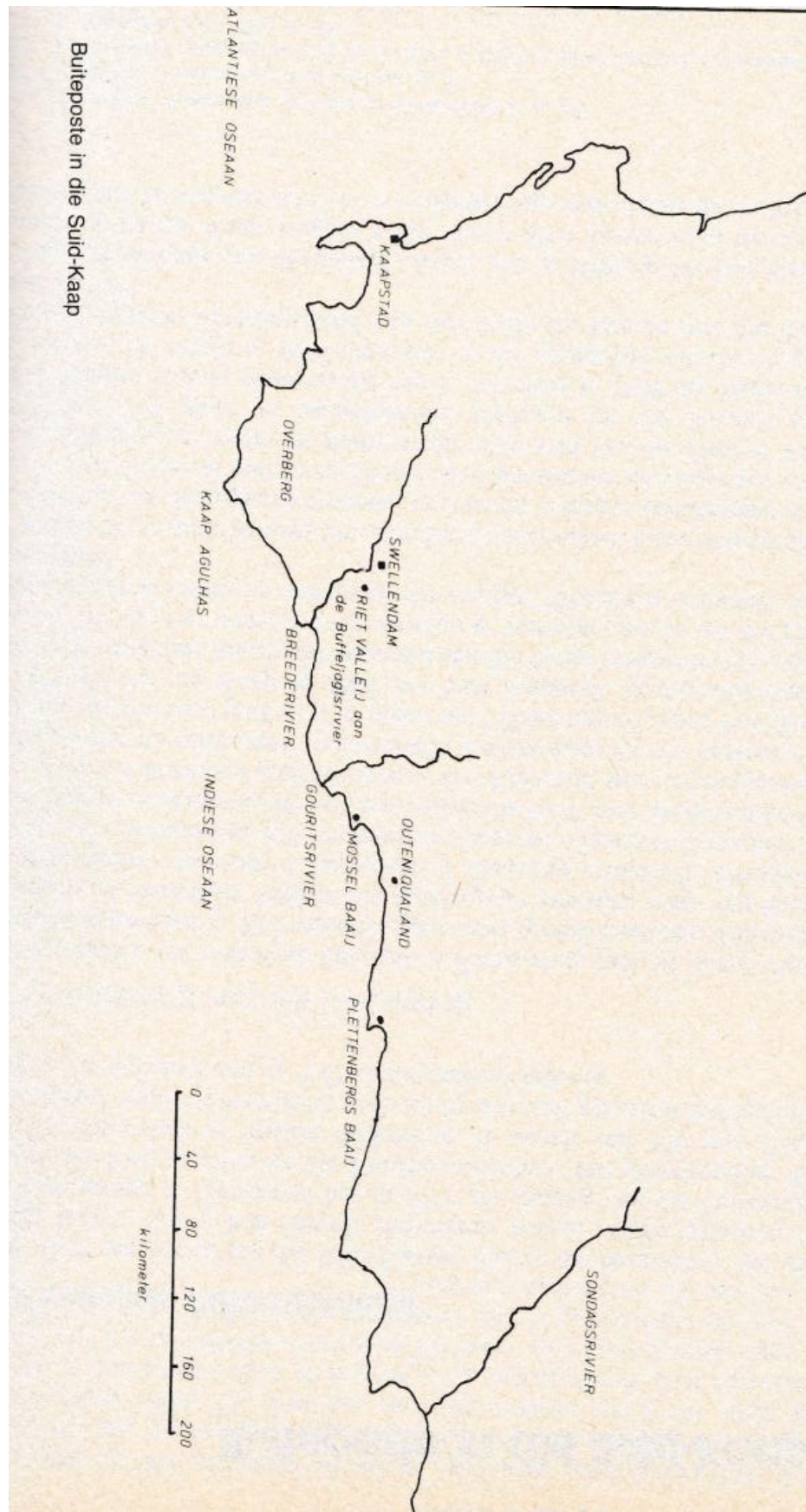
Source: Appel (1966)



F

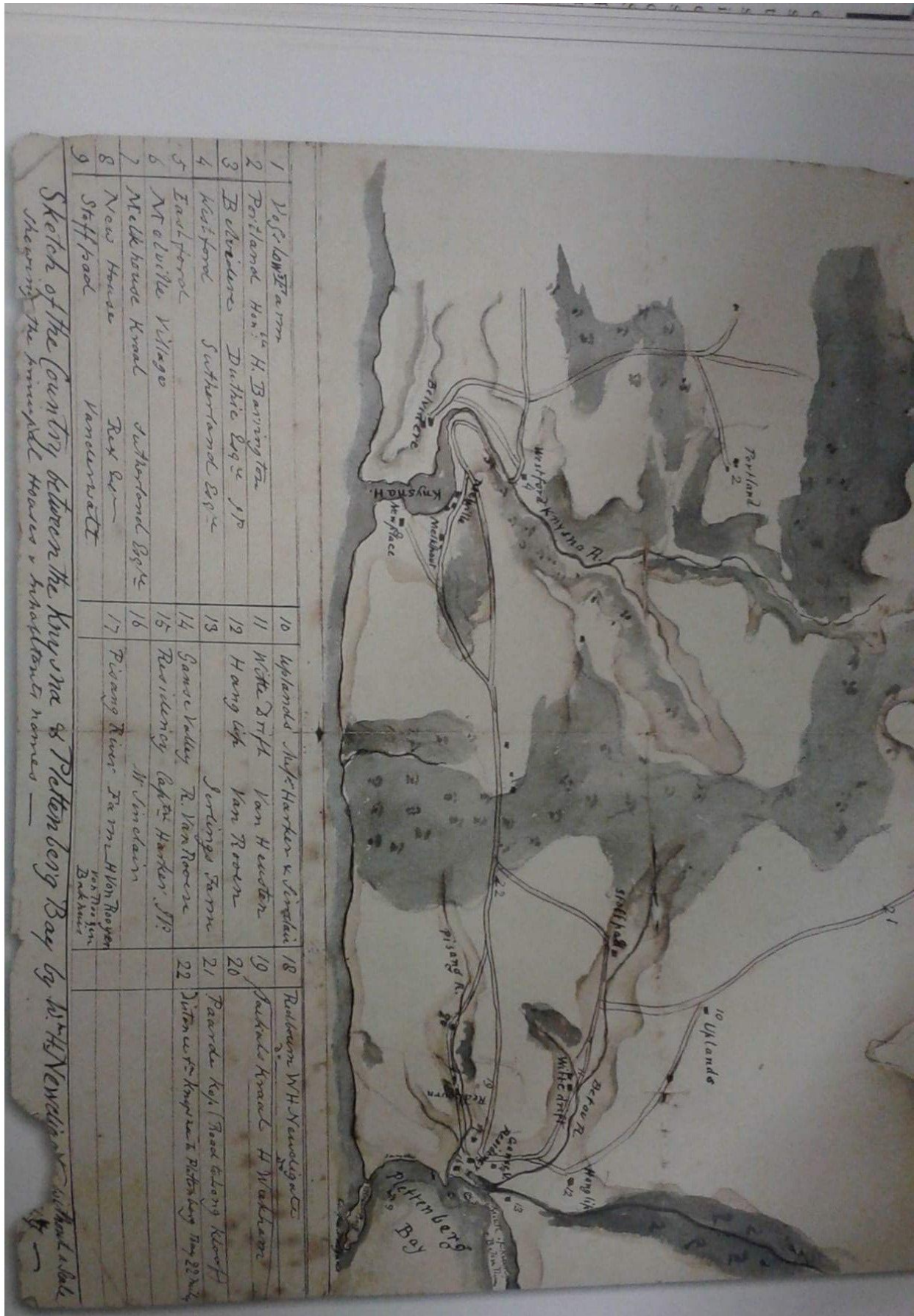
Outposts in the Southern Cape

Source: Sleigh (1993)



Map of the Plettenberg Bay-Knysna districts drawn by William Henry Newdigate (circa 1850's)

Source: (Storror, 2001)



H

Garden Route Vegetation Map

Source: SANParks

