

Talk about a radical recovery!

Leading Nguni stud breeder and livestock farmer **Trenly Spence** managed to survive a crippling four-year drought. And once the rains did come, his Karoo bossieveld exploded with climax grasses – a fact he chalks up to holistic management. He shares his experiences with **Heather Dugmore**.

After a year of drought you can still ask a farmer if he's had any decent rain. After two years you get more circumspect. After three, it's not a good topic to raise. And after four years it's downright insensitive to even mention the r-word.

'ALL KAROO FARMS SHOULD RUN CATTLE TO HELP THE GRASS FLOURISH.'

That was the situation faced by leading Nguni stud breeder and holistic livestock farmer Trenly Spence, 43, of the farm Kriegerskraal in the Camdeboo Conservancy south of Graaff-Reinet.

When *Farmer's Weekly* interviewed Trenly last

year, he was in the midst of the worst drought Kriegerskraal had seen in 100 years, without any effective rain since 2006.

"We need 25mm to 30mm of rain in summer to generate effective grass growth," explains Trenly, who runs stock on his own 3 300ha farm and on another 3 800ha he leases.

"The worst drought before this one was in the 1940s when the farm went through 19 months without once getting 25mm. This time round, when we passed the 19-month mark, the 25-month mark, then the 30-month mark, I was getting really worried about whether we would ever see rain again.

"From August 2007 I started reducing my Angora kapater herd from 2 400 to 450. I've always run a big kapater herd



ABOVE: What you would have seen passing Kriegerskraal farm in November.

ABOVE RIGHT: The same view of Kriegerskraal in February.

BELOW: Trenly Spence on his farm in February, surrounded by *Cenchrus ciliaris* (blue buffalo grass).

with the idea of reducing it during dry times.

"In the same year I started reducing my Dorper ewes from 2 000 to 850. At our annual Heritage Auction in September 2010, I sold double the number of stud Nguni cattle that I normally do, reducing the herd from 160 cows and heifers to 80 cows and 25 heifers."

A PAINFUL SIGHT

Trenly's grazing lasted admirably and farmers from around the country showed extraordinary kindness by sending him grazing, fodder and licks.

But by October 2010 he had very little left and

had to move his cows to friends' farms, he says.

He has farmed holistically since the early 1990s and his veld held up longer than many others in the district. But this didn't serve him when the drought relief payouts came.

"Satellite maps reflected my farm as green for the first three years and I was told I did not qualify for drought relief," he explains.

But by the fourth year Trenly's farm was a painful sight of bare earth and stones. Trees several hundred years old were dying.

"I'm an eternal optimist, but I started doubting



myself and questioning whether all the hard work and effort that went into looking after my veld all those years had been wasted.

"It also didn't help that our farm is next to the road and every second guy was telling me how I had messed up the veld.

"When you start doubting yourself it

recorded in the past 60 years was 380mm. His dams were fuller than they'd been since the mid-1970s.

The relief when the rain came was indescribable, he says. From bare earth and stones the veld recovered rapidly – first the

FAST FACTS

- Holistic farming practices helped Graaff-Reinet farmer Trenly Spence survive a crippling four-year drought.
- His experience helps dispel several myths about the Karoo.
- The veld has undergone a significant shift from Karoo bossieveld shrub to grass.

'AFTER THE DROUGHT I'M NOW MORE CONVINCED THAN EVER THAT I'M ON THE RIGHT TRACK WITH HOLISTIC FARMING.'

becomes difficult to motivate yourself. There was nothing much to do anyway but sit it out, do the basics and not tackle any new development projects.

"I think what kept me going is that I'm not a quitter. We've been farming Kriegerskraal for 100 years. I wasn't going to be the first to pack up."

THEN THE RAINS CAME

The first 17mm fell on 16 December 2010, followed by 30mm in the first week of January.

By March Trenly had recorded 385mm in a region that for the past 60 years has received about 380mm/year, and where the highest annual rainfall

pioneer grasses returned in January, then the climax grasses in February.

The diversity of species and the colours are phenomenal. "I've never seen it like this before," Trenly says. "I've also noted a significant shift from Karoo shrub or bossieveld to grasses.

HOLISTIC MANAGEMENT

Trenly definitely knows about grasses, which is why the Grassland Society of South Africa honoured him with the Peter Edwards Award as Conservation Farmer of the Year a few years ago.

He is the first holistic farmer to receive this award. "With holistic

Grass like never before

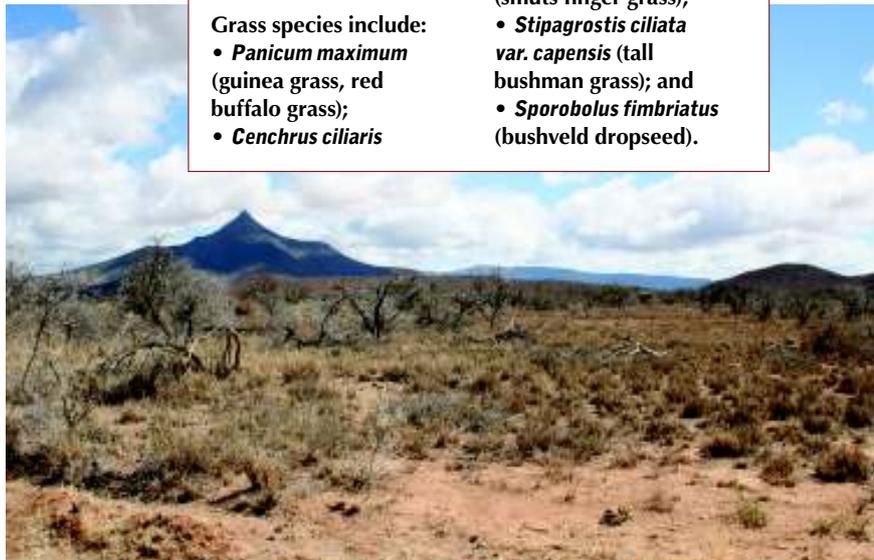
"About 80% of the bossies died in the drought, but in their place I now have climax grasses coming through in parts of the farm where we've never had them before," says Trenly.

"Ironically, the worst drought in 100 years has helped me achieve this."

- (blue buffalo grass);
- *Themeda triandra* (red grass), found mostly in the mountain camps;
 - *Fingerhuthia africana* (thimble grass);
 - *Heteropogon contortus* (spear grass);
 - *Setaria incrassate* (vlei bristle brass);
 - *Digitaria eriantha* (smuts finger grass);
 - *Stipagrostis ciliata var. capensis* (tall bushman grass); and
 - *Sporobolus fimbriatus* (bushveld dropseed).

Grass species include:

- *Panicum maximum* (guinea grass, red buffalo grass);
- *Cenchrus ciliaris*



ABOVE: The Poort on Kriegerskraal in November 2010.



RIGHT: The same view in January 2011.

BELOW RIGHT: The Poort in February 2011. Since the rain, Trenly has seen a virtual explosion in climax grasses.



LEFT: The first lucerne harvest following the end of the drought offers a welcome sight. Trenly has planted 25ha lucerne and will retain third-grade lucerne as a reserve for hard times instead of discarding it.

PHOTOS: TRENLy SPENCE





management we have smaller camps, shorter grazing periods and a minimum of six months' rest per camp – and longer in the mountains," he says.

"Because of this, our grass rootstocks are stronger than under continuous grazing or conventional farming. With large camps and longer grazing periods, the more palatable species start drawing on their rootstocks to grow."

Trenly has divided his 3 300ha farm into 90 camps with a combination of conventional and electric fencing.

"After the drought I'm now more convinced than ever that I'm on the right track with holistic farming," he says.

"On some southern slopes, for example, I've never seen *Digitaria* before, so the question is 'How long did it lie dormant?'"

"It's not as if it gradually returned. It was never there. One of the miracles of nature is that seeds can lie dormant in the soil for decades, waiting for the right rain and micro-environment."

Kriegerskraal is a showpiece of what good

holistic farming can achieve. Yet some passers-by remain unconvinced.

"Now they're saying I received more rain than everyone else," chuckles Trenly. "But at least they've stopped saying that I ruined my farm."

'THERE IS A LOT OF SENTIMENT ATTACHED TO MY NGUNI STUD, BUT I CAN'T AFFORD TO BE SENTIMENTAL IN A DROUGHT.'

LESSONS FROM THE DROUGHT

The drought has taught Trenly that you can never have enough food for your animals.

"I've always grown lucerne and oats, but I had to cut back considerably with the drought. I've since planted 25ha of both.

"I'll bale and sell most of the first few cuts as a short-term cash crop to try and recoup some money. After four years of drought money gets tight, but I'll start storing more.

"My maiden Dorper ewes also lamb on the pastures. I mate them at six months and they lamb just before

ABOVE:

Trenly was able to bring his cows and their calves back to his farm on 18 February. "They are looking so nice and fat again and I am so happy to have them home," he grins.

they cut their teeth. This group's reconception rate is far better on pasture than it is on the veld."

Trenly has also started building up his Dorper ewe and Angora kapater numbers again.

"I will keep all my third-grade Lucerne as a reserve instead of discarding it," he says. "When it's really dry, the cattle eat any roughage.

"I'm also going to plant agave as a drought reserve. It's not expensive to establish and requires no watering and maintenance. My neighbour, Norman Kroon, who taught me a

lot about holistic farming, used it very effectively during the drought as a back-up fodder bank."

Trenly is also considering adding a commercial component to his Nguni herd. "There's a lot of sentiment attached to my Nguni stud, but you can't afford to be sentimental in a drought," he says. "All the same, it's great to have my cattle back. They're looking nice and fat again, and I'm so happy to have them home," he grins.

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The Karoo: naturally a grass plain?

The explosion of grasses on his holistically managed farm does not surprise Trenly Spence.

"I've always maintained Karoo *bossieveld* is a pioneer condition and that, historically, grass species dominated the area"

Explorer-naturalist Robert Jacob Gordon (1743-1795), who travelled the Karoo on horseback, is one of his historical sources.

"He wrote about grasses reaching to his stirrups and indigenous people grazing their cattle on grass plains better than anything he'd seen in Europe," says Trenly.

Aside from confirming that bossieveld is not the Karoo's natural vegetation type, it also dispels the myth that the Karoo is smallstock country. This has only been the case over the past 200 years.

Trenly believes all Karoo farms should run cattle to help the grassland flourish. "The impact of their hooves on the veld is particularly good for the establishment of grass seed.

"Cattle hooves tend to break up the soil, which creates a seedbed for germination. Smallstock hooves tend to compact the soil."