



Mapungubwe

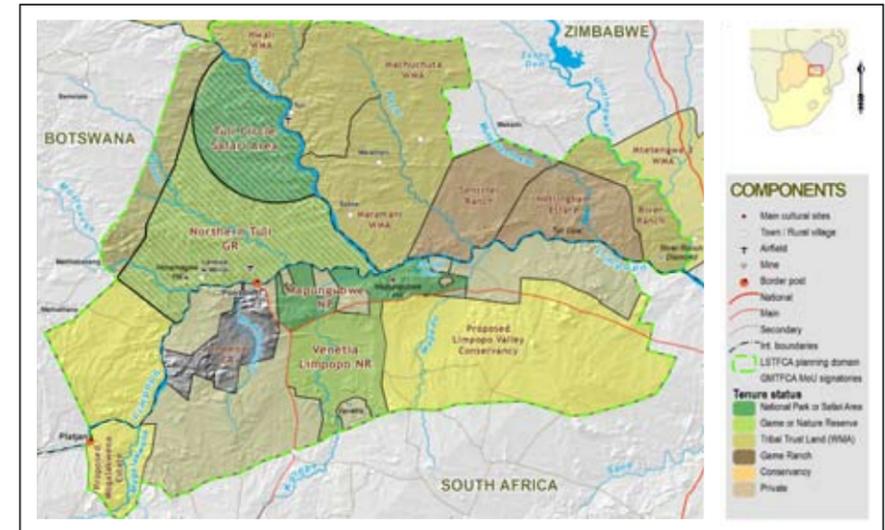
RISING

At the confluence of the Limpopo and Shashe rivers in South Africa's Limpopo Province is an enigmatic wilderness whose buried treasures were unknown to modern historians until 80 years ago. Excavations carried out in the period leading up to World War II revealed findings that told of the boom and decline of an industrious, sophisticated Iron Age kingdom. Today wildlife, mining, tourism and agriculture compete for the land. **Scott Ramsay** went sleuthing and discovered some interesting facts about the area called "the place of jackals", Mapungubwe. ▶

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT RAMSAY



GREATER MAPUNGUBWE TRANSFRONTIER CONSERVATION AREA



LEFT Mapungubwe Hill, once home to a thriving kingdom.

OPPOSITE, BELOW SANParks guide Cedric Sethlako.

BELOW, LEFT The most famous find at Mapungubwe – a small rhino fashioned from gold foil.

BELOW A kudu male.

PREVIOUS SPREAD Bushveld, baobabs and mopane trees characterise the landscape of the northern Limpopo Province.

It's a real privilege for us to be up here,' said Cedric Sethlako quietly, as we stood atop Mapungubwe Hill. The SANParks guide pointed to the landscape below. 'For hundreds of years no-one saw this view.' Beneath us, a panorama of baobabs and bushveld stretched hundreds of kilo-metres in either direction. Nearby, the Limpopo River – the border between South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana – reached its northernmost trajectory and turned south-east to the Indian Ocean.

'Look!' said Sethlako, pointing to a bull elephant feeding on a mopane tree below. As the prevailing easterly wind carried the smells and sounds of the wilderness, giraffes and kudu picked up our scent and stared at us. We stood still, taking in the impressive scene. But sight-seeing was not the reason Sethlako had brought us to the top of the hill.



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'It's a sacred place for the local people,' my dreadlocked guide said. 'A long time ago, their ancestors were buried here. Out of respect and fear, no-one visited this place.' Now, as part of Mapungubwe National Park, the hill is accessible to locals and foreigners alike, who come either to pay homage to their forebears or simply to learn about southern Africa's first and wealthiest kingdom.

'Over there were three royal graves,' Sethlako said, pointing to a site nearby. 'It was in these that more than two kilograms of gold was found 80 years ago, including the world-famous golden rhino and 12 000 golden beads. Hundreds of other valuable items were also uncovered.'



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Very few outsiders knew of the importance of Mapungubwe until 1932, when a further 22 graves were discovered and excavated, revealing the existence of a powerful kingdom that thrived during the 13th century, long before any settlement by European people. The news was kept relatively secret by the white government of the time and was excluded for many years from school history books.

Excavations revealed that for almost four centuries the area was home to thousands of people who lived alongside the wildlife, yet managed to cultivate millet, sorghum, beans and pumpkins, and grazed cattle, sheep and goats. It sat at the crossroads of a significant trade route in southern Africa, where ivory was exchanged for glass beads and copper from China, India and Arabia.

The increase in wealth prompted the formation of an elite class, perhaps the first sign of distinct social ranking in the sub-continent. The three royal graves were thought to contain the remains of the most important members of this monarchy. The bones, which lay in a basement of the archaeology department at the University of Pretoria for 70 years, were reburied in 2007. It was a significant occasion for the local community, who still revere Mapungubwe as a spiritual site.

Mapungubwe reached its zenith in 1220 AD, only to collapse 60 years later. There are several theories about its demise, but all are in agreement about one significant contributory factor: the arrival of a minor ice age that precipitated the worst drought in 15 000 years and, in all likelihood, destroyed the grazing. Today the region is still too dry for cattle and sheep farming, and the few farms that remain rely on ▶





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the Limpopo River for irrigation. Wildlife, however, continues to thrive and is one of the main drivers of development.

The Mapungubwe region was first identified as a potential nature reserve in the 1920s, but it was only in 1947 that Prime Minister Jan Smuts proclaimed the 190 000-hectare Dongola Wildlife Sanctuary. The following year, the reserve was abolished by the incoming National Party government, which instead allocated the land to white farmers. They failed to heed the lessons of ancient Mapungubwe and tried to graze cattle in the dry climate, with little success.

Further conservation plans lay dormant until the advent of South Africa's democracy



CONSERVATION VS CATTLE, CROPS AND COAL

The use of land for agriculture, livestock and mining near Mapungubwe continues to stir controversy. The national park is surrounded by farms, most of which have already been incorporated into the protected area. Some still operate as private outfits, but it is planned that, in time, these will also be included.

In southern Zimbabwe, the Maramani community owns large herds of cattle that move across the rivers to graze in Botswana and South Africa. Veterinary fences donated by the PPF are easily damaged by elephants, making them insecure, and the low water levels of the Limpopo and Shashe rivers in winter make it easy for livestock, people and wildlife to cross the borders.

But the headline act on the controversy stage is mining. The proposed development of the Vele Colliery open-cast mine to the east of the national park has sparked a national outcry from conservation NGOs such as the Endangered Wildlife Trust, PPF and the Association of Southern African Professional Archaeologists, as well as public watchdogs.

If the colliery plans were to go ahead, Vele would not be the only mining operation in the area. A De Beers diamond mine has been in operation south of the park for several decades and still draws water from a pump station within its borders, depleting even further the region's scarce water supply.

Jurgen Elbertse believes everyone should work as partners and that some compromise may be necessary. But he doesn't believe that mining is the way forward. 'Our private land has some of the richest coal deposits in the area,' he admitted. 'We could make billions overnight from mining it, but we're not going to. It would just be wrong.'

ABOVE Conflict between wildlife and livestock causes inevitable tension. Here, cattle cross from Zimbabwe into the protected area in search of better grazing.

LEFT Jurgen Elbertse predicts that Mapungubwe's combination of wildlife, vegetation and historical attractions such as this rock art site could turn the area into 'the second Kruger National Park'.

OPPOSITE Access to the hilltop is via a wooden staircase.

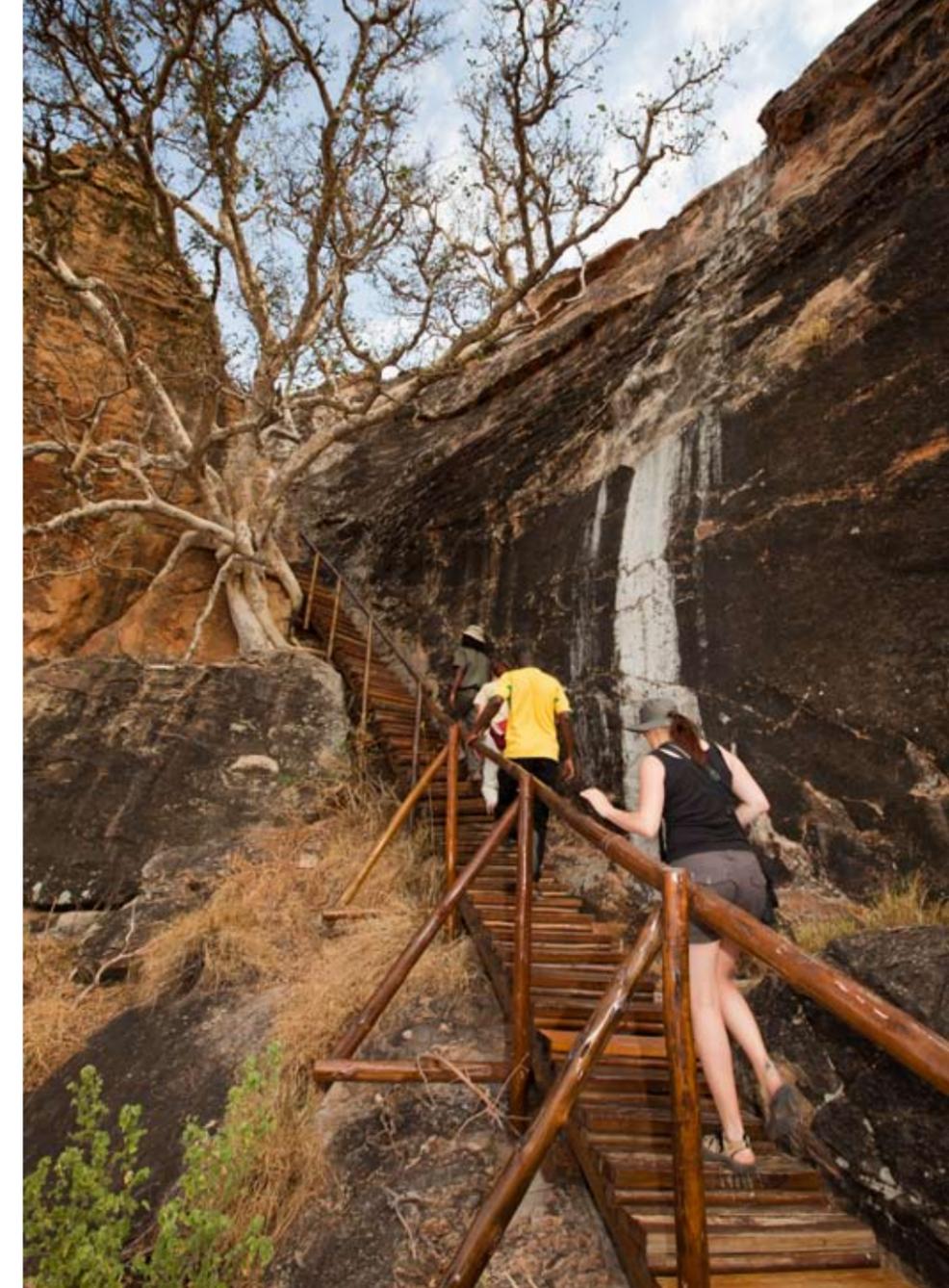
in 1994, when the possibility of the park's revival was discussed. A *Zeitgeist* of national pride had emerged, and Mapungubwe's rich archaeological history was seen as a pillar of the country's cultural heritage. The wildlife and natural landscapes, however, were also important reasons for its eventual proclamation as a national park in 2003.

Today Mapungubwe National Park extends over 30 000 hectares, spanning some of the finest riparian areas along the Limpopo River, where a diversity of trees such as sycamore figs, acacias and huge nyalas contrasts with the surrounding homogeneity of mopane bushveld. A relatively small but growing population of elephants, giraffes, lions and leopards roam the area, while the list of bird species tops the 400 mark. Surrounding the sanctuary is land that is mainly privately owned, some supporting agricultural farms but most of it transformed into reserves. The entire region, reaching also into Botswana and Zimbabwe, makes up the 500 000-hectare Greater Mapungubwe Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA) and is managed by the Peace Parks Foundation (PPF), an internationally funded non-profit organisation.

To the west of the national park is a 25 000-hectare private game reserve managed by Dutch-born Jurgen Elbertse, who is passionate about the potential of the region as a wildlife destination. 'There is huge biological diversity here and plenty of land that is already dedicated to wildlife,' he enthused as we bumped along a gravel track in his pick-up truck.

Called somewhat confusingly Mapungubwe Private Game Reserve, this protected area has a small population of wild animals, numerous rock art sites and several archaeological sites dating back to the Mapungubwe kingdom. It is owned by Leif Rahmqvist, a Swedish stationery magnate who originally established it as a private game farm and hunting lodge. Now there are plans to incorporate the reserve into the national park to expand the land available to conservation.

Elbertse hopes that it will herald something big for the region. 'This area could become the second Kruger National Park,' he said, referring to the privately run Klaserie, Timbavati and Sabi Sand wildlife areas, which have contributed significantly to the financial viability of South Africa's most famous wildlife sanctuary. 'We are probably about 15 years behind them, but



the potential is definitely there to create a sustainable public and private partnership conservation area.'

Hunting has supplied some of the revenue to Mapungubwe Private Game Reserve, but its survival is mostly due to Rahmqvist's generosity. Under the proposed plans, the national park will have access to the reserve, although the Swede will retain ownership. This arrangement will almost double the size of the park, providing a much-needed buffer zone for its wildlife.

'We are committed to the conservation of this region,' Elbertse emphasised. 'But it's expensive to run a 25 000-hectare wilderness properly. Hunting doesn't cover the costs; we need to find another way to generate revenue.' Even though he and ▶

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WORLD HERITAGE SITE STATUS

In 2001 Mapungubwe was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, which described it as a 'cultural landscape that represents combined works of nature and man. These works are illustrative of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of physical constraints and opportunities presented by the national environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces both external and internal.'



Rahmqvist will continue to operate the reserve as a conservation area (and eventually stop hunting altogether), they will develop about 1 800 hectares to create 64 plots in the west. A further 15 plots on 1 700 hectares in the east are also mooted. At an average of R2-million (nearly US\$300 000) per plot, and with a monthly levy of R2 500, Elbertse believes that it's the only way to create a sustainable business from conservation. 'The tourism industry is very competitive,' he said, 'and a few lodges in the area aren't going to supply the investment or the jobs that are required. We must create positive awareness of Mapungubwe as a conservation area, but we also have to be realistic about making it pay for itself.'

He stopped the car at a viewpoint in the eastern sector and we hiked a few hundred metres to a sandstone overhang decorated with several rock art paintings, some a few thousand years old. More than 150 rock art sites are scattered throughout Mapungubwe, indicating continuous human habitation. We climbed further to reach the top of a ridge. 'See there, that's Mapungubwe Hill. It's just 25 kilometres from here,' Elbertse pointed out.

The dry mopane forest extended to the Limpopo River, where the river's canopy forest flowed like a green vein through the bushveld. Here, far from concrete and congestion, it was hard to believe that this serene landscape had once been home to a thriving, industrious community.

AG



TOP Raised walkways have been constructed to allow birdlovers access to hides. More than 400 bird species have been recorded in Mapungubwe National Park alone.

CENTRE Elephants make short work of the veterinary fences that have been erected to keep livestock out of the protected area.

LEFT A serene Mapungubwe landscape.