

In the Place of *Miracles*

Traditionally the home of a great number and variety of game, iSimangaliso Wetland Park in northern KwaZulu-Natal is recapturing the abundance of its past

WORDS ANITA DE VILLIERS PICTURES ANITA DE VILLIERS AND SUPPLIED



Kudus silhouetted against the sun setting over the Eastern Shores of iSimangaliso Wetland Park.

It was the elephant breeding herd that rumbled a welcome to iSimangaliso's Western Shores. They moved like shadows in the twilight, only an arm's length away, their presence so close to us we could feel their ancient bond with this place.

"Elephant invasion of Makakatana Bay Lodge is a regular occurrence," said owner Hugh Morrison, who had been rather busy with some refurbishing after a pachyderm visit just the previous week. But the adrenalin surge had boosted the already scintillating mood among the guests, the elephant encounter topping the low-key presence of two movie stars at the lodge.

For nearly a century, elephants had not walked the shores of Lake St Lucia in northern KwaZulu-Natal, the last tuskers shot by ivory hunters. But in the spring of 2001, 24 elephants were relocated from Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park (HIP) to the Eastern Shores of iSimangaliso, followed in June 2002 by another small

herd from Kruger National Park.

"Both groups were released on the Eastern Shores, but the first group soon found the old migratory route across the lake to the Western Shores, where they now prefer to stay," said Andrew Zaloumis, CEO of iSimangaliso Wetland Park.

We had set off on a hike early that morning from Catalina Bay Lookout, navigating our way southwards through the grassland and coastal forest along the lake's eastern shore. The view of the elephants' route across the park drew an impulsive wish from me to witness such a crossing, over miles of hippo- and crocodile-infested waters.

Promising to send photographs of the crossing, Andrew elaborated on iSimangaliso's conservation vision. "We are one species away from reintroducing all the wild animals that historically occurred here, the eland being the last. With the re-establishment of the land and ecosystems, these animals will instinctively find age-old migratory patterns from the top of the Lebombo

Mountains down to the coastal plains."

At its heart, this land has wetlands and major lake systems, relics of geological processes dating back sixty million years. In the south is Lake St Lucia, Africa's largest estuary system, flanked by the Eastern and Western Shores; westwards in uMkhuze Game Reserve is iNsumo Pan, and to the north is Lake Sibaya, with the four interlinking lakes of Kosi Bay towards the Mozambican border. To the east, the Indian Ocean forms a 220km coastal boundary. Five interlinking ecosystems across this 332 000ha park create a biodiversity hotspot greater than that of Kruger or Botswana's Okavango Delta.

But earlier hunting and poaching, as well as the killing of great numbers of crocodile and hippo, impacted heavily on the game population, wiping many species from this landscape. Commercial forestation began in 1954 and saw acres of thirsty pines and eucalyptus trees covering vast tracts of land. Towards the end of the 20th century, visitors to what

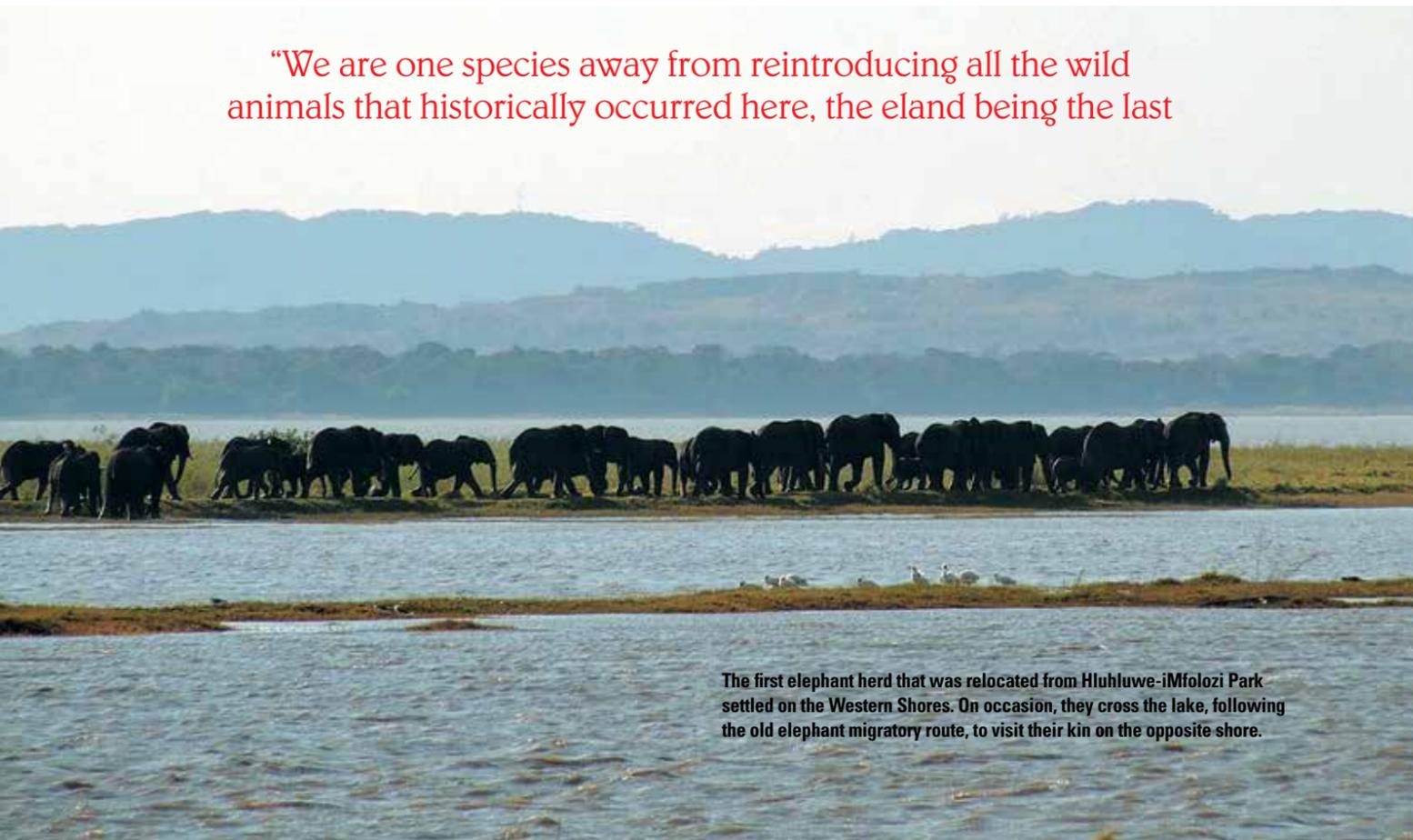


LEFT: Andrew Zaloumis, CEO of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park. ABOVE: Waterbuck, like this male sporting long spiral horns, prefer grassland areas close to water, habitat that is characteristic of the park. ABOVE RIGHT: The Eastern Shores landscape consists of grassland dotted with mostly uMdoni trees, thick pockets of dune forest and enormous vegetated coastal dunes seen in the background.



ABOVE: Hiking on Lake St Lucia's eastern shore. LEFT: In the area of Lake St Lucia known as The Narrows, an ever-watchful hippo mom keeps a keen eye on her baby. BELOW: Tourism officer Thandi Shabalala at Bhangazi Bush Camp.

"We are one species away from reintroducing all the wild animals that historically occurred here, the eland being the last"



The first elephant herd that was relocated from Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park settled on the Western Shores. On occasion, they cross the lake, following the old elephant migratory route, to visit their kin on the opposite shore.

was then known as the St Lucia Wetland Park, would be happy to see red duiker, samango monkeys and maybe some kudu on the drive through the park.

It took an epic battle between conservation and mining in the early nineties, eventually resolved by President Mandela and his Cabinet's vote in favour of conservation, as well as the declaration of iSimangaliso as a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1999, to set gargantuan wheels in motion to reinstate the park to its original glory. The iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority was established to restore the land, develop the infrastructure for eco-tourism, incorporate the community and, of course, reinstate game. The name change from St Lucia to iSimangaliso was not only symbolic, it heralded a new era.

"The name has a history to it," said Thandi Shabalala, iSimangaliso's tourism information officer. "It means 'the place of miracles and wonder'." The grunts and huffs of hippo drifted over to where we sat on the deck of Lake Bhangazi Bush Camp. "Jeje, (the q-click of the Zulu name resonating like a whiplash) aide and keeper of King Shaka's secrets, escaped from being buried with the king, as was the custom, by fleeing eastwards when Shaka died in 1828. Discovering the land of the Thongas (Tongas or Shangaans), he was amazed at its beauty. To this day, the Zulus have a saying,

'If you have seen miracles, you have seen what Jeje saw'. And this is the new name chosen for this beautiful place."

It is this respect for the local culture that Andrew touched on during a drive through the recently opened Western Shores region of the park. "We consulted the elders about the traditions in this area. They showed us different pans where the men and women went to wash in the old days, and we paid tribute to the old customs by using the Zulu names – *Kwelamadoda* (the pan where men bathed) and *Kwelazintombi* (the pan where women bathed)."

Those were the days when the elders knew how to share the bush with the lion. Now, with the reintroduction of lion here, two photographers recently found themselves doing the same. After a most rewarding shoot at one of the hides in the





uMkhuze section of the park, they obliviously marched right through a guard of honour formed by two male lions, on the way to their vehicle. These two were part of the group of eight translocated from Tembe Elephant Park and released towards the end of 2013.

The late Herbert Mthembu, park operations director and leader of the lion reintroduction team, upheld the elders' bush knowledge of what it was like to share the waters of the uMkhuze River with lion. Prior to 2013, the roar of lion had not been heard across this savannah for 44 years.

Community involvement and education are crucial, where predators are introduced to conservation areas, a process that preceded the release of both lions and wild



TOP: Ezemvelo's specialist game-capture team releases a rhino. CENTRE: Fanny Douvere from UNESCO and Mr Zikhala release two serval cats on the Eastern Shores. ABOVE: Leopards are elusive, but sightings are becoming more regular, especially in uMkhuze. (Picture Cole du Plessis)

Animal Rehabilitation

The iSimangaliso Rare and Endangered Species Fund, largely supported by contributions raised during the park's Eco-Series events, contributes to the cost of monitoring, treating and relocating animals. Items such as collars and transmitters for rhino, oribi, wild dog, elephant and cheetah have been funded. www.isimangaliso.com



LEFT: The powerful grace of the African Fish Eagle soaring against the blue skies. ABOVE: The introduction of wild dogs is part of a wider project to re-establish this species in Zululand. Volunteers working for Wildlife Act are especially active in the monitoring and research of wild dogs in the uMkhuze section. (Picture Cole du Plessis) BELOW: Lions, translocated from Tembe Elephant Park to the uMkhuze section, complete the Big Five in the park and are proving a big attraction for visitors.



dogs in uMkhuze. These painted dogs are part of the country's most endangered predator species, and the chronicles of the uMkhuze pack warrant a story on its own.

Predators are a big attraction in a game park and the cheetah and leopard numbers are steadily increasing in iSimangaliso. The existing serval cat population has also been increased through the donation of servals by Zululand's Animal Care and Rehabilitation Centre at Emdoneni Lodge in Hluhluwe, bringing the park's tally of wild cats to full count.

The threat to wildlife has, however, not subsided. In some instances it is reaching critical levels, as is the case with rhinos. Andrew Zaloumis describes poaching as "an intolerable crime that could result in

... it seems they have indeed found each other, as reports from the monitors indicate that two sets of rhino spoor were seen wandering off into the sunset

the extinction of endangered species in our lifetime." To meet this challenge, the Anti Poaching Unit of Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, in association with iSimangaliso, as well as ZAP-Wing's (Zululand Anti-poaching Wing) aerial support, form a formidable team in combating poaching in Zululand. Furthermore, iSimangaliso has, through its release programme, increased the black and white rhino populations.

One heart-warming story is that of two young, abandoned, black-rhino calves – a male and a female – that were saved in different reserves and cared for by Ezemvelo staff. Dave Cooper, Ezemvelo Wildlife's chief veterinarian, says black rhinos are very intelligent but also aggressive, and not easily integrated into existing populations.

The iSimangaliso team took a chance and, hoping that Cupid would be successful, relocated the two youngsters simultaneously to the Eastern Shores. The team holds thumbs for a romantic conclusion to the tale. Despite an escape by the female and her subsequent recapture and release, it seems they have indeed found each other, as reports indicate two sets of rhino spoor were seen wandering off into the sunset.

The list of animals in the park today goes on – buffalo, kudu, giraffe, nyala, zebra, tsessebe, oribi, reedbeek, impala, blue wildebeest, duiker, warthog, 800+ hippos and 1 000+ crocodiles are some. Add to this a species count of 526 birds, 118 reptiles, 86 snakes, 49 amphibians, 228 spiders, 282 butterflies. Add to this the park's marine life that includes

prehistoric creatures like the coelacanth, and leatherback and loggerhead turtles.

On the last morning in iSimangaliso, I joined the two movie stars and an Italian family of four on a boat trip departing from Makakatana Bay Lodge. It was a gloriously sunny day and for four hours we navigated the narrows of Lake St Lucia. The lake teemed with hippo. Giant crocodiles sunned themselves among the reeds, water birds waded and dived in the shallow waters. A pair of Fish Eagles sent their cry into the blue-blue skies, and kudu, waterbuck and reedbeek grazed on the banks. As the actor said, giving me a bear hug on our departure later that day, "We have shared something very special today." Amen. ■

Map reference C&D 8 see inside back cover



www.countrylife.co.za



Know your Park

- iSimangaliso Wetland Park is situated in the Maputaland region of northern KwaZulu-Natal, 245km from Durban.
- iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife are both involved in the management and running of the park. The rehabilitation of the game population involves the Eastern and Western Shores, as well as uMkhuze Game Reserve.
- Self-catering accommodation and camping is available at Cape Vidal within the Eastern Shores and in uMkhuze. Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife 033 845 1000 bookings@kznwildlife.com, www.bookings.kznwildlife.com
- Makakatana Bay Lodge has fully-catered luxury accommodation on the Western Shores. info@makakatana.co.za
- For boat trips on Lake St Lucia and game drives in both Eastern and Western Shores. 035 550 4198, www.isimangaliso.com