

WETLAND PARK SCOOPS DIAMOND AWARD

28 September 2007

The diamond award for the most exciting and interesting heritage site was scooped by the Wetland Park Authority today, culminating what in the words of Minister Van Schalkwyk "has been a decisive year for the Greater St Lucia Wetland Park. The Park has a new name, the 4x4 issue has been concluded and 9 land claims over 75 % of the Park have been settled"

The award was made at the Business Leaders' breakfast hosted by the Professional Management Review Africa (PMR) in Durban following their annual survey that identifies those doing the most in their sectors to promote economic growth.

The Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Marthinus van Schalkwyk, highlighted these achievements in the Park's 2007 annual report, which was tabled in National Parliament at the end of August.

"The Park's name change to iSimangaliso Wetland Park will come into effect on November 1, paving the way for new marketing and branding programme while consolidating gains from its World Heritage listing in 1999, and subsequent redevelopment programme."

"The Wetland Park is probably the most complex conservation area in South Africa", the Park Authority Chairman, Mavuso Msimang, wrote in the annual report. "The challenge is to conserve World Heritage Site values while enabling economic growth and empowerment." He congratulated and thanked all the parties who have contributed to the park's successes to date.

Chief Executive Officer, Andrew Zaloumis, provided details of some milestones during the year under review:

PARK CONSOLIDATION AND LAND CARE

- Finalization of SAFCOL's withdrawal from commercial forestry on the Western Shores, enabling land rehabilitation and improvement in ground water during this period of drought.
- The transfer of 98000ha of land to the Park by the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry
- The withdrawal of SANDF from the former missile base at Hell's Gate

The mouth of Lake St Lucia also opened after five years of closure following cyclone Gamede, creating great excitement.

LAND CLAIMS

When the Park was established as South Africa's first World Heritage Site it was 100 % under land claim. Strong collaboration between the Park Authority, the Regional Land Claims Commission and affected communities facilitated the settlement of land claims extending across 75% of the Park. The local area planning process was initiated to involve successful claimants, who now have title to the land which remains under conservation, in planning and co-management.



SMME DEVELOPMENT, TOURISM SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND CRAFTS

A SMME development programme started in the last financial year with 60 SMME learners and 8 SMME businesses. Twenty four contractors were trained in project management. The craft, culture and tourism development programmes continued to provide capacity-building, employment and income for neighbouring communities. Thirty seven learners from five cultural groups and 215 women from 25 craft groups also received extensive training and mentorship. They are supplying Mr Price Home with their products. Fifty new learners are being trained in tour guiding, 42 trainees have completed training in

assistant chef, hospitality and tour guiding. Thirty learners have already been placed with tour operators on full time and freelance basis.

IMPROVED TOURISM FACILITIES

Over R17, 4 million was spent on new tourist roads and entrance gates. The extensive programme of game introductions enhanced visitor numbers in and around the Park with occupancies now outstripping the national average. A July 2006 inventory of tourist accommodation in and around the Wetland Park revealed a 59% increase in establishments and a 20% growth in beds since 2000. The weighted average room occupancy for the year ended June 2006 was 56% which compares favourably with the 48, 5% average occupancy for South Africa in 2005. A further R80m has been sourced over the next three financial years for improvement of park infrastructure building up to 2010.

LOCAL BLACK ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

An external review of public entities described the Authority as having "commendable and ground breaking" supply chain and BEE practices.

Benefits for mandatory partners included the issuing of over 100 land care contracts going to 52 SMME's employing more than 1500 claimants and community beneficiaries. Forty percent of the contractors and 60% of the people employed were women. The value of the contracts was approximately R 11 Million.

Infrastructure contracts were awarded to 23 SMME's employing 495 beneficiaries. Thirty percent of the total construction value went to SMMEs.

COMMUNITY BASED NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The delivery of 33 community gardens with approximately 900 beneficiaries, 80% of whom are women, as alternatives to farming in sensitive wetlands and peat lands, is well underway.

Sustainable natural resource harvesting included incema by 4500 community members, 90% of whom are women who use this resource to create saleable products.



RESEARCH

There are more than 100 registered research projects in the Park. Research plays an important role in providing scientific information and advice for Park management as well as contributing to the general body of knowledge about this World Heritage Site. In turn, the Park provides opportunities for South African researchers and institutions to develop specialist research capacity.

FINANCIAL AND GOVERNANCE

The Wetland Authority, which is now in its sixth year of operation, received its 5th consecutive clean audit opinion. Accounting revenue for the year increased by 33% reflecting the increase in the number of projects rolled out during the year. Revenue from own sources increased by 27%. The audit included for the first time a performance review. This component of the audit assessed the extent to which the Authority achieved its objectives and the levels of effectiveness and efficiency vis-à-vis its mandate to conserve, empower and develop the Park.

For copies of the annual report for 2006/7 please contact:

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This **Wetland Wire** newsflash, will be regularly issued by the Wetlands Park Authority and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the Park's conservation managers. These communications underline our ongoing commitment to update, inform and involve the public, holidaymakers and interested parties about the Park, and to address any concerns brought to our attention.

Andrew Zaloumis,
Authority Chief Executive Officer