

## Matobo Hills (Zimbabwe)

No 306 rev

### 1. BASIC DATA

*State Party:* Republic of Zimbabwe  
*Name of property:* Matobo Hills  
*Location:* Matebeleland, South Province  
*Date received:* 19 February 2002

*Category of property:*

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*. In terms of Operational Guidelines, para 39, this is a *cultural landscape*.

*Brief description:*

The nominated area exhibits a profusion of distinctive rock landforms rising above the granite shield that covers much of Zimbabwe. The large boulders provide abundant natural rock shelters and collectively exhibit a long association with human occupation from the early Stone Age right through to early historical times, and intermittently since. The rocks also provide a dramatic setting for an outstanding collection of rock paintings.

The densely grouped granite formations have allowed the development of a complex and very specific ecology at Matobo, turning it into a moist and rocky island amidst the semi-arid savannahs of south-western Zimbabwe.

The Matobo hills continue to provide a strong and high-valued focus for the local community through their active use of shrines and sacred places, closely linked to traditional, social and economic activities.

### 2. THE PROPERTY

*Description*

The nominated Matobo site covers an area of 2050 km<sup>2</sup>, some 35 km south of Bulawayo in south-western Zimbabwe. It is surrounded by a buffer zone of 1050 km<sup>2</sup>.

The landscape is visually and ecologically distinguished from the surrounding dry savannah. A profusion of distinctive granite landforms, densely packed into a comparatively tight area, rise up to form a sea of hills. Their forms have resulted from the varied composition and alignment of the granite rocks, which responded differently to millions of years of weathering. What remains are inselbergs – large individual vertical rocks, ‘kopjes’, crenellated ridges, ‘dwalas’ or hump-backed domes, and what look like randomly heaped boulders.

These extraordinary granite rock formations have exerted a strong presence over the whole area – both in natural and cultural terms.

The discrete and often small sheltered spaces, formed between this dense collection of rocks, have fostered a wide variety of microclimates, allowing the development

of an extremely diverse range of habitats. The resulting species rich vegetation has in turn provided much sustenance for a wide range of fauna.

These natural attributes have also been the dynamic focus for people living in the area since the early Stone Age. Within natural caves, and on boulders and cliff faces are found a dramatic corpus of rock art much of it dating from the Stone Age.

What gives Matobo its continuing relevance to local communities today is the strong persistence of indigenous beliefs and practices associated with Matobo as a sacred place – the seat of God, (Mwari/Mwali), the home of ancestral spirits, and the focus for rituals and ceremonies linked to rain, harvest, disease and appeasement of spirits.

Overall the landscape has a strong aesthetic quality – the natural phenomena give the place a dramatic ‘natural beauty’. From strategic points on the hills there are far-reaching views over the surrounding landscape. It is easy to see why so many people have imbued this landscape with a special meaning.

Specifically the Matobo Hills nominated cultural landscape includes:

- Rock paintings – a huge corpus of paintings;
- Stone and Iron Age archaeological sites;
- Historical sites from pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods;
- Natural heritage – rock forms, high biodiversity; rare species;
- Living intangible culture associated with the rock forms.

**Rock paintings – a huge corpus of paintings:** Matobo has perhaps the largest concentrations of rock art sites in southern Africa. The nomination claims that there are ‘no less than 3500 rock art sites’ in the Matobo Hills. Unfortunately this statement cannot be substantiated. Nevertheless even a more conservative estimate of around 700 known sites – each containing a large number of paintings, perhaps in all totalling 20,000 – give the whole corpus of paintings an enormous significance in terms of size and density.

The paintings are found in caves, and on boulders and cliff faces. Stylistically Matobo is part of a rock art ‘region’ which stretches from South Africa to Tanzania. The majority of the paintings have been attributed to the Late Stone Age period with some belonging to Iron Age Farming Communities.

Some of the larger caves – with many hundred of paintings – display images of extreme visual beauty – such as the galloping giraffe in the Inanke cave.

The earlier paintings associated with hunting and gathering are mostly executed using a red pigment – red ochre – mixed with an as yet unknown binder. The later paintings associated with farming communities used white pigment from kaolin or quartz. This distinction is common within the stylistic region.

Insufficient quantities of organic material in the pigments, mean that it has not been possible to date the painting directly. Indirect methods – using subject matter and the

presence of pigments in archaeological deposits – suggest that the earliest paintings date back at least 13,000 years.

The subject matter of the paintings is essentially naturalistic interpretations of people, animals and trees. But it is also impressionistic in that many of the paintings distorted body proportions to convey a sense of movement, or size to convey importance. In many sites there are layers of paintings superimposed one on top of the other. Images in the later paintings also appear to display a complex cosmology linked to religious beliefs.

Analysis of the styles has suggested that images changed gradually from outlines to polychromes in the hunter-gatherer paintings. The later paintings of the early farming communities exhibit much less skill, accuracy and precision in comparison to the earlier images.

Several of the caves are open to the public.

**Stone and Iron Age archaeological sites:** An abundance of archaeological evidence has been amassed from the shelters for the Stone Age and Iron Age periods, which when combined has contributed a great deal to the understanding of pre-colonial history of the region. Bamabati cave – said to be one of the most extensively researched caves in southern Africa – has revealed the oldest decorated piece of stone from Zimbabwe together with what appears to be Stone Age pottery. Elsewhere tools, implements and human remains have been dated to the Middle and Late Stone Age. In many caves Iron Age deposits overlay earlier Stone Age material.

Important features of Iron Age sites are the remains of dry-stone walled enclosures and grain bins.

**Historical sites from pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods:** Graves of King Mzilikazi who formed the Ndebele nation and Cecil Rhodes who led European settlers into the country are both within the nominated area.

**Natural heritage – rock forms, high biodiversity; rare species:** The valleys between the rocks contain numerous streams and springs supporting a wide range of flora ranging from lichens, figs and aloes to *Brachystegis* species, mopane trees and over 100 grass species. At least five plant species are indigenous to the Matobo area (*Cyphostemma milleri*, *Lobelia lobata*, *Triaspis dumeticola*, *Maytenus heterophylla puberula* and *Turrea fischeri eylasii*). In addition the area supports a major and significant portion of a further nine species.

Out of 189 mammal species indigenous to Zimbabwe, 88 have been recorded in the Matobo Hills. The area has the highest density of leopards in Zimbabwe. Many other mammals have been re-introduced in recent years such as the white rhinoceros – depicted in cave paintings. About 330 bird species have been recorded, including 40 species of raptors and the highest density of black eagles recorded anywhere in Africa – over 70 pairs nest in the Matobo Hills.

**Living intangible culture associated with the rock forms:** Matobo is the home of the wide-ranging oracular cult of the high God, Mwali, whose voice is believed to be heard from the rocks. This powerful oracle links the indigenous communities to the hills – where the ancestral spirits live in sacred forest, mountains, caves, hollow trees and pools. Some say these beliefs originated with the Iron Age peoples who inhabited the area and thus there maybe links with the rock art.

The natural granite rock formations have a powerful intangible association with the people who live in the surrounding area. They have become objects of spiritual significance from where people can derive inspiration, fertility, good health and make contact with their ancestral spirits.

Within the Matobo hills, certain places have become known as shrines. Njelei, specifically associated with agricultural rituals, is one of the most important and attracts people from as far as South Africa, Namibia, Botswana and Lesotho. Dulu is visited through out the year by people with illnesses.

The reverence given to the area, along with the rituals associated with visiting, has become a powerful force for its conservation, as despoiling the environment would deprive god and the spirits of a home to live in. There are also taboos in place that operate to keep the natural resources intact. For instance, no one may hunt animals or cut down trees in the sacred forest.

These intangible links are quite without physical evidence and rely for their continuation on communal memory and social practices alone.

### *History*

Evidence for the early history of the area comes from archaeological excavations and from analysis of the rock paintings. These indicate a long and perhaps continuous use of the caves from the Stone Age right through to the early historical period first by hunters and gatherer societies and then by Iron Age settlers practicing agriculture. In the Zimbabwean context the separation between the prehistoric and the historic periods is not clearly defined.

The sites first appear in the records of missionaries, mineral seekers and explorers who document the arrival and establishment of the present Ndebele group of people during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the leadership of the King Mzilikazi. Mhlahlandlela, on the northern fringes of the Matobo Hills, was one of the earliest settlements. The first Bulawayo was established soon after. Around the same time the Nguni people, fleeing Zululand, arrived in the area.

Resistance by the local people to the early colonists is well documented. During confrontations in 1893 and 1896 between Cecil Rhodes and the Ndebele leaders, the Matobo Hills played a pivotal role in providing refuge to local people who derived inspiration from the oracles of the Mwari shrines.

The majority of the area which now forms the Rhodes Matopos National Park was declared a conservancy in 1926.

### *Management regime*

In order to reflect a coherent landscape, encompassing not only the rock paintings and rock batholiths but also the strong social interaction between local people and these tangible aspects, the nomination suggests a boundary that is larger than the Rhodes Matopos National Park. The proposed boundaries cover the areas of two Rural District Councils. This has important implications for management.

Within then nominated area are three types of land ownership:

- The Rhodes Matopos National Park – managed by Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management (Ministry of the Environment) (DNPWLM);
- Communal lands without individual tenure – managed by Matobo and Umzingwane Rural District Councils on behalf of the President and the people of Zimbabwe;
- Privately owned land – with individual tenure.

The National Park is managed by DNPWLM to retain the significance of its natural resources. This department is in the process of being established as an Authority (ie as an independent a statutory body under the Ministry). The management of archaeological and other cultural properties is the responsibility of the National Museums and Monuments (Home Affairs) (NMMZ) irrespective of land tenure. However the ownership and management of shrines and ritual activities is the responsibility of members of the community. The following agencies also have management responsibility within the nominated area: Natural Resources Board, Forestry Authority and the Rhodes Matopos Committee.

Currently there is no body that could coordinate activities within a World Heritage Site and at present there are some grey areas that affect the willingness of one or other party to take responsibility for conservation.

If the State Party is to promote the proposed world heritage site as a cultural landscape, it will be essential to establish an authority with representatives from all the official stakeholders, as well as the resident rural and commercial farmers and the tourism industry.

There is already a precedent for this in Zimbabwe, namely a statutory instrument that was established with assistance from SIDA (Sweden) and JICA (Japan) as a legal entity to manage the Victoria Falls world heritage site. Unfortunately it has not been in operation for a while because of financial constraints.

The Management Plan proposes a management committee for the world heritage site, which will consist of representatives from the key statutory bodies as well as from Chiefs and custodians of the shrines. It would clearly be desirable to try and widen this team to include those suggested above. It is envisaged that the management committee will coordinate management plans generated by stakeholders and encourage the preparation of plans for areas where these currently do not exist.

The management plan is very much a description of the status quo. It does not address the need for research for the area nor how current basic management arrangements can be transformed into conservation practice. For instance there is no mention of the need for research by oral historians and anthropologists into indigenous knowledge and intangible heritage associated with the site. Nor does the plan address how the cultural and natural qualities of the area – addressed separately in the plan – can be drawn together so that the area can be managed as a cultural landscape.

At present environmental impact assessments are not mandatory in Zimbabwe, but the statutory instrument established for Victoria Falls makes them necessary for all

development in that world heritage site. A new Environment Bill has been prepared that will make them compulsory throughout the country, but it has not yet been tabled in parliament. When a management authority is established for Matobo Hills, it should therefore address this issue as a matter of urgency.

#### *Legal provision:*

Legal protection of the Matobo Hills is achieved through four Acts that govern the cultural and natural heritage and administration of the Rural District Councils. These are the Rural District Councils Act, the Parks and Wild Life Act, The Natural Resources Board Act and the National Museums and Monuments Act.

#### *Resources:*

Currently sources of funding for work in the nominated area is channelled through the various bodies that have management responsibility. There is nothing in the nomination or the management plan to indicate any commitment by those authorities to provide extra funding for implementing the Management Plan.

#### *Justification by the State Party (summary)*

The Matobo Hills contains both cultural and natural attributes of exceptional aesthetic, scientific and educational significance.

The diverse cultural heritage spans more than 500,000 years with continual settlement over at least 100,000 years, and is reflected in numerous rock art sites, and rock shelters with Stone and Iron Age deposits. Today, the Matobo Hills are revered as the centre of the Mwari religion, the seat of god and ancestral spirits, and where shrines are the focus of communal contact with the spirits.

The area is regarded as a most important sanctuary for birds of prey – particularly the Black Eagle; it possesses a great density of predator species and significant botanical diversity within tree species, grasses and small flowering plants.

### **3. ICOMOS EVALUATION**

#### *Actions by ICOMOS*

ICOMOS and IUCN evaluated the property in 1983-84. An ICOMOS mission visited the site in October 2002.

#### *Conservation*

##### *Conservation history:*

No details are given for this. However a significant body of academic and scientific literature has been generated by the site – as indicated in the extensive bibliographies in the nomination document and the management plan. There is continuing scientific interest in the area.

##### *State of conservation:*

No formal text on this is given in the nomination document or the management plan. Conservation programmes begun in the 1990s with help from Norway and Sri Lanka have helped create awareness and develop skills but have been suspended because of the political situation in the country.

Conservation at the moment appears to be re-active and geared to maintenance rather than conservation or preventative conservation work.

The only active research mentioned in the text is on the black eagle monitoring programme, which is run by volunteers. The location and documentation of rock art sites is being done by a volunteer – but currently the information is not being passed to the NMMZ.

#### *Risk analysis:*

The management plan includes an analysis of the following threats:

- Population pressure;
- Natural disasters;
- Visitor/tourism pressures;
- Development pressures.

The following additional threat is apparent from the overall text:

- Atrophying of interest in traditional beliefs.

These are considered separately:

**Population pressure:** A significant increase in people living in the area over the past 100 years has had a negative impact on the environment. Agriculture in some areas has resulted in deforestation; illegal hunting takes place; and uncontrolled burning has damaged vegetation and animals. It is also clear from the management plan that, in spite of this encroachment, the cultivation of the communal lands is failing to provide adequate food for the occupants of the park.

The increasing need for building material for traditional pole and dagga houses is adding to the deforestation problem.

The government's resettlement programme is resettling some farmers from the communal areas and further resettlement is planned. People are being encouraged to use alternative building material for houses – although this will have a negative impact on vernacular architectural traditions.

Overall outreach programmes are encouraging knowledge and understanding of the cultural importance of the area.

**Natural disasters:** The area is prone to droughts and floods. Every ten years or so cyclones travel inland bringing significant rainfall. The natural vegetation seems to be hardly robust enough to absorb the impact of these extremes and soil erosion is becoming a serious problem.

In order to provide extra water in times of drought, dam building projects have been recommended.

The greatest threat to the environment after population pressure is the introduction of exotic plants. The current threat is from *Lantana camara*, which has established itself in the eastern hills and parts of the national park. The recent introduction of Eucalyptus and Bottlebrush is also a potential threat as is the *Azolla* fern in the Maleme dam. The DNPWLM has strategies to deal with these invasive species in its management plan.

**Visitor/tourism pressures:** Since the 1980s tourism has grown rapidly with the Matobo National Park recording the

second highest number of visitors after Victoria Falls. 100,000 now visit annually. Response to the needs of visitors is coming from the commercial and communal lands –rather than from centralised direction. Increased visitor numbers are beginning to have a slight adverse effect particularly on the rock paintings through dust, graffiti, and illegal spraying of water on the paintings to enhance their appearance for photographs. Illegal cutting of certain tree species to produce carved curios for tourists has also been recorded.

The management plan acknowledges these issues and the need for strategies to better manage visitors to the site as well as for adequate staffing at sites open to the public.

**Development pressures:** Development pressure comes mainly from the demand for amenities and facilities by visitors. A dense network of new roads, hotels, lodges, camping sites, caravan parks are all beginning to contribute to changes in the appearance of the landscape – although these are yet to be too intrusive.

**Atrophying of interest in traditional beliefs:** Concern was expressed to the evaluator by elders that younger people did not show much interest in learning and carrying on the traditions. Judging from books such as the one by Terrence Ranger, *Voices from the Rocks*, there has been a gradual attrition since the late nineteenth century.

#### *Authenticity and integrity*

The authenticity and integrity of the Matobo Hills site needs to extend through all its elements: rock paintings, natural heritage; archaeological sites; intangible heritage.

The authenticity of the hunter-gatherer and a few agriculturist rock paintings in the Matobo Hills area has been widely confirmed. The rock paintings survive in situ and are still linked to a landscape that reflects elements of the pastoral and agricultural traditions reflected in painted images. They thus have a high level of authenticity.

Overall the rock paintings are in a fairly good state of preservation. Natural weathering is the main agent of change and although this has made some of the paintings difficult to decipher, the process is part of the relationship between the images and their setting. Further slight damage is being wrought by visitors.

In only one cave are the paintings badly compromised: at Pomongwe Cave, experiments were carried out in the 1920s with linseed oil as a preservative and this has darkened the images.

The archaeological evidence appears to be well protected – both within those caves where large-scale excavations have taken place and elsewhere in caves that could produce further evidence.

During her visit, the evaluator was able to verify the authenticity of the living traditions and intangible heritage associated with the site and which bind the cultural and natural values together.

The custodians and elders at both the shrines visited (Njelele and Dula) estimated that collectively more than a thousand people visit them annually. The casual visitor to Njelele would hardly know its significance without verbal or written explanation because the significance of the place is in the natural features of the rocks and the adjacent

terraces where participants dance, perform rituals, eat and sleep during the 3-week long annual pilgrimage in August. There are no artificial buildings, structures, walls or other traces of human presence, apart from a wooden palisade that demarcates the area beyond which people may not proceed without permission from the ancestral spirits who are consulted by the custodian and the elders.

### *Comparative evaluation*

Similar intangible values to those put forward for Matobo may be argued for the Inyanga region in the east of the Zimbabwe (not yet proposed for world heritage listing, but on the tentative list) where shrines are also still operating. Comparatively speaking, however, Matobo Hills has greater physical integrity and there is evidence that people with a wider range of cultural activities and beliefs have interacted with the landscape over a longer period of time than at Inyanga.

Beyond the borders of Zimbabwe, the closest comparable world heritage site is to the west at Tsodilo where the geological features are similar, but on a much smaller scale. The rock art at Tsodilo is of a different tradition from that at Matobo Hills, and it is much more recent (within the last 2000 years). The intangible heritage of Tsodilo is still part of the living culture, with a shrine visited by local people, but it is again a different tradition from the beliefs practiced at Matobo Hills.

In Namibia, the rock art in the Brandberg (on the tentative list) is comparable in size density, age, quality and tradition to that of Matobo Hills, but the Brandberg lacks the continuity of living traditions.

To the east, the rock art of the Chongoni area in Malawi (currently being prepared for nomination) is closely connected to rituals still being practiced today, but it is an agriculturist tradition, not a hunter-gatherer one.

To the south, the mixed world heritage cultural and natural site at uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park in South Africa shares some similarities with Matobo Hills hunter-gatherer rock paintings, but the geological and environmental setting of the two sites is quite different and uKhahlamba has no comparable living heritage values. The recently nominated Mapungubwe cultural landscape has a much lower density of rock art, only partly resembling the hunter-gatherer paintings in Matobo Hills, and the time period for which it is nominated as a cultural landscape is not well represented at Matobo Hills.

The above reflects a thematic study of the rock art sites in Southern Africa, which was undertaken by ICOMOS in collaboration with members of the South African Rock Art Project (SARAP).

To the north, the rock art of Kasama in Zambia is being prepared for nomination but the paintings and the beliefs surrounding them are much more recent than in the Matobo Hills and as a result the subjects depicted and the styles and techniques used are quite different.

Beyond the African continent, a broad generic similarity can be recognised with places like Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and Kakadu National Park in Australia.

The Matobo Hills cultural landscape nomination does not therefore overlap with, or duplicate, any comparable properties in southern Africa or further afield that are on

the world heritage or tentative lists. However, it does share a high-level similarity with several sites that demonstrate strong and sustained intangible spiritual connections between people and the landscape in which they lived, and where there is no tangible evidence to demonstrate these links.

### *Outstanding universal value*

#### *General statement:*

The universal value of the Matobo Hills stems from the way people have interacted with, and been inspired by, the dramatic natural rock formations over many millennia. This interaction has produced one of the most outstanding rock art collections in southern Africa; it has also fostered strong religious beliefs, which still play a major role in contemporary local society; and it demonstrates an almost uninterrupted association between man and his environment over the past 100,000 years. The natural qualities of Matobo thus have strong cultural associations.

#### *Evaluation of criteria:*

The *criteria* selected by Zimbabwe for nomination of the Matobo Hills as a cultural landscape are *iii* and *vi*:

**Criterion iii:** The rich evidence from archaeology and from the rock paintings at Matobo provides evidence to show that the Matobo Hills have been occupied over a period of at least 500,000 years. Furthermore this evidence provides a very full picture of the lives of foraging societies in the Stone Age and the way agricultural societies eventually came to displace them in the Iron Age.

The Matobo Hills has one of the highest concentrations of rock art in Southern Africa dating back at least 13,000 years. The paintings illustrate evolving artistic styles and also socio-religious beliefs. The whole bears testimony to a rich cultural tradition that has now disappeared.

**Criterion vi:** The Mwari religion which is still practiced in the area, and which may date back to the Iron Age, is the most powerful oracular traditions in southern Africa. The Matobo rocks are seen as the seat of god and of ancestral spirits. Sacred shrines within the hills are places where contact can be made with the spiritual world. The living traditions associated with the shrines represent one of the most powerful intangible traditions in southern Africa and one that could be said to be of universal significance.

**Criterion v** could also have been selected. What is significant at Matobo is the way communities living in harmony with the surrounding landscape have interacted with the rocky hills of Matobo. This interaction is manifest in the millennia of rock art as well as in the current religious traditions associated with the rocks: these are community responses to a landscape rather than individual ones. Thus the landscape – both its tangible and its intangible heritage – is a reflection of a distinctive culture which stressed the power of the rocks and of the produce from the surrounding natural environment.

#### 4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS

##### *Recommendation for the future*

This is the second nomination for the site. The first nomination in 1983-84 was for a natural site. The value of the rock paintings was acknowledged at the time of the original nomination and also its setting: '...the region, with forests and granite hills, provides an inspiring landscape setting for its outstanding rock art sites.' The nomination was deferred by the Bureau, which noted that it 'lacked justifications for inscription' and 'requested the Zimbabwean authorities to re-submit this nomination defining the cultural and natural criteria justifying this nomination' (SC-84/CONF. 001/9, p. 15).

The current nomination addresses these points and is being submitted under the criteria for cultural landscapes that did not exist at the time of the earlier nomination.

There is no doubt that the Matobo Hills have exerted an influence on the beliefs, rituals, culture, economy and lifestyle of people who have lived in the vicinity for well over 100,000 years. These people have left both tangible and intangible evidence of their attachment to the landscape and many of the natural heritage values that sparked their beliefs are still intact. The nomination puts forward the Matobo Hills as a living cultural landscape where peoples' interaction with the environment has a long time depth, is still thriving and exemplifies a strong local culture.

One has to dig quite deep into the text to justify these points, which does not make the case very plainly. Extra information provided by the evaluator and others has helped to clarify the situation to the extent that ICOMOS should in principle support inscription as a cultural landscape.

However, there are issues connected with the management of that cultural landscape. These stem mostly from the lack of clarity in the text of the cultural and natural qualities of the landscape, and how these are integrated to reflect the dynamic evolution of the whole landscape. Thus the management plan will need to be modified to reflect more integrated thinking and to specify ways in which this thinking can play a proactive role in management. It will also be necessary to find ways to document the significant belief systems in order to try and quantify whether they are declining and, if so, how far and how fast.

A conservation management plan that has more specific detail than the current generic management plan may also be required. This could identify key research and recording issues, to integrate significant information from the natural, cultural and intangible heritage spheres, and to offer strategies for retaining the significance of both the intangible and tangible heritage.

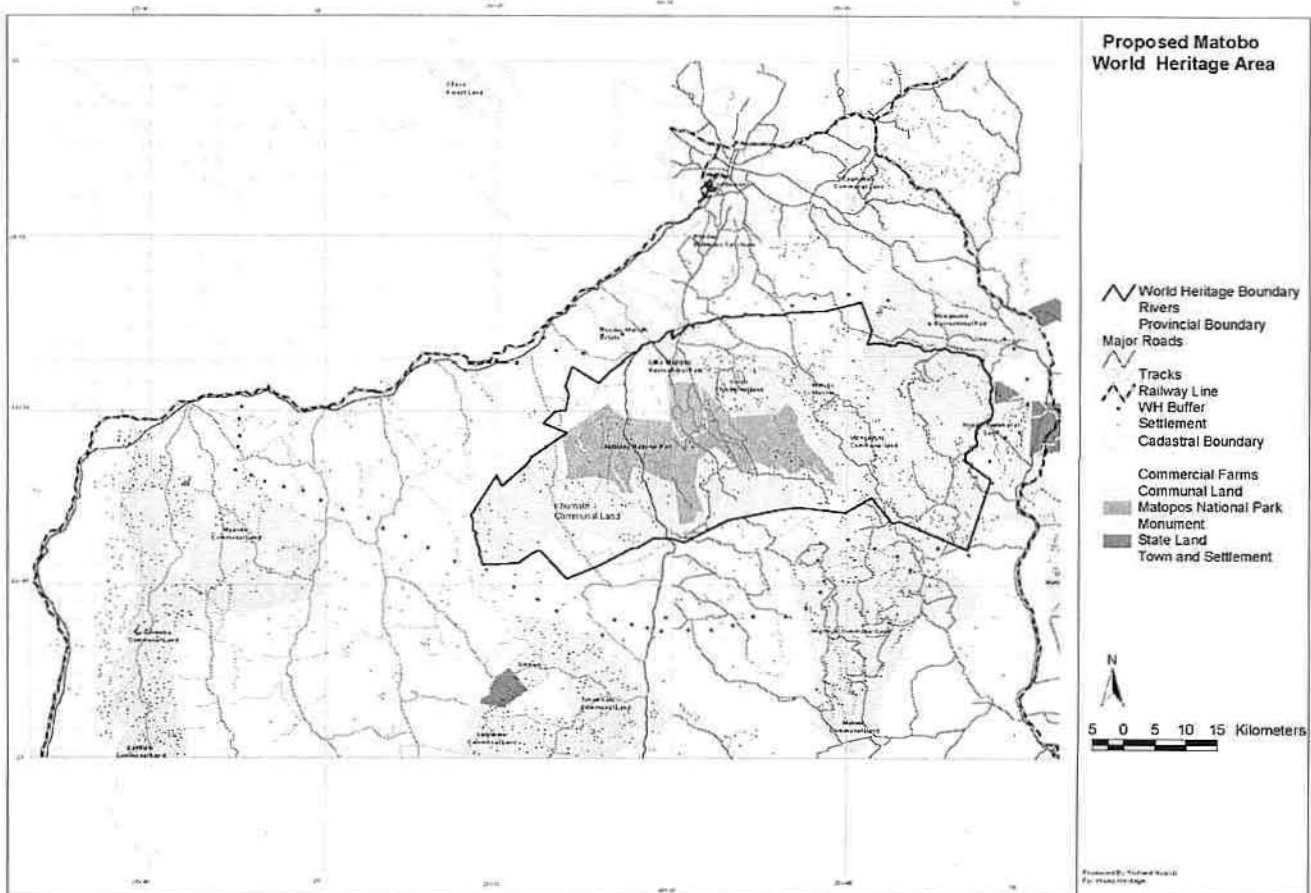
The proposed establishment of the high-level decision-making management authority, with the addition of tourism representatives and oral history specialists, will begin to achieve this integrated thinking.

##### *Recommendation with respect to inscription*

That this nomination be *deferred* to allow the State Party to provide a revised management plan that addresses:

- The integrated management of the site to achieve sustainable development which respects both cultural and natural parameters of a cultural landscape;
- The integration of intangible heritage issues into management and interpretation;
- Acknowledges the need for conservation plans for key aspects of the site.

ICOMOS, March 2003



**Map showing the boundaries of the site  
Plan de délimitation du site**