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## Old African Fortress Inspires New Deal



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**South Africa's Mapungubwe National Park is no stranger to controversy. In a new twist, the enigmatic reserve is to get paid for having a mining company dig for coal a short distance from its boundary.**

Mapungubwe National Park on South Africa's northern Limpopo River border with Zimbabwe and Botswana is an enigmatic reserve for both its natural and cultural riches. It is best known for its golden scepter and gold-plated one-horned rhino left behind by an African kingdom of notable sophistication that settled there during 900 AD and traded with the East. It constituted southern Africa's biggest known African settlement of the time before mysteriously upping stakes and moving elsewhere three centuries later.

But the reserve is also known for courting intrigue ever since its first brush with protected-area status nearly a century ago. The latest episode in the saga has been the opening of a coal mine so close to it that conservationists, neighboring land owners and other interest groups calling themselves the Save Mapungubwe Coalition launched a protracted but ultimately unsuccessful campaign to stop it.

Instead, the mining company, Coal of Africa Limited (CoAL), has been allowed by the South African government to proceed with mining under what has been presented as a groundbreaking deal that would herald conservationists and developers from now on walking the path towards sustainability together rather than being constantly at odds.

### **'Biodiversity Offset'**

The parties to what is called the "biodiversity offset agreement" are the mining company, central government's department of environmental affairs and SANParks, the authority in charge of South African national parks.

In terms of the deal a steering committee made up of representatives of the three parties will see to it that what has been named the Vele Colliery keep its impact on the environment within mutually acceptable limits. At the core of the offset is an amount of R55-million (about 5-million US dollars) which the mining company will pay SANParks in five equal instalments over 25 years to offset such harm as the open-cast mining might cause the park.

There is a heavy onus on the parties to the agreement to prove that their deal offers adequate protection as the anti-mining campaigners by all reckoning had much to be concerned about. In addition to being a prized national park, Mapungubwe is a World Heritage Site and is at the heart of both a recognized biosphere and a declared cultural landscape.

The 30 000 hectare (74 131 acre) park anchors an ambitious transboundary scheme named the Greater Mapungubwe Transfrontier Conservation Area which links it with a vast patchwork of protected areas and wildlife ranches in Zimbabwe and Botswana, together coming to 5 909 square kilometre (2 281 square miles). The complex scheme is under ongoing negotiation with an array of parties, including poor communities, whose trust in it as an ecotourism venture is of cardinal importance to its success.

### **Place of Jackals**

The name Mapungubwe has been divergently interpreted to mean "place of the stone of wisdom" and "place of jackals", the first probably in reverence to the old kings and the latter most likely a reference to the animals who

gathered there to feed on the bones lying around.

But the area's cultural-historic significance goes beyond the hill where the old African kings ensconced themselves and where archaeological excavations continue to shed more light on the remarkable community that once thrived there.

The caves and overhangs in the rocky hills that dot the surrounding landscape house a rich collection of San rock art. And then there have been many discoveries of stone-age tools, which serve to take the region's human history a good deal further back. Footprints and fossils show it was a stomping ground of dinosaurs as well.

Added to all this is an enchanting landscape of riverine forest and savannah interspersed with giant baobabs where elephant, lion, hyena, wildebeest and a good many antelope species roam. The animals for most part cross the river boundaries between the three countries at will, quietly making their own case for undoing rather than extending intrusive development in this tender portion of old Africa.

### **Temporary Jobs**

Coal exports are vital to the economic development South Africa needs to reduce high levels of unemployment. One of the arguments in favour of the agreement with the mine is that it will over fifteen years create 349 temporary jobs for local communities. What that means to a region where many thousands are jobless is open to interpretation.

To conservationists it would be terribly sad, however, if Mapungubwe were to be forced backwards just when after almost a century of the wildest possible swings of fortune as a protected area it was at last enjoying firm legal, political and social recognition as one of South Africa's most prized reserves, in the process luring growing numbers of money-bearing tourists.

The park's saga goes back to 1922 when, two years before he lost power, then Prime Minister Jan Smuts's government set aside a piece of land there as a botanical reserve. More land was subsequently added, and when after fifteen years Smuts was voted back into power, his estimation of the region's natural environment had him take up the utterly novel idea at the time of joining it in a transboundary conservation scheme with territories across the Limpopo River border.

What was called the Dongola Wildlife Sanctuary was proclaimed by law in 1947, but after political controversy that saw one of parliament's longest and most heated debates it all fell apart when Smuts' government was defeated in the 1948 election and the new apartheid government of clergyman D F Malan repealed the act and dished out the protected land to settlers. Only a portion where archaeologists of the University of Pretoria were working at what got named Mapungubwe Hill was retained as a reserve.

However, it happened once again to be the region's compelling natural appeal that in 1976 had the successors of the same government reverse the park's fate by buying back farms and proclaiming it a provincial reserve. This set in train the process that finally saw it turned into a properly proclaimed national park in 1995, a year after South Africa's historic transition to an all-race democracy with Nelson Mandela at the helm.

Optimism ran high at an event outside the country's capital city of Pretoria where the parties to the agreement signed it in front of the media.

### **'Common Vision of Growth and Prosperity'**

Government's acting director general of environmental affairs, Judy Beaumont, said: "We have indeed reached a momentous stage in our country's development, where sectors originally perceived to have competing mandates have realized the common vision of growth and prosperity and are beginning to walk this path towards sustainability together."

The chairman of the SANParks board, Kuseni Dlamini, offered the assurance that the income from the mine would be spent on biodiversity conservation, cultural-heritage management and tourism development in favour of Mapungubwe and the stimulation of the economy.

The chief executive of Coal of Africa, David Brown, spoke of the agreement as offering a model for coexistence between conservation and development.