



South African
NATIONAL PARKS



VISION
2040



VISION 2040
PATHWAYS TO THE FUTURE OF CONSERVATION



For centuries, there have been deep, harmonious relationships between nature and our ancestors. SANParks is striving to bridge the gap between communities and conservation, to be a modern organisation that draws its most valuable lessons from its historical African context.

Pam Yako

Chairperson of the SANParks Board





INTRODUCTION

Re-imagine South Africa

It is now 2040, and:

We are bonded to our country, to its high mountains and rivers, to its deserts and fertile valleys. Nature is our heart, our breath, our common ground. We owe our very being to the land. It nurtures us, and we cherish it.

South Africans are a people interconnected with nature and invested in its protection and restoration. We understand that nature is the well of vitality and at the centre of healthy and resilient communities. We take pride in the diversity of our natural resources, the wildlife and wild lands that surround us. We frown on poaching of animals and plants; we use the proceeds of nature responsibly. We see benefits in maintaining healthy environments; air quality is high; our rivers, dams and lakes are cleaner; pollution is low and littering a thing of the past.

Our families are healthy. Communities thrive. The young lead by example as they know no other but a 'green' way of life. The nature and tourism economy is booming and our livelihoods benefit directly and tangibly. Learning and job opportunities are plentiful. The unique plants and animals that make South Africa one of the richest biodiverse countries in the world are treasured and used responsibly. There is a renewed appreciation of nature in urban and rural areas alike. Our cultural heritage is safeguarded and celebrated.

We are the land, and the land is us.

This is the projected 'high road' scenario for South Africa, the result of a process that started in 2022 when the Board of South African National Parks decided to consult with South Africans on the way forward. New ideas were crucial to navigating the way forward for protected areas up to the year 2040.

By the middle of 2024, more than 1 600 stakeholders had been consulted, and had become part of the planning process – now named Vision 2040. These participants included visitors to our parks, our employees, women, communities neighbouring our parks, conservationists, scientists, traditional leaders, healers, heritage specialists, businesspeople, and youth organisations.

"Thinking about the long-term future is critical for our country. Vision 2040 must be more than a blueprint.

It must be a promise to confront the imbalance between people and nature, ensuring that our country not only survives, but that people see the benefit."

Ms Makhiba Mollo – National Planning Commission

They gave their responses via workshops, virtual meetings, social media, and online feedback.

It was the first time in SANParks history that the public had been consulted on a visionary scenario exercise of this scale. The contributions from these diverse South Africans were invaluable, co-creating the foundation of a shared vision for the future of conservation in South Africa.

Futurists who study and analyse the future of trends were called in. They took the raw information and together with stakeholders shaped and envisaged seven likely scenarios for conservation in South Africa. Each scenario had its own valuable lessons. But the seventh drew consensus and stood above all the rest:

Scenario Seven was called 'The Best of All - Mega Living Landscapes', and it envisions a very different South Africa to the one of 2024.

In brief, it is this:

We shift from conservation areas that are islands and that exclude people, to expansive, connected stretches of land, aiming for a future where both nature and people thrive.



NATURE NEWS

Thursday,
26 September 2040

BLACK BIODIVERSITY INDUSTRIALIST, AN ECO- WARRIOR

Mpho Mhlaba, who heads up EcoDynamics International, has won yet another international award, the Green Globe, this time for their transformative role in South Africa's biodiversity economy.

While handing over the award, Green Globe chairperson Aziza Sablay commended Mhlaba for their holistic approach to business.

"It exemplifies a profound commitment to environmental health and inclusive growth. Their achievements transcend corporate success, influencing policy and inspiring a new generation of eco-entrepreneurs."

Mhlaba's storied career started after they pioneered the Pofadder Biodiversity Industry Cluster. Here they championed fisheries and aquaculture initiatives along the West Coast. Their business endeavours then spread to wildlife ranching in various Southern African countries.

But Mhlaba is best known for the company they started in 2034, EcoDynamics International (EDI), listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange.

In their first years at the helm of EcoDynamics International, Mhlaba pioneered a paradigm shift in the biodiversity economy. Their peers and colleagues acknowledge them as a visionary leader who ensures ecological integrity while generating wealth for communities and shareholders through social equity, renewable energy, biotechnology and ecosystem management.

At the award ceremony on 24 August, Mhlaba said their vision and drive had been shaped by his childhood in the rural areas, and having had the opportunity to spend time in Kruger National Park while a learner.

"I am proud to be called the future of conscientious industrialism—a future where profitability aligns with the preservation of Earth's rich biodiversity, ensuring a thriving world for generations to come."

By Jamal Naidoo



SCENARIO 7: VISION 2040 - THE BEST OF ALL

By 2040, the dream of people living in harmony with nature, supported by a nation invested in its success, has been realised and is being celebrated as a model for others to follow.

Nature, heritage and conservation are integral to every South African's life, correlating directly with healthy people and parks. Protected areas transcend borders, with national parks serving as cores of conservation in vast open landscapes. Transboundary and other protected areas cover ecological, cultural, and heritage ecosystems, fostering landscape and community unity. To achieve Vision 2040, SANParks embraced radical change and transitioned into an organisation coordinating mega-living landscapes that bring people in harmony with nature. SANParks enables social cohesion.

With political and societal support, the organisation champions new and innovative approaches that increase the diversity of wildlife and wild worlds, protect biodiversity, eliminate poaching and grow local, regional and international visitor numbers in parks. Working with all stakeholders, SANParks is now an organisation owned and sustained by community and business leaders including youth representatives.

In this vision, women stand as pillars of strength. Their participation shapes a future where their contributions are honoured and their roles in conservation and community upliftment are celebrated. Women are at the forefront of safeguarding cultural heritage, preserving the past while guiding us towards a prosperous future. They are the trusted hearts of social cohesion, weaving the threads that bind communities together, ensuring that every woman, every child, every voice is heard and valued.

SANParks has given significant importance to the safeguarding of cultural heritage sites, aligning with its core mandate and long-term vision as we recognise the importance of cultural heritage in promoting community well-being, identity, and national pride. These efforts included expanding controlled access to historical sites within the living landscapes and improving educational resources.

Numerous partnerships have been forged to unlock the use of plant and animal-life for generations to come and create socio-economic opportunities benefiting both communities and SANParks. These collaborations support conservation, heritage preservation, biodiversity, and tourism, contributing to the well-being of both humans and the environment. The Minister of Finance, the Minister of Health and the Minister of the Environment in South Africa have all been awarded global recognition for their supportive role in the biodiversity economy and for the role nature plays in human well-being respectively.

SANParks is carbon neutral. Renewable energy installations in all of our (former) parks had been done by 2030 and the eventual adoption of e-vehicles for its fleet accelerated net-zero targets. Quick wins like banning bins and plastic bags, alongside carry-in-carry-out policies, bolstered net-zero targets.

While climate change is still a serious international concern, mitigation strategies protect both land- and seascapes and support international mitigation targets. Ongoing adaptive management and community engagement are key as we navigate climate complexities.

"When we talk about Vision 2040, we're really talking about investing in the future of our planet. Climate finance isn't just about funding projects; it's about ensuring that every rand we spend helps build a more resilient, sustainable world.

Christelle Beyers – Presidential Climate Commission

SANParks also leads in the international Eco-Experience Tourism Economy. While some seek traditional Big 5, many discover broader ecosystem offerings like stargazing and cultural events. Parks offer seamless experiences managed by people from local communities providing immersive visitor centres and seamless virtual payments, allowing visitors to contribute to conservation projects, and boosting revenue. The Chief Experience Office for Tourism has done groundbreaking work, and our parks have won all categories in the United Nations World Tourism Organisation awards, including awards for sustainable and responsible tourism practices.





SANParks prioritised financial viability and sustainability to realise Vision 2040 early on and now operates independently from financial support from the government. Optimising conservation resources benefits the organisation, communities and South Africans generally, creating substantial socio-economic benefits off the back of the biodiversity economy. Strategic partnerships, spanning sectors and borders, enhance financial sustainability, securing funding for shared agendas and diverse revenue streams. A diversified funding model is in place and the organisational efficiency optimises delivery.

Following a review of the business model, SANParks now plays a prominent role as a champion rather than a regulator. The organisation recognises the importance of harnessing the power and influence of a wide range of stakeholders, both locally and globally, in its activities and advocacy efforts. The new business entity is ensuring profitability and effective coordination of all living landscapes in South Africa for the benefit of all. It has reshaped conservation strategies to become a global leader in research and innovation. Leveraging technology, SANParks now offer seamless experiences while fostering innovative collaborations with global tech disruptors, supporting research and citizen science.

SANParks focuses on dynamic, innovative, and entrepreneurial approaches, consciously leveraging technology and implementing agile financial strategies for sustainability.

Our Head Office is now a cutting-edge biodiversity campus, driving conservation education in tech, finance, and community engagement. It attracts global students for nature-based learning, generating revenue from educational camps and sabbaticals. Graduates become sought-after global talents and SANParks ambassadors.

SANParks is the global employer of choice, renowned for top-rated staff and leadership. It generates revenue through research services for parks worldwide, prioritising talent attraction and retention. Flexible work policies allow remote living and work within parks. Recognition that people and internal and external stakeholders are the enablers of any preferred future is a core part of SANParks' organisational culture. The Chief Catalyst Officer for Transformation in SANParks has received the global award for #1 as "Internationally acclaimed preferred employer".





BACKDROP AND FOREGROUND

A Quick Look Behind Us

Kruger National Park was proclaimed in 1926, the start of a conservation journey that would save and safeguard wild lands and wild animals across South Africa.

South African National Parks has come a long way from the 'Fortress Approach' that first prevailed in nature reserves worldwide. Back then, conservationists in South Africa would generally identify a piece of land deemed important for its biological diversity or landscape value and remove people, often forcibly. The area would then be fenced off, rules would be enforced, and access would be restricted.

The pain and social injustice experienced by these displaced communities are still keenly felt today.

The last thirty years have seen dramatic changes in the way SANParks has approached conservation.

By the 1990s, with the coming of a new democratic government, conservation authorities sought greater collaboration with surrounding communities.

In the run-up to South Africa's first democratic government in 1994, for example, SANParks entered into an agreement with the people of the Richtersveld to establish a contractual national park on communal land. This enabled local communities to benefit through jobs and income while also protecting this delicate arid biome.

Similarly, the Makuleke people now own a large concession within Kruger National Park, part of their ancestral land, and managed by SANParks.

This concession in the Pafuri area has a history of rolling forced removals, with some of the Makuleke being forcibly moved in the early 1900's and others in the 1960's. Around 1997, the Makuleke had their land restored and through, what was described as a world-class and innovative agreement, a 50-year contractual park was established. This concession has become an iconic ecotourism destination and a breakthrough for how conservation of the future should look.

SANParks created a standalone division in the early years of South Africa's democracy called Social Ecology to ensure that conservation became more inclusive and equitable. This marked a new era in innovation, benefit-sharing, and a pioneering approach to collaboration with communities.

In 1991, a law was passed in South Africa making it one of the few countries in the world that allowed private ownership of wildlife within fenced areas. This was key to the rapid spread of privately owned and managed nature reserves and game ranches in South Africa.

As years went by, fences were dropped between Kruger and neighbouring game reserves, restoring some historic migratory routes for wild animals.

In 1999, South Africa and Botswana launched the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, the first such cross-boundary protected area in Africa.

DID YOU KNOW?

- In 1866, a single company in Kroonstad exported 157 000 blesbok and wildebeest skins. Between 1870 and 1871, records show that half a million blesbok, wildebeest and zebra skins were shipped from the port of Durban.
- In 1896, after the outbreak of the Rinderpest, the Transvaal Volksraad allowed citizens to shoot as many wild animals as they could;
- Between 1916 to 1929, the Natal Government encourage hunters to shoot game indiscriminately, in the mistaken belief that they harboured the tsetse fly. At least 138 000 wild animals died as a result;
- By the early 1930s, there were only 17 bontebok left in the country, which led to the proclamation of the Bontebok National Park near Swellendam. Numbers have now risen over 3 500;

Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs) are large protected zones straddling national borders, linking parks and wildlife reserves in different countries. They protect ecosystems by allowing animals to move freely across boundaries, supporting biodiversity, and promoting cooperation between states.

Since 2005, the number and size of TFCAs have increased dramatically in Southern Africa. There are now six TFCAs in place, covering more than 100,000 square kilometres.

During the first two decades of the new millennium, SANParks proclaimed six new national parks and expanded many of its existing parks, adding a million more hectares to the country's protected areas.

Across Africa, vast swathes of land had been set aside for protected areas since the mid-20th century and more so since post-colonial days. Despite these major accomplishments, protected areas in South Africa remained small in comparison. Even so, there has been notable growth.



Addo Elephant National Park, tiny when proclaimed in 1931, is now a mega park, sprawling over 182 000 hectares from the edges of the dry Karoo, across dense subtropical thicket, to the ocean. Southern right whales and great white sharks have been added to lions, leopards, buffalo, rhino and elephants, making this a Big 7 park.

A local community benefits from their ownership of Matyholweni – one of Addo's most popular rest camps.



DID YOU KNOW?

- By 1890, numbers of black wildebeest had sunk to a few hundred, and they were expected to become extinct, just as the quagga and the bluebuck. Two farming families in the Free State gave them sanctuary. Now black wildebeest, which are only found in South Africa, are staging a strong comeback in the arid and grassland national parks.
- By the early 1930s, there were only a few dozen Cape mountain zebras left in the Sneeuberg mountains near Cradock. Proclaiming the initially tiny Mountain Zebra National Park halted the decline. Numbers are now above 750 and Cape mountain zebras have been translocated to many other high altitude parks.



Where We Stand Now

By late 2024, South Africa had 21 functional national parks safeguarding more than four million hectares of land, along with ten Marine Protected Areas covering 370 000 hectares.

There are eight UNESCO World Heritage Sites and five parks in shared conservation areas with our neighbours Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

Currently, South Africa's protected and conservation areas are an irregular patchwork made up of national parks, nature reserves, forest wildernesses, marine protected areas, mountain catchments, special nature reserves, and in some places, overarching biosphere reserves and protected environments that link various kinds of conservation lands.

They cover an impressive 16 million hectares, with SANParks managing approximately 30 percent of these protected areas through a network of national parks.

The existing national and provincial parks have the highest level of protection. They remain the cores and anchors of any conserved area.

Within the Kgalagadi TFCA, recently proclaimed as the #Khomani Cultural Landscape World Heritage Site, the #Khomani San and Mier communities enjoy unrestricted access to their ancestral lands. Cultural ceremonies are allowed and practised. The ancient languages are being revived.

This dry savannah park has a long history of human habitation and survival techniques, along with traditional hunting and plant collection customs. By blending indigenous knowledge with modern park management techniques, SANParks, the Khomani San and Mier people have developed an innovative, community-driven conservation model that preserves their heritage and sustains their livelihoods.

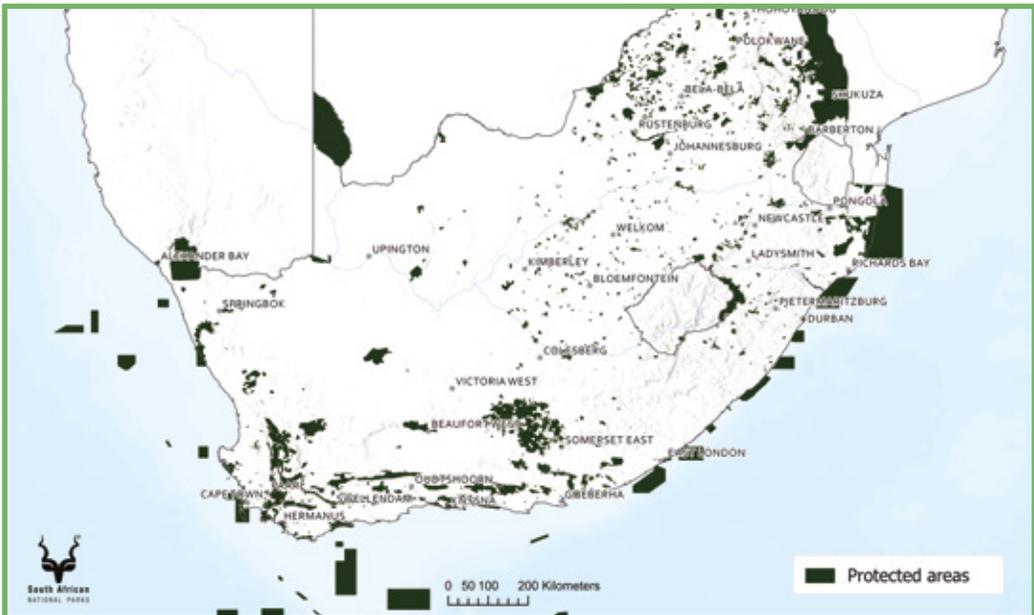
A Glance into the Future

At the United Nations Biodiversity Conference in 2022, South Africa and other countries committed to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), which aims to conserve at least 30% of the world's terrestrial, inland water, coastal and marine areas by 2030. The agreement, also called 30 x 30 (Thirty by Thirty), specifically respects the rights and involvement of indigenous peoples and local communities.

To achieve 30% by 2030 would mean a dramatic growth in South Africa's existing conservation lands: an additional 14 million hectares (equivalent to eight Kruger National Parks) must be added to the 16 million hectares now under formal protection.

Clearly, Government and organisations like SANParks cannot attain this goal without the private sector and traditional or communally-owned lands.

To achieve 30 x 30, conservation in South Africa must be re-imagined. The old ways of conservation islands that exclude people will not work.





NATURE NEWS

Thursday,
26 September 2040

FORMER MINE TO BE A CONSERVATION GEM

Exciting developments have begun at the former diamond mine south of Port Nolloth. Kleinzee Holdings is winding down large sections of its operations and with the help of SA National Parks, is creating jobs and opportunities for entrepreneurs in the town.

There is still steady seasonal work doing land restoration on the former mine, funded by the former owners, De Beers and Kleinzee Holdings. But other developments are moving ahead. Initial funding has come from Kleinzee's first Green Bonds for Carbon Capture Contribution.

SA National Parks has translocated gemsbok, bat-eared foxes and seed-spreading whistling rats onto the land, bringing them from the nearby Namaqua National Park and Goegap Nature Reserve. A communally-owned nature reserve is being planned. Kleinzee already has its first official birding and nature guide who can take tourists to the spectacular seal colony.

Wheelchair users and those with crutches are catered for with ramps and easy access. There are braille, audio signs and helpful guides for the visually impaired.

The seal colony now falls within one of the largest regional Marine Protected areas, proclaimed in 2027. The MPA has created unexpected benefits for Port Nolloth and Hondeklipbaai. Fishermen are reporting bigger catches, even though there are still strict regulations on size and numbers.

Closer to the town, abalone, mussel and crayfish farms, several owned by women-only consortia, are already generating a profit.

Communications Executive for Kleinzee Land & Sea Pty Ltd, Samantha Diergaardt, credits the regional Mega Living Landscapes with the uptick in visitors and revenue to West Coast's small towns.

"Tourists have already started booking months in advance for the crayfish and Sustainable Seascape food experiences in Hondeklipbaai and Port Nolloth.

"We are also happy to announce that the solar-powered desalination plant is now complete, so construction is moving ahead on the housing development within the new Kleinzee Nature Reserve."

By Nandipha Mashazi



THE VISION

Scenario Seven, the Mega Living Landscapes concept, is nothing short of a paradigm shift for the entire conservation sector in South Africa. It is a structural pivot, a revolutionary step that could unlock the potential of a whole new economic sector.

In this degraded era of industrialisation and extraction, SANParks and 1 600 South Africans have taken the bold step of envisaging a new world where nature, heritage and conservation are central to every South African's life, where national parks become the cores that nurture ecology and culture within Living Landscapes.

These Mega Living Landscapes – essentially massive interconnected areas – are set to break the myth that conservation is the playground of scientists and environmentalists. Ordinary South Africans are invited to find their place within Vision 2040.

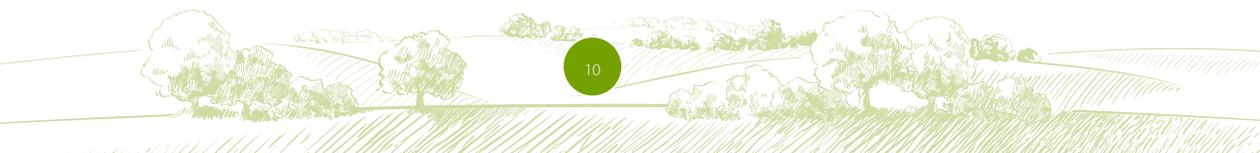
"Why can't we use our National Parks to capitalise rural socio-economic development? That's the sweet spot, where there is harmony between nature and people, where alongside wild lands, you see businesses and enterprises in areas that have been historically disadvantaged."

Dr Howard Hendricks, Managing Executive, Conservation, SANParks

The potential is staggering. Mega Living Landscapes can:

- Build climate resilience, especially for the communities most vulnerable to climate change impacts
- Bring employment and income to economically depressed rural areas
- Offer jobs and learning opportunities for the youth
- Offer dignity and a greater role for women as nurturing links to nature
- Strengthen biodiversity protection
- Provide natural goods like firewood, medicinal plants and seasonal wild fruits
- Provide access to nature, plant and animal species for spiritual, healing, sustenance and commercial benefits
- Protect ecological services, like wetlands that purify water and mitigate flooding
- Increase and sustain food security by making small-scale subsistence farming more viable
- Increase rangelands for the farming of indigenous livestock species
- Provide sanctuaries for quiet lands and dark skies
- Connect with indigenous knowledge which might in turn find medicine that will cure cancer
- Empower National Parks staff through learning and opportunity
- Offer natural spaces for spiritual and religious purposes
- Provide good research resources for schools and universities.
- What will this look like on the ground?

As the University of the Western Cape's Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies explains: "In this process, some human places will become wilder, and some wild areas may become more human."



The Fifteen Year Plan

Imagine broad swathes of green buffer zones surrounding towns, threading wildlife and biodiversity corridors between parks and settlements, intertwining over vast expanses of the countryside.

Instead of fragmented protected areas sparsely dappled around the country, the Vision 2040 map shows broad green corridors linking national parks with other protected areas.

These interconnecting, ecologically alive lands might include communally owned game farms, contractual parks, botanical gardens, farmlands and rangelands where antelope graze alongside indigenous livestock species.

Green belts connect Kruger National Park to the Kalahari, consolidate Mapungubwe's cultural and natural treasures, and tie the Cederberg to the Tankwa and Namaqualand with the Augrabies Falls. Addo connects through to the Great Fish River; the Amathole mountains up north join the new Grasslands National Park under Lesotho, and link to the Wild Coast. Addo also connects to the west through the Baviaanskloof all the way to Eden (the Garden Route) via the mountains and the southern coastal plains that are home to extraordinary archaeological sites documenting 200,000 years of human activity.

This new map imagines interconnections across vast and thriving landscapes, protecting biodiversity, uplifting people, celebrating their culture and heritage, and creating sustainable climate resilience.

It is in this way that the massive new areas can become part of these Mega Living Landscapes, helping us to achieve 30 x 30.

Humans and Wild Places

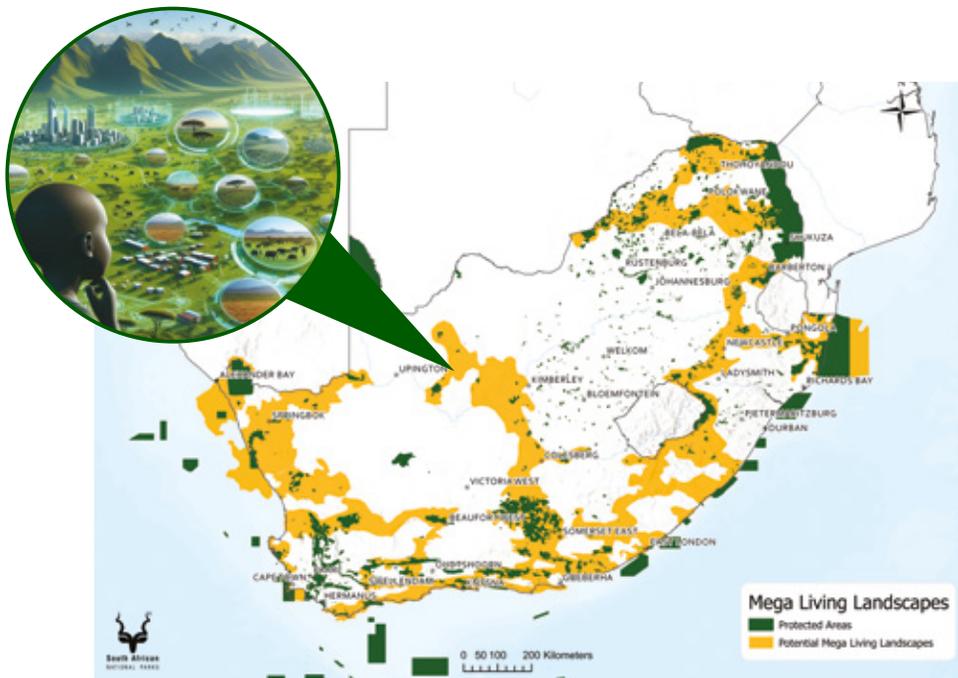
The underlying ethos of the Mega Living Landscapes is this: what happens outside national parks is as important as what happens inside them.

A century ago, or even a few decades back, this degree of openness and inclusivity would have been unthinkable. Now Mega Living Landscapes seem a radical yet logical step to drawing humans and nature closer together, in ways and places that enhance both.

This will require concerted lobbying and effort, partnerships with entities within and outside the State, a drive towards inclusion of more land-use options, more wildlife, and the involvement of local communities in new business opportunities.

Will physical fences around national parks be dropped? No, because the safety of surrounding communities is paramount. But gateways to opportunities and benefits within and outside national parks will be unlocked. Multiple land uses will be possible in neighbouring areas, including livestock and game ranching.

The Global Environmental Facility (GEF) has already pledged funding to help make South Africa's Mega Living Landscapes a model for the world to follow.



Conservation Innovation Ideas

How can cities, villages and towns blend with protected areas?

Planting pocket forests in urban areas, for example, can bring conservation into daily life. SANParks will lobby local governments, businesses, and communities to show how these green spaces benefit the wider landscape – not only boosting biodiversity and improving air quality, but also giving communities and ecotourists a place to enjoy nature within and outside national parks.

There are other ways conservation principles can be infused through urban areas, like leaving wild verges along roads to support insect populations. Or planting indigenous trees to bring birds, shade and life to hot city streets.

Waste-Water Treatment Plants could be replaced in some areas with reedbed systems and specific bacteria to remove and neutralise pollutants, leading to cleaner river systems.

In agricultural areas, regenerative farming moves large numbers of livestock onto small areas of land for a few days, leaving pruned plants and fertilised soil behind. It is a rapid land restoration kick-starter and has been found to sequester carbon in the soil.

Opportunities for entrepreneurs in the green economy can abound. Local communities could even sell green charcoal made from invasive woody plants.

Everyone has access to the new socio-economy. Everyone is invested in and benefits from the new status quo.

DID YOU KNOW?

GREEN SPACE DROPS CRIME

- In the Global North, many studies have shown that crime drops in leafier surroundings.
- Until 2022, no one had looked at South Africa, with its generally high crime statistics and racially skewed urban spatial development.
- Environmental scientists from various South African universities and the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research took police data (publicly available per precinct) and correlated crime statistics with urban green space and overall greenery as part of a nationwide study.
- They found that: "after controlling for a number of socio-demographic confounders (unemployment, income, age, education, land use and population density), for every 1% increase in total green space there is a 1.2% decrease in violent crime, and 1.3% decrease in property crime."





SOCIO-ECONOMIC BENEFITS

The intention behind Vision 2040 is to make sure that every South African has a stake in conservation, knowing that they will tangibly benefit by protecting landscapes and species.

One of its most important aspects will be the way that national parks can anchor development and job creation.

South Africa's National Parks are, by their very nature, large institutions in the country's least-developed rural areas, where they are significant buyers of goods and services. Parks are public assets, able to act as great economic anchors, local bedrocks for many levels of socio-economic activity.

Local entrepreneurs have great opportunities to supply goods and services to parks, creating profitable and sustainable community-private-public partnerships. This spans the entire spectrum of conservation and tourism value chains. These collaborations will not only drive economic growth but also strengthen the bond between local communities and the natural treasures they help protect.

Investing in skill development within these communities will – and have already – paved the way for park managers, senior staff, rangers, scientists, and environmental specialists to be recruited from the very areas surrounding the parks. This approach ensures that the benefits of conservation are shared, empowering local people to take leading roles in safeguarding their own natural heritage.

National parks can leverage sponsorships and funding. They are also natural centres for learning and research.

Traditional leaders are custodians of indigenous knowledge and critical anchors who can guide and facilitate participation of communities in the Mega Living Landscapes. They are central role players who can shape the content and benefits that derive collaborative relations with other role players.

Youth, Jobs and the Biodiversity Economy

"We can't be the young and the hopeful, we must be the young and the impactful!". Participant in a Vision 2040 Youth engagement

Within a single generation, urban children's physical intimacy with nature has diminished dramatically. Some only play outside for an hour a day, or less.

Yet many studies now show that exposure to nature can be "a powerful form of therapy for attention-deficit disorders and other maladies," according to Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*. He coined the term Nature-Deficit Disorder.

Our youngest South Africans face a high-risk future as fossil fuels run out, natural resources are depleted and climate change devastates the world we once knew. It is in their immediate interests that ways are found to mitigate climate crises while providing livelihoods within these large living landscapes.

This is particularly urgent in South Africa, where 60% of the youth are not in work, not in education and not in training. Mega Living Landscapes can offer new ways of thriving, with work and learning opportunities in interconnected spaces that link the green economy to viable future careers.

Some of these jobs are already being created.

Examples include the privately funded Tracking Academy outside Camdeboo National Park. Many of the young people trained here now work in Transfrontier Conservation Areas. The South African College of Tourism of which the Tracking Academy is a part, trains youngsters for a career in hospitality.

Another subsidiary, the Herding Academy, instructs young men and women from small villages like Leliefontein (Northern Cape), and Matatiele (Eastern Cape), in the arts of working with livestock and revitalising overgrazed land.

The Rhodes University-based Environmental Learning Research Centre (ELRC) is looking at ways of upskilling young people in the following fields or potential workstreams within the Biodiversity Economy:

- South Africa's polluted rivers are in desperate need of water quality monitors who can report basic issues and work with scientists;
- Food security and soil health needs attention all over the country, ideally within Mega Living Landscapes. Agroecology could even spur food tourism via regenerative and sustainable farms;
- The transition to renewable energy, especially small-scale solar, could be a promising workstream.

This kind of work allows young people to make a contribution to their own futures. In so doing, they strengthen their own communities, while gaining income and self-worth. In addition, this work experience could be invaluable when it comes to further employment, according to the ELRC.

DID YOU KNOW?

THE BIODIVERSITY ECONOMY

In 2018 South Africa had more than 418 000 biodiversity related jobs, a number comparable to the mining industry.

For each job dedicated to protecting biodiversity there are 5 jobs that depend directly on using biodiversity. – SANBI, National Biodiversity Assessment 2019.

"My students need to learn about nature, but they also need to feel safe and cared for. The park is close by, and they need to understand how to protect it."

– **Monica Oosthuizen**, Primary Early Childhood Development Principal, Knysna



NATURE NEWS

Thursday,
26 September 2040

FLASHBACK: A OLD RURAL SOUTH AFRICAN STORY

In 2003, Rhodes University's Environmental Science Department sketched a common rural South African scenario in a guide to Community-Based Natural Resource Management:

"Along the coast of South Africa, every day, a group of women go down to the sea to collect mussels and shellfish from the rocks. They must do this to feed their children. In the forests nearby you can hear the snapping of twigs as women cut these from the trees to make brooms so that they can sell on the streets of the nearby town. While they are doing this, their husbands are casting nets into the waters of the river that flows past their village. The men leave some of the fish at home and dry the rest over fire and smoke before going off to sell these in the same town.

"Not far away, inland from the sea and on the slopes of the mountains that rise up behind their village, young boys graze their fathers' cattle. On some days, they come across the traditional healer from their village, who is busy collecting roots, herbs and bark to make his medicines. On other days, the herd boys come across gangs of men armed with rifles ... and chain saws. They have come to cut down the old slow-growing hardwood trees so that they can sell these to the timber factory not far from town. While these men cut the trees, they are also on the look-out for duikers and klipspringers and other animals that roam the forest. They kill these and braai them for lunch. Whatever is left over, they take home to their families.

"When the herd boys go home, they walk past a woodlot near their village. The wild trees around their home were all cut down a long time ago to build their houses or for the firewood that cooked their food. Now there is a woodlot next to the village, a place where officials from the forestry department are encouraging people to grow trees again so that they can use these rather than the natural forest for their needs.

"Twenty kilometres up the road, the government has created a nature reserve. Some years ago they arrived and put up a fence around the area and erected some nice tents and built a swimming pool. They brought in some giraffe and zebra and wildebeest to make the place more attractive for tourists. Some of the young men in the village have been trained as game rangers to protect these animals ... from other young men who sneak under the fence to lay snares for these animals. A few of the women have found jobs as waitresses or cleaners in the tourism lodge.

"You will find places like this across the entire landscape of South Africa, places where, in one way or another, local people depend on the land, the soil, the rivers, the dams, the sea—and the wild things that live and grow there—in order to feed their families and to survive. In many places, especially where there are few jobs, the harvesting and use of natural resources is more important in the livelihoods of local residents than is the inaccessible formal sector of the economy.

To these people nature can be more important than mines, or factories or big agricultural estates when it comes to the fight against poverty."

Tourism in All its Forms

Conservation areas like national parks are magnets for tourists, and tourism creates massive employment opportunities. The barriers to entry are low, and the multiplier effects are high. Tourism routinely outperforms most other economic sectors in South Africa when it comes to job creation. This offers great job and entrepreneurial opportunities for communities around national parks.

Game drives, photographic safaris, birding and guided hikes are the activities most people associate with national parks. But many more choices would be available within a Mega Living Landscape.

What about more adventure options, like river rafting, cheetah-tracking and bouldering? Or calmer pursuits immersed in nature: stargazing, spiritual retreats, healing hikes, dark sky safaris, wine-tasting and heritage farm visits. Maybe unplugged breakaways, story-telling safaris, and wild camping?

"People want to connect with the land in a spiritual way."

– Annah Makhubela, Hlangani Arts & Culture, Phalaborwa

In parks close to urban areas (think Table Mountain National Park), the opportunities are even more vivid. Head down to the beach, in a tranquil, bird-rich marine protected area. Later on, take a mountain bike and cruise through single tracks winding through the fragrant fynbos. And finish the day at a wine bar or night club in the city centre to dance the night away. Why not? Everything is close by. Leisure time is intertwined between nature and city.

National Parks and Marine Protected Areas are zones where hunting is forbidden, while fishing and harvesting of natural resources are restricted to certain areas.

But that need not be the case in adjoining lands. Wildlife and plant protection can change in natural areas next to national parks. This is where there might be livestock or regenerative farming, sustainable harvesting of medicinal plants, crafters markets, 4x4 trails, limited hunting, homestays with communities, and adventure camps for urban and rural youngsters. Here you could go mountain biking from farmhouse to farmhouse, tasting and cooking the local food of the region, or hosting writers' retreats. There are low barriers to entry into this business sector. It is ideal for women-owned businesses.

Many national parks now protect culture and heritage sites. These tell the story of our ancestors and their long-term relationship with the land and are being given the highest level of protection. Communities are invited to celebrate their cultural heritage in national parks.

Community-run cultural heritage related enterprises will showcase the history and heritage of the people in every Living Landscape intertwining with opportunities for the sharing of indigenous knowledge. Already SANParks is protecting and showcasing a growing number of rock art trails, Iron Age remains and historical ruins and relics within wild landscapes.

DID YOU KNOW?

THE HUNTER'S SHARE

- Local and international hunters contributed R15.5 billion to the South African economy in 2022, according to North West University's Tourism Research unit in Economics, Environs and Society.





The Value in Biodiversity

South Africa's 2 800km coastline, mountain ranges, arid plains, subtropical valleys, high plateaux and varied weather systems have resulted in exceptional richness of numbers and varieties of plants and animal species. It has one of the highest numbers of endemic plant species in the world, and is the only country where an entire, unique floral kingdom is found – fynbos.

Some 3 000 of South Africa's plant species are currently used to heal a variety of ailments, with 350 of these being the most commonly used and traded. Many have a long spiritual, religious and cultural history that communities have long understood. Of these, 25 plant species are currently of interest to international pharmaceutical and cosmetic companies.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems have been honed over centuries, and are some of the most valuable indicators of potentially useful active compounds in plants. Traditional Healers and Traditional Leaders possess an extensive understanding of what can be achieved in this field that we have to tap into.

Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) in the biodiversity economy takes this further by focusing on how we can utilize this traditional knowledge to discover valuable compounds in plants and animals that we can use in beauty products, health supplements, or other innovations. This often involves extracting and processing plants or animals to create new products. We all know about the ongoing success and benefits of products like Rooibos tea and Hoodia. The benefit-sharing part is all about making sure local communities receive fair financial rewards and continued access to the knowledge and resources they provide and have provided for centuries.

South Africa's laws are now being changed to make sure local communities – who were once simply designated as collectors of plants – can benefit from the full value chain in this country. This can include exploration, discovery, product development, trade, and benefit sharing.

The next crucial antibiotic or cure for pancreatic cancer might well come from communities living around our Mega Living Landscapes or Seascapes. A new form of commercial enterprise – the wildlife economy – which includes the hunting industry, game or wildlife sales, meat and leather sales, and the agro-processing of indigenous crops is booming. Communities directly benefit by owning wild animals and taking part in regulated hunting and meat production along with other forms of beneficiation.

It not only creates jobs but also fosters a sense of ownership, involvement and responsibility for conservation.

DID YOU KNOW?

TOURISM, JOBS AND BIRDING

- By 2021, nearly 1.1 million South Africans were employed in the tourism sector.
- The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) predicted in 2022 that South African tourism jobs could increase by 800 000;
- The WTTC said South Africa's Travel & Tourism sector is forecast to grow at 7.6% every year, for the next ten years, completely outstripping the current 1.8% growth rate of the country's overall economy.
- Birding alone has proven to be a highly profitable niched tourism offering. By 2020, birding in South Africa generated R2 billion annually.
- According to BirdLife South Africa, international birders spend more money in their visits to South Africa than any other niche tourism group.



DID YOU KNOW?

A POTENTIAL MARINE ANTIBIOTIC

- The world's next potent antibiotic could come from South Africa's Marine Protected Areas.
- Over 400 million years, sea sponges have evolved to repel nibbling fish, predatory nudibranchs, and infection from disease-causing pathogens. Their weapons of choice are poisons.
- "These compounds, or natural products, are exquisitely specific to the target," says microbiologist Professor Rosie Dorrington. "They kill bacterial pathogens, inhibit viral activity, and prevent parasitic infections. These compounds must be extremely active and fast-acting, because the instant they are released, they are obviously diluted by millions of litres of water."

"For us, the land is more than just a place—it's part of who we are. We were taught from a young age to protect nature and honour our heritage. So we know what "sustainable" means. We live it every day and our people keep that wisdom alive."

Prince Itumeleng Shole – Youth Traditional Leader

IMAGINE IF

The Unknown Future

Vision 2040 invites us to imagine a world 15 years away. What technology will be available to us then? What will have happened to the climate? What will our planet look like?

Will there be 5D downloadable headsets that contain fully immersive, sense-engaging footage of walking through every National Park? Will advanced webcams be installed at spots where humans do not traverse, providing us with a peek into the habits and behaviours of our magnificent wildlife and bird populations?

Will humans come to National Parks, craving to be in a place with dark skies and freedom from digital connection? Or will there be QR codes on every tree and wifi hotspots around every corner?

Will Artificial Intelligence help us to accurately identify birds, animals and plants?

Will citizen scientists from every region be feeding valuable information into a central ecosystem knowledge centre?

What will the population of the world look like? Demographic trends now tell us that numbers of youngsters born in developed countries are plummeting, while Africa's population is soaring. By the 2040s, two out of five babies born in the world will be African. What impact might that have on conservation and natural resources? What opportunities await?

Quiet electric vehicles will almost certainly have replaced diesel or petrol vehicles for game drives by then. Solar panels on rondavel roofs in National Parks camps will be generating renewable power without the need for overhead cables and pylons.

Funding for conservation and National Parks might look completely different. Think Green Bonds and Carbon Credits for restoring and rehabilitating large mining areas once they close. These can be turned into natural resource banks for the people left jobless by mine closure.





The Path Ahead

SANParks is envisaging a revolutionary and transformative step forward for South Africa and the region, one that could unlock a vibrant and sustainable economy through the interconnection of landscapes and seascapes.

To bring this dream to fruition, SANParks itself must transform into a more agile organisation. Alongside its deep-seated commitment to conservation, SANParks will have to adapt and innovate, pulling together science, technology and human capital.

Its vision is to be at the centre of biodiversity protection, a co-creator of climate resilience, a guardian of heritage and a driver for socio-economic progress in South Africa.

The board and management of SANParks are convinced that:

“By championing these large, interconnected areas of land and seascapes, we will have paved the way for a future where nature and cultural heritage flourish, and where people live in harmony with nature.

“National Parks could serve as the core that anchors, sustains and nurtures these expansive areas, that supports the physical well-being, economic prosperity, social cohesion, and spiritual enrichment of our nation. Together, we can successfully forge a path towards a sustainable future where both nature and humanity thrive.”

DID YOU KNOW?

THE VALUE OF NATURE'S SERVICES

- Natural Capital Research carried out a survey in 2017 to put a value to many of the services provided by natural ecosystems in South Africa. It found that those related to livestock fodder, harvested resources, tourism, non-use value, carbon storage, pollination, pest control, critical habitats, erosion control, water flow regulation and water quality, provided value worth R275 billion per year. This conservative valuation is equivalent to 7% of the country's GDP. – Department of Fisheries, Forestry and the Environment.



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Q&A WITH LUKHANYO RASMENI, BIO-PROSPECTING BILLIONAIRE

Q: Dr Rasmeni, could you please give us some of your background? Specifically, how you became interested in the potential of nature to provide cancer-healing drugs?

A: As you probably know, I grew up in Cradock, the youngest of three siblings. You could say I was a bit of a troubled youth. I fell in with a bad crowd, and I am afraid I gave my poor mother many grey hairs. It was my grandmother's idea to send me off for a wilderness camp in the Mountain Zebra National Park. Initially, I absolutely hated it.

But after the second week, I had a revelation. During the night watch, I realised I was experiencing absolute peace for the first time. I could feel my fear and anger turn to acceptance and stillness. I had this incredible feeling of connection with nature around me. From then on I was hooked. I kept returning, and later I took other troubled youths into the wilderness as a kind of spiritual initiation into adulthood. So many of them have come back and told me that this was a positive turning point in their lives.

Incidentally, it was also my grandmother who provided the gateway to my future career. She was a healer, and I remember her making a tea for our neighbours, using a plant that grows in the Swaershoek Mountains adjoining the National Park. Everyone knew my grandmother. They called her Tannie Souf, short for Sophia.

She would also say to me: "Our vitality comes from the Karoo veld. It has plants that can help heal people."

Q: How did a love for nature help you in your business?

A: After matriculating, I decided to study Microbiology and Biochemistry at Rhodes University. I loved my years in academia, but my grandmother's medicinal plant lessons were always at the back of my mind. For my Master's degree, I opted to analyse the active compound of one her favourite healing plants. My supervisor and I obtained permission to harvest various specimens, because by then these plants had become rare, and hard to find.

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And as everyone now knows, one of the active compounds I found turned out to be effective against leukaemia and lung cancer. The first thing we had to do was to synthesise the molecule, because we couldn't use the plant itself as a raw material. Then, with the help of the Pharmacy Department during my doctoral studies, we found a delivery mechanism. At first, we didn't know if the drug should be administered orally or by injection.

It took a very long time for the testing, but to cut a long story short, it has been a great success story.

Q: What is next for you?

A: Well, the production plant has been set up close to the wind farm between Middelburg and Cradock and that is going well. We are hiring mostly from the local community, because they are steeped in ecosystem sciences and exposure to nature. But I have been thinking of a way to pay back to my community and National Parks for setting me onto this path. Thanks to the Minister of Environment, I am now in the process of setting up a bursary for disadvantaged youngsters who are interested in biodiversity studies. I have also set up the Sophia Rasmeni Trust (named for my late grandmother), to provide fund the research and preservation of more useful medicinal plants in the Karoo.

By Babaiwa Cohen



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