



# Mr No-nonsense puts parks first

David Mabunda does not believe in extravagance, or incompetence, or laziness. He believes in upholding SA's heritage. By Eleanor Momberg

**T**HE EFFECTIVE management of South Africa's conservation areas is of paramount importance to the man who has been at the helm of SA National Parks for 12 years.

David Mabunda does not believe in wasting money. He does not tolerate incompetence and has a bone to pick with anyone he deems lazy.

Sitting in his office at SANParks headquarters in Pretoria, Mabunda finds it difficult to speak easily about his past, but proudly states that he is a fourth-generation descendant of Matsafeni, the warrior who blazed a path from Swaziland to Mafafeni, which is today known as Mafafeni, outside Nelspruit.

"I grew up as a countryside boy with all these aspirations. I never knew there was apartheid in this country until my high school years," he says.

"I don't want people to lock me in a party-political compartment, but I have been part of the student struggles and part of the liberation struggle in our country.

"It took me to different places in the world and I ended up in England, in Manchester, where I worked at the Institute for Development Planning and Management (IDPM), after studying there."

Mabunda obtained a Master's in education at the University of Manchester, has a BA from the erstwhile Vista University and completed his PhD in eco-tourism management at the University of Pretoria in 2004.

Mabunda returned to South Africa in 1993, joining the Department of Land Affairs as a commissioner and opening the provincial land claims office in Nelspruit.

Negotiating the Makuleke community's land claim in the north of the Kruger National Park saw Mabunda draw on the experience he gained working with the IDPM in South America, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

"That prepared me well on the issues of resources and the environment. We fought quite seriously in those meetings with my colleagues here at SANParks, and eventually they felt that I actually belong more to the conservation side than where I was," he said.

Initially, he was reluctant to join an institution he believed was anti-community and did "not like black people", but later he changed his mind.

"I realised that conservation needed serious transformation, not just moving chairs on the deck, but a complete turnaround in terms of how we relate to communities, how we interpret the resources that we are managing for the benefit of the communities that live around the parks, and also for the socio-economic development of the country."

It was also an opportunity to educate the broader community about the importance of conservation.

He started introducing himself as South Africa's chief game ranger.

"I think I experienced the same type of miracle that occurred on the road to Damascus.

"It dawned on me how important the conservation of biodiversity and the associated cultural assets was. Biodiversity really is the crux of everything from agriculture to marine and water resources. The carbon sinks that our parks are providing to the country must have contributed a little bit to the reduction of the national health budget. There are so many benefits."

These include bio-safety and bio-prospecting or exploring medicinal opportunities in nature that could possibly produce cures "for all these pandemics that are engulfing us left, right and centre."

National parks are an asset, he said, that contributed more to the



A leopard rests on a branch in the Sabie Sabie area of the Kruger National Park. 'It dawned on me how important the conservation of biodiversity and the associated cultural assets was,' says David Mabunda, the CEO of SANParks. 'Biodiversity really is the crux of everything from agriculture to marine and water resources.'

PICTURE: CHRIS COLLINGRIDGE



David Mabunda takes it upon himself to make the government and society recognise their responsibility for the upkeep of national parks.

country than people were aware of.

While environmental awareness has improved over the past 15 years, Mabunda says a lot needs to be done to develop the country's wonderful natural heritage.

He believes getting people to be aware of their immediate surroundings and to take care of them would contribute to an even higher understanding of complicated issues like climate change.

"I don't think at this point in time in our country that a large portion of our population, particularly people who live in rural areas and the townships, know much about climate change.

"In the townships, coal stoves remain the main source of energy to prepare food and keep the house warm. Approaching any township in winter, all you see is a cloud of smoke from those stoves. I think there are better ways. We can start there."

He sees a need for the national

climate change strategy, approved by the cabinet last year, to be cascaded to a lower level so it can be implemented by municipalities, private institutions, business and educational institutions.

Another need is the pooling of national, provincial and local government resources to achieve an economy of scale – a change mooted more than a decade ago – while dealing with the reality of a skills shortage and limited funding.

"The reason why sister organisations at a provincial level are battling to fulfil their responsibilities is really because their budget just covers salaries," he said.

He is of the view that the mandate of the provincial conservation authorities should be refined so that fragmentation in marketing and functioning can be aligned to meet the requirements of the constitution.

"There is a constitutional imperative that we have got to manage that at different levels. In terms of how it is structurally partnered, I am sure politicians at different levels should decide what is best for South Africa."

He believes that the environment could be managed from one structure and the work decentralised. This would bring about greater consistency in terms of policy, management, operational efficiencies, strategies and focus.

"We will all be working from the same strategy, the same business plan, the same everything."

"But how do we make sure that the provincial and local government dynamics are incorporated into that nationally managed structure while still meeting constitutional requirements?" he asked.

"There has to be a peaceful balance between agriculture, forestry,

the manufacturing sector and industrialisation. But we are not getting it right all across the spectrum," he said, alluding to fractures between government departments responsible for conservation and those overseeing industrial expansion.

"There is a need for very strong inter-departmental co-ordination so that the one hand knows what the other hand is doing," he said.

"As a government official I haven't received any (formal) information. But when you look at best practice in other parts of the world, there are instances where it makes sense to have water affairs and envi-

**We don't tolerate lavish venues or corruption. I won't beat around the bush. I've kicked a few butts**

ronment combined – it is working.

"It makes sense where commercial forestry goes to agriculture because it is farming with trees, which has a role to play in economic growth. There are instances where the tourism faction is either with trade and industry or economic affairs.

"I think any system is as good as its managers. It has got to be managed. There will be teething problems, but mutually I think everybody will make good out of it."

Mabunda laughed as he referred to the employment of "young lions" who wanted to employ marketing gurus to upgrade SANParks offices

and give the organisation a facelift, saying that while they would love that, the community they served may not approve of it becoming a Sandton-based business.

SANParks is about best practice, financial prudence and making sure there is no wastage, he says, adding that it is an ongoing challenge.

"We do not tolerate corrupt practices; we don't tolerate extravagance, wasteful expenditure, people using expensive venues for whatever we are doing. The choice of a venue is very important, and we don't want to go over the top, especially with the present financial crisis.

"I have not lost my background as a teacher. There are times when I feel like an old school principal again. I think it helps. It keeps people on the edge of their toes and seats."

"I think here people are very conscious about cost, how they travel to the various parks and what they do there. I can't serve cognac and Johnnie Walker Black at functions. They should be happy to get mineral water, cold-drink and pap and vleis."

Referring to the upgrading of infrastructure in parks across the country, Mabunda pointed out that over and above its operating budget SANParks had been allocated R700 million by the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism to address maintenance.

It was a job that had lagged behind, because all funding had gone into developing biodiversity conservation methods and only the money generated through tourism was used to upgrade chalets and camps.

In terms of the three-year R700m allocation, SANParks would spend R185.8m this year upgrading infrastructure. Where infrastructure

was collapsing, poor management was to blame.

"I will not beat around the bush – I have kicked a few butts," said Mabunda, adding that he could not understand why leaking taps, dirty chalets, torn curtains and ageing bedding could not be immediately rectified.

"Those are things that need to be managed. We will never be in a situation where you look at the amount of money we have got for infrastructure and we will have enough money for everything."

"But I don't want people to be pointing fingers at the government and saying there is no money or we don't generate our own. In addition to what the government has given us, we put in our own funds for maintenance."

"So my park and hospitality managers must get off their chairs and manage by walking about," he said. "We are cracking the whip on lazy bones. You cannot be complacent in this job. You have to be hands-on and know the state of your infrastructure."

"As far as I am concerned, (there) is enough money to do the job at hand. We must just prioritise as managers."

The man who pioneered and led the establishment of Inala Farms (Pty) Ltd – one of the first successful land reform projects in Mpumalanga – is open about the fact that the project has not achieved what had initially been planned.

While it is doing comparatively well, not everyone is benefiting from it yet. In-fighting between the initial claimants – the Mdluli family and the farm-workers – and the farm-workers has delayed progress. But these would be sorted out soon, said an optimistic Mabunda.

## War against poaching for rhino horn goes into top gear in parks

ELEANOR MOMBERG

EFFORTS are being made to halt all poaching in the national parks.

But, says David Mabunda, head of South African National Parks, "poaching for the pot will never stop and it does not have much of an impact. But these poachers, we do not want them. Good citizens don't poach. A poacher is a selfish person who feeds his stomach. He does not feed the nation, just himself. So we must get rid of them."

Mabunda, however, conceded that because of the high levels of poverty, small-scale poachers wanting to feed their families would continue to venture into the country's national parks to hunt.

The reality was that SANParks

did not have the capacity to "have a ranger behind every bush", especially in the country's largest parks – the Kruger National Park and the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park.

"We will not be able to do that. However, we make sure that there are mechanisms in place, including eco-tourism, because the presence of tourists serves as a deterrent."

The increase in rhino poaching in game reserves in the past two years continues to cause headaches among wildlife authorities.

Of the viable population of 16 000 rhino left in the world, 12 000 are found in the Kruger National Park. The Asian rhino is on the brink of extinction and the Sumatran rhino is highly endangered.

Poaching syndicates turned their focus to South Africa two

years ago, killing 76 rhino in the Kruger National Park last year.

At the end of last year, the police and SANParks had a major breakthrough. A tip-off by a member of a rhino poaching syndicate operating in the Kruger National Park and provincial and private game reserves led to the arrest of 14 members of the gang that had slaughtered numerous rhino between October and December.

Police and SANParks investigators arrested 11 syndicate members. The crackdown on the poaching syndicate started in April 2008, when SANParks called in the help of the Mpumalanga, Limpopo and North West organised crime units, and the Gauteng task team, to deal with the surge in poaching of black and white rhino in the Kruger Park.

Investigations into the rhino poaching syndicates over the past two years have seen the arrest and conviction of two brothers from Bronkhorstspuit who were caught poaching white rhino in the Hluhluwe game reserve in KwaZulu-Natal in 2006. The brothers were linked to a national syndicate targeting rhino in a number of other locations. Two Kruger Park field rangers and two other men were arrested for poaching in 2002.

More than 100 rhino are believed to have been killed in conservation areas in 2008. The rhino horns were believed to have been sold to buyers in the Far East.

Elephant and hippo, also hunted for their ivory, have escaped the poacher's bullets until now.

"People were paying good money,

up to R40 000 per kilo for the horns, so there is an incentive for people to do this. We really became a sitting duck in that situation, so we decided this was a war. We reorganised ourselves, strengthened our combat strategies to deal with the problem, and look at the success we've had."

The operation to bust this syndicate resulted in SANParks draining its resources. But, said Mabunda, catching the culprits was a national service.

The collapse of the Zimbabwean economy fuelled the supply of rhino horn because there was a source of this commodity in South Africa.

"In Zimbabwe there is a political problem; I mean, the situation is far from ideal and far from really being as stable as what we are led to believe," he said, alluding to the fact

that South Africa had become the gateway for the smuggling of endangered species and wildlife products.

"Obviously it has to go through OR Tambo International Airport, but it is also (happening) through the legitimate traders and exporters of trophies and products that have been legitimately purchased. The crates or the cartons that go out with all the legal stuff also have illegal things in. So it stretches us quite seriously."

It was an unfortunate reality that many poachers were from neighbouring countries, he added.

"We have no intention of giving up," Mabunda said, pointing out that it took blood and sweat to build up the rhino populations to their present size. "I am not about to betray those efforts."

## Eskom's nuclear plant will spoil Cape reserves

JOHN WILLIAMS

BANTAMSKLIP on Groot Hagelkraal farm was expropriated by Eskom in the late 1980s as a potential nuclear power station site.

This was long before the passing of such legislation as the National Environmental Management Act (1998), the Protected Areas Act (2003) and the Biodiversity Act (2004), and the adoption by the Overberg district municipality of the Bioregional Planning Approach and the approval of the Coastal Zone Policy by the Western Cape government.

It is clear at this late stage of the environmental impact assessment (EIA) process for the Bantamsklip site on the Overberg Whale Route, that Eskom is patently disregarding the fact that Bantamsklip is in a registered nature reserve and a South African Nature Foundation natural heritage site – Groot Hagelkraal. Eskom is also ignoring the fact that the site's immediate neighbours are SANParks at Waterford (part of Agulhas National Park) and Cape Nature at Pearly Beach Nature Reserve and at the Soetfontein Nature Reserve next to the Bantamsklip site.

No mention of these critical conservation profiles is to be found in the 35-page executive summary – transmission line EIA, produced by consultants Arcus Gibb.

The spectacular disregard for the conservation status of the proposed site by Eskom, and the gung-ho manner in which this is being done, is symptomatic of the malaise of corporate indifference we find these days.

Bantamsklip was expropriated by Eskom while being a registered nature reserve and was senselessly tagged as a nuclear site during PW Botha's "total onslaught" presidency.

We find it is hugely ironic that Eskom also funds and publishes Red Data species books.

There are 1 600 listed endangered or vulnerable Red Data species within the 100km zone of the Bantamsklip site, which the nine 400kV power lines could traverse. The property in fact, has the highest concentration of endemic plants in the world.

Further, the Hagelkraal or Bantamsklip coastline has the highest level of marine biodiversity and endemism found in southern African coastal waters.

Dyer Island Nature Reserve, 7km due south of Bantamsklip, is a great white shark and seabird sanctuary of global importance. It has the highest concentration of great whites in the world and there are six Red Data bird species found breeding on the island.

The nuclear power plant would produce a huge thermal discharge of scorching water (condenser cooling), which will alter the sea temperature, destroying the kelp habitat and adversely affecting the ecology.

Chemicals and biocides used to treat the plant's piping, to prevent biofouling, will put contaminants into the marine environment.

This thermal and toxic discharge, together with the noise pollution and sediment transport, would devastate the seabed, altering the in-shore habitats and killing marine organisms and larval fish. A massive marine trauma will disturb the seasonal migrations of the southern right whales.

Whether Eskom executives are aware of this and can be held accountable will have to be seen. Eskom's announced compliance with the King Report on corporate governance and the protocols of corporate governance will also be watched closely.

Eskom's final scoping report (July 2008) showed Bantamsklip to be "neutral, (with) no overriding positive and/or negative impacts or cost implications".

Yet we know the emerging Agulhas National Park, and surrounding mountain and marine reserves of Dyer Island and Walker Bay, are contributing their ecosystem services to a sustainable green GDP tourism revenue in excess of R500 million annually.

● John Williams chairs the Hemel en Aarde Valley Conservancy and was founding chairman of Limpopo's Central Louvel Tourist Association. He was also the key project initiator and founding trustee of the Unesco Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Reserve in the Central Louvel and Escarpment bioregion.