

Tides of time

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Male hippos fighting.

South Africa's iSimangaliso Wetland Park, a Unesco World Heritage marine site, aims to balance conservation and development, protecting its biodiversity while empowering the area's historically disadvantaged communities

SPOTLIGHT | Rejuvenation and national pride

iSimangaliso Wetland Park: 'The goal is to end the paradox of poverty amidst the bounty of nature'

The story of iSimangaliso Wetland Park — the first South African site to be inscribed on Unesco's World Heritage List — is tied to South Africa's recent post-democratic evolution. It is a tale of rejuvenation and national pride. The story begins in the park's coastal dunes. The park is a marine site with terrestrial components, and its dunes, formed over the past 25,000 years, rise up to 170 meters (560 feet). But what matters is underneath them: the dunes contain mineral wealth, including titanium, ilmenite, rutile and zircon.

The fight against mining was iSimangaliso's defining moment

In the late 1980s and early '90s, the site faced a menace from miners. That the dunes held ore was not a new discovery. There is evidence of the use and trade of iron tools in the area from early times. But a mining company wanted to look for minerals in a big way, and revealed plans to bulldoze the dunes along the eastern shore of Lake St. Lucia, the heart of the park.

Opposition from conservationists and a public outcry over what was understood to be a looming ecological disaster prompted half-a-million citizens — including then-President Nelson Mandela — to sign a no-mining petition. This led in 1996 to a government ban on industrial development in the area. It also led to the nomination of the park as a

World Heritage site. But the battle was iSimangaliso's defining moment. Thrust into the spotlight, it became emblematic of the new nation and the focus of an emphasis on strategic nature tourism as a spur to economic growth in the country as a whole.

After outlawing mining in the park, the government went further, outlining in 1999 a strategy of development initiatives for the entire region. Together with the governments of neighboring Swaziland and

Mozambique, it began a drive to promote employment in the area, with iSimangaliso as the core. Focusing on tourism and agriculture, initiatives included the creation of 4,500 temporary jobs a year for local community members. Today, initiatives support the local entrepreneurs; build skills in tourism, conservation and hospitality; train chefs and tour guides; provide opportunities for local contractors; and put people to work on construction and maintenance of park roads.

Specialized initiatives, such as craft and cultural performance programs, target women and young people.

Guy Debonnet, chief of Unesco's Special Projects Unit, notes: "Instead of going for large-scale economic development based on resource extraction, the government decided to stimulate a more sustainable local

development, directly benefiting the local communities." These communities are among the nation's poorest. World Heritage status, authorities believed, would help produce momentum to generate opportunities for them. So great was this belief that South Africa became one of only two countries (Australia is the other) to incorporate the World Heritage Convention into national law. The World Heritage Convention Act of 1999 ensures that the country complies with the commitment it made to Unesco when proposing iSimangaliso as a World Heritage site. It created a special Wetland Park Authority to manage iSimangaliso and — perhaps its most important function — oversee the betterment of the social and economic conditions of local people.

The World Heritage Convention Act gives the iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority a mandate to deliver tangible benefits to communities living in and around the park. Andrew Zaloumis, chief executive officer of the park authority, says: "Importantly, this law laid the foundation for a new model for protected area management in South Africa, as it recognized that conservation without acknowledging the needs of the poor people living in and around the park would ultimately erode its conservation status."

"Developing to conserve" is iSimangaliso's motto, and its objective is to safeguard its ecological wealth while empowering its

historically disadvantaged communities. Adds Zaloumis: "The purpose of the development initiatives was simple but ambitious — to end the paradox of poverty amidst the bounty of nature. The park is a people's park, balancing biodiversity protection and ecosystems rehabilitation with a commitment to social equity and economic development." The law amounts to a proud national pledge for the park's conservation. Unesco leaves countries free to make good on their obligations to World Heritage as they see fit, but considers the South African statute an example of best practice, often citing it to other World Heritage Convention signatories.

The new model, combining a new national consciousness and World Heritage status, has helped deal with other park issues. At its time of inscription in 1999, some of iSimangaliso's landscapes had been

planted with introduced species, such as eucalyptus. Park authorities began a drive to remove foreign flora; today the park is free of commercial plantations. Seven thousand hectares (17,300 acres) of pine and eucalyptus have been removed from its Eastern and Western Shores area, and many zones have recovered their natural vegetation. The park is also restocking animals that have disappeared. Three years ago, the cheetah was reintroduced, and the park authority has brought back many endemic species, including elephant, buffalo, black rhino, wild dog and hyena. World Heritage status has played a role here. Says Zaloumis: "The government invested considerable resources in the World Heritage site, due to its status and its potential to deliver economic benefits. Restoration and rehabilitation of the site was an important part of the overall development and conservation strategy." ■

NIGEL DENNIS

What is natural heritage?

Unesco's 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage states that the following shall be considered as natural heritage: natural features of physical and biological formations, or groups of formations, of outstanding universal value from the aesthetic or scientific point of view; geological formations and delineated areas that constitute the habitat of threatened species of animals and plants of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation; and natural sites or delineated natural areas of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science, conservation or natural beauty. Visit <http://whc.unesco.org>

EXPLORING | Earth, water and culture

From tropical reefs to Africa's highest forested dunes

There are so many different things to see and do in the iSimangaliso Wetland Park that few risk going home disappointed. Centered around Lake St. Lucia, the park contains Africa's largest estuary system and its southernmost coral reefs. The variety of natural beauty and abundant wildlife draw about one million visitors every year.

Formerly known as the Greater St. Lucia Wetland Park (after the name given by Portuguese sailors in 1576), it received its new African name in November 2007 — iSimangaliso, or "Miracle." The name is apt. Former South African President Nelson Mandela describes it this way: "The Wetland Park must be the only place on the globe where the world's oldest land mammal (the rhinoceros) and the world's biggest terrestrial mammal (the elephant) share an ecosystem with the world's oldest fish (the coelacanth) and the world's biggest marine mammal (the whale)."



Courtship display of the African Jacana.

NIGEL DENNIS

A collection of protected areas, iSimangaliso has game reserves, marine reserves, freshwater reserves, state forests and most of South Africa's remaining swamp forests. Numerous organized tours and excursions are geared around almost every living thing on its land, waters or skies. On land, feline fanciers can take a close look

at Africa's endangered cheetahs and wildcats at the African Wildcat Center. Reptile enthusiasts can visit a crocodile and snake center. The Web site of Go2Africa, an independent safari travel service, says: "Probably the most rewarding experience is a boat trip on the lake, which provides encounters with waterfowl, hippos, Nile crocodiles as well as the beautiful fish eagle."

Photographers can go on game reserve tours and snap buffalo, rhinos, lions and leopards. Night drives offer sightings of porcupine, aardvark, elephant and antelope. Those who prefer a slower pace might enjoy a wilderness walk. There are 196 species of butterflies, and bird-watchers can identify more than 500 species on the hiking trails. iSimangaliso is also a refuge for water birds, and flocks of flamingoes and pelicans can be found feeding along the coast.

The park's marine system includes 220 kilometers (about 140 miles) of coastline facing the Indian Ocean's warm waters and tropical reefs. Lovers of sea creatures can go whale-watching from June to November, or take a marine mammal tour for dolphins and sharks from December to May. There are even midnight turtle tours. From November to January, visitors can watch turtles lay eggs — a spectacle available in very few countries. Swimmers can snorkel and dive in the shallow reef, and there is good fishing at Cape Vidal. Visitors can also explore the wetlands on horseback. Other activities include golf, kayaking, camping and caravanning — there is a wide range of recreational opportunities in the park.

iSimangaliso's wealth of animal life is due to its unique diversity of ecosystems. A rare combination of coastline and game park, the site includes reefs, lakes, lagoons, thickets and woodlands, dry sand forest, bushland, beaches, grasslands and marshes. iSimangaliso also boasts Africa's highest forested sand dunes. Monkeys, squirrels and reptiles live here. The visitor can enjoy guided tours or stroll alone.

The site is as rich in culture as it is in natural beauty and biodiversity. Visitors can see Zulu and Thonga arts and crafts; receive a lesson on local history, traditions, marriage rites and religion; watch tribal dancers and musicians; and even visit a witch doctor. ■

The Master Compressor Diving watch: A gift for divers

Sports enthusiasts — particularly divers, who expose their watches to unique shocks and pressures — need a more resistant, and therefore larger, timepiece. Ideally, divers should also know how long they've been underwater and exactly how deep they are.

Jaeger-LeCoultre's new line, the Master Compressor Diving series, offers three models that are designed with both professional and nonprofessional divers in mind; they provide unique precision, reliability and resistance, essential when diving. The Master Compressor Diving Pro Geographic is larger than previous models — 46.3 millimeters (1.8 inches) in diameter — for easier readability below the waves. Its casing of grade-five titanium is waterproof down to 300 meters (about 980 feet). A steel membrane inside the case expands and

contracts according to the water pressure. These movements are transmitted to a hand in the middle of the dial that shows how deep the diver is, from zero to 80 meters. Since no water can enter the membrane, the gauge is 100-percent reliable.

These new additions make the in-house, hand-decorated Diving Pro Geographic the showpiece for Jaeger-LeCoultre's state-of-the-art technique. Chief Executive Officer Jérôme Lambert says, "Jaeger-LeCoultre can produce, from A to Z, inside and out, from case to movement, anything needed in a diving watch today." This expertise is built on 175 years of watchmaking, Lambert adds. "Generation after generation," he says, "we have grown more capable of leading the new dimension of sports watches."

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