

State of Conservation Report

for

Maloti–Drakensberg Park
World Heritage Site

Lesotho and South Africa

Submitted

by the Governments of the Kingdom of Lesotho and Republic of South Africa

DECEMBER 2024



PART I – IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROPERTY

Name of property: Maloti–Drakensberg Park

Identification number: 985 BIS and 985ter

State Party and Province: Lesotho, Qacha's nek District

State Party and Province: South Africa, KwaZulu-Natal Province

Criteria: (i)(iii)(vii) and (x)

1. Executive Summary of the Report

The State of Conservation Report is in response to Decision: 45 COM 7B.101 for Maloti-Drakensberg Park (Lesotho, South Africa) (C/N 985bis and 985ter).

The Decision also recalls previous Decisions adopted by the World Heritage Committee, namely 44 COM 7B.170 adopted at its extended 44th session (Fuzhou/online, 2021).

The States Parties reiterate their commitment to limiting conservation interventions for the rock art sites to addressing immediate and urgent vulnerabilities only, and to submit the Environmental and Heritage impact assessment reports for the proposed cableway, as well as the shale gas and oil explorations, to the World Heritage Centre, as soon as the assessments are completed.

The States Parties further reiterate their commitment in finalising the revision of the Joint Management Plan (JMP), however the State Parties are currently revising the Joint Management Committee agreement before proceeding with the finalisation of the Joint Management Plan.

The State Party of Lesotho expresses that the approval of the Biodiversity Resources Management Bill has been delayed by change in Lesotho's national administration.

The two States Parties are not aware of any other conservation issues, proposals or applications for major restorations, alterations and constructions within the property or the buffer zone which may affect the Outstanding Universal Value of the property including authenticity and integrity.

2. Response to the Decision of the World Heritage Committee

2.1 Appreciates the commitment by the state party of South Africa to undertake environmental impact assessments in line with the guidance and toolkit for impact assessments in a world heritage context for the proposed cableway in the immediate vicinity of the property and for the proposed oil and gas exploration within the anticipated buffer zone in South Africa, which could impact the outstanding universal value (OUV) of the property and requests the state party of South Africa to ensure that their potential impacts on the OUV of the property are assessed in line with the guidance and toolkit for impact assessments in a world heritage context, and to submit impact assessments to the world heritage centre for review by the advisory bodies before making any decisions that may be difficult to reverse, and to continue to keep the world heritage centre informed before any such pending decision to proceed is made, in accordance with paragraphs 118bis and 172 of the operational guidelines;

The State Party of South Africa reiterates its commitment to undertake the impact assessments for the proposed cableway and the oil and gas exploration within the buffer zone of the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park to the World Heritage Committee for review before making any decisions that may be difficult to reverse, in accordance with Paragraphs 118bis and 172 of the Operational Guidelines. The State Party would like to reiterate that the cableway and the oil and gas exploration impact assessments have not commenced.

2.2 Also requests the state party of South Africa to provide more information on the mitigation measures put in place to avoid any negative impacts, in particular visual impacts, of the operation of the petrol filling station in the buffer zone of the property on the OUV;

The mitigation measures put in place to avoid any negative impacts on properties Outstanding Universal Value during the operations phase, in particular with regards to the visual impacts for the filling station includes;

- Lights must be dimmed at night and no floodlights or poles must be taller than the filling station canopy base.
- Signage must harmonize with the environment and where possible contribute to the sense of place.

2.3 Notes with appreciation the completion of the integrated management plan (IMP) for the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park component of the property in South Africa, which will be reviewed by the advisory bodies;

The South African state party appreciates and notes the paragraph.

2.4 Reiterates its request to the states parties to urgently complete and submit to the world heritage centre for review the revision of the joint management plan of the property, taking on board the outcomes of the conservation, monitoring and risk assessment of rock art in Sehlabathebe National Park project, improving interpretation of rock art, and using it as an umbrella to harmonise the management system, and to report on its implementation;

The State Parties are in the process of revising the Joint Management Committee agreement, before reviewing the Joint Management Plan to incorporate results of the conservation, monitoring and risk assessment of rock art. The Sehlabathebe National Park (SNP) monitoring and risk assessment exercise revealed that the three rock art sites adjacent to the road, are frequently visited, as a result are highly prone to risk. Human agents likely to cause deterioration or damage to the rock art were identified as dust, soot, graffiti and liquid pouring on the rock art. The State Party of Lesotho as a result put strict measures to minimize risk to the rock art by forbidding unguided tours to all rock art sites in the park. The number of visitors to each rock art site is also significantly controlled. Periodically the park staff remove plants growing on the rock cliffs and inside the rock shelters. All the factors affecting the rock art sites within the park have been observed and taken into consideration in the development of various management tools for the park. The SNP Cultural Heritage Management Plan, Fire Management Plan, Sehlabathebe Management Plan and other management tools dictate how conservation and management of not only the rock art, but the park's heritage resources should be handled.

As far as improving the interpretation of the rock art, the State Party of Lesotho commits to introduce virtual interpretation for rock art sites that are vulnerable. This initiative is intended to enhance interpretation as well as reduce risk by limiting physical visits to rock art sites.

2.5 Takes note of the approval of the biodiversity resources management bill by the national assembly of Lesotho and also reiterates its request to the state party of Lesotho to expedite finalization and to submit a copy to the world heritage centre;

The Biodiversity Resource Management Bill (Bill) was in Senate in the 10th Parliament having been discussed in the 10th national assembly. However, the high court of Lesotho made a decision in November 2023 that Bills from the 10th Parliament have to start afresh in the 11th Parliament. Currently the Bill has received concurrences from relevant stakeholder Ministries, and we await concurrence from Ministry of Finance to be able to proceed to Parliament.

2.6 Notes the process to propose a minor boundary modification to formalize the buffer zone to the south of the Sehlabathebe National Park in South Africa and further requests the states parties to submit the fully completed maps, as advised by the world heritage centre, so that it can be transferred to the advisory bodies for evaluation;

The full maps of the proposed Minor Boundary were submitted to UNESCO for the for the Maloti-Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site on the 1st of February 2024. The Minor Boundary Modification application was reviewed and approved by the World Heritage Committee during the 46th session held at New Delhi, India. The response to the World Heritage Committee Decision 46 COM 8B.32 is attached as Annexure A.

3. Other current conservation issues identified by the state(s) party(ies) which may have an impact on the property's outstanding universal value

Fire at the uKhahlamba- Drakensberg Park main caves

The Officer-in-Charge of the Witteberg Section, which encompasses the Giants Castle area of the uKhahlamba- Drakensberg Park, reported an incident of arson on the 28th of July 2024, at approximately 11:45 am. The Standby Fire team was quickly deployed to tackle the flames, while additional teams were placed on alert. At that time, the manager estimated wind speeds exceeding 100 km/h, with even stronger gusts. After the fire was contained, it was found that roughly 4,000 hectares had been scorched. Although the exact cause of the fire remains unknown, it is strongly suspected to be the result of arson committed by individuals illegally entering the Park. Unfortunately, the fire spread to the Main Caves, a site of San Rock Art at Giants Castle, destroying the viewing platform and causing significant damage to both the site and the rock art, about 30% of the rock art was damaged in the Northern section by spalling and ash adherence.

The provincial Heritage Authority, the KwaZulu Natal Amafa and Research Institute (Amafa) in early August 2024 visited the Main Caves at the request of Ezemvelo KwaZulu Natal Wildlife (management authority) to conduct an independent risk assessment of the damage. The Amafa report describes a "runaway or arson fire that has gutted the northern section of the Main Caves Museum in the Giant's

Castle Management Unit." It further details that "both the southern and northern sections of the Main Caves Open Air Museum feature a wooden boardwalk and gathering decks. The northern section's boardwalk and gathering deck were completely destroyed by fire, while the river in the southern section acted as a buffer, thankfully leaving it intact." Dr G. Blundell (the Principal Curator for the Department of Human Sciences at the KwaZulu-Natal Museum) also visited the site in August and "recommended establishing a working group of rock art researchers to re-design the exhibit at Main Caves rock art in manner that is more in line with international standards regarding materials and so forth." (see attached report as Annexure B). Additionally, American archaeologists Mr. David and Ms. Tammy Whitley noted that "the fire was so intense that it destabilized the cave ceiling, causing its surface to spall even after the infrastructure had completely burned." They further warned that "there is substantial evidence suggesting that the stability of the rock art panels may have been seriously compromised and, without immediate intervention, they risk further degradation and loss of integrity."

In the aftermath of the incident, Ezemvelo promptly closed off the site to the public. After reviewing the recommendations from independent experts. Ezemvelo established a Working Group comprised of Amafa, the KwaZulu-Natal Museum and leading specialists to determine the best strategies for stabilizing and managing the site, as well as providing recommendations on the most effective approaches to restoration and preservation.

4. In conformity with paragraph 172 of the *operational guidelines*, describe any potential major restorations, alterations and/or new construction(s) intended within the property, the buffer zone(s) and/or corridors or other areas, where such developments may affect the outstanding universal value of the property, including authenticity and integrity;

None.

5. **Public access to the state of conservation report**

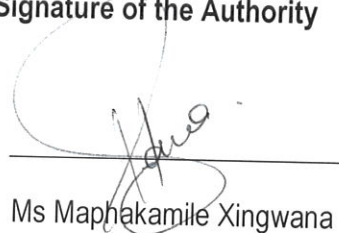
The State Parties have no objection against uploading this State of Conservation Report for the Maloti-Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site to the World Heritage Centres State of Conservation Information System, thereby providing access towards the report.

6. **Signature of the Authority**

Obo Ms Flora Mokgohloa
Deputy Director-General
Biodiversity and Conservation:
Department of Forestry, Fisheries and
the Environment

Date: 29/11/2024

Signature of the Authority



Ms Maphakamile Xingwana

Principal Secretary

Ministry of Environment and Forestry

Date: 28/11/2024