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SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL PARKS SIGNS BIODIVERSITY OFFSET AGREEMENT

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PRETORIA, Oct 10 (NNN-SA NEWS) -- South African National Parks (SANParks), which is responsible for managing South Africa's national parks covering some 3.7 million hectares (37,000 square kilometres), has signed a historic biodiversity offset agreement with Coal of Africa and the Department of Environmental Affairs for Vele Colliery.

The agreement is worth 55 million Rand (about 4.9 million US dollars) over the lifespan of the mine, which is located in Limpopo Province.

SANParks Acting Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Dr Nomvuselelo Songelwa, the Acting Director General of Environmental Affairs, Judy Beaumont, and the CEO of Coal of Africa (CoAL), David Brown, signed the agreement on behalf of their organizations on Wednesday.

Speaking at the signing ceremony in Pretoria, the Chairperson of the SANParks Board, Kuseni Dlamini, said the process to revise the Mapungubwe World Heritage Site buffer zone showed that it was possible for Vele Mine to continue its operations without compromising Mapungubwe.

"There are those who have insisted on seeing conservation as being opposed to development and job creation but this is certainly not the case," said Dlamini.

"SANParks has long held the view that our national parks should serve as catalysts for local economic development, particularly in some of the more isolated rural areas where opportunities are limited.

"It was a complex journey as we sought to marry the interests of the environment, heritage and development. The signature of this agreement bears testimony to the commitment of the representatives of our respective organizations."

Mapungubwe was a pre-colonial state in southern Africa located at the confluence of the Shashe and Limpopo rivers, south of Great Zimbabwe. The kingdom was the first stage in a development that would culminate in the creation of the Kingdom of Zimbabwe in the 13th century, and with gold trading links to Rhapta and Kilwa Kisiwani on the African east coast.

Brown, whose company produces coking and thermal coal, said: "We believe that Vele Colliery has set a new benchmark for co-existence between mining, heritage and agriculture."

Beaumont said South Africa's mineral endowment implies that mining and the environment will continue to inter-act and will need to walk together to achieve prosperity in a sustainable environment.

Beaumont said the offset agreement will enable Mapungubwe National Park to implement various projects to rehabilitate and improve the management of archaeological sites, as well as develop roads and key park infrastructure such as an overnight education facility for children.

"We have indeed reached a momentous stage in our country's development, where sectors originally perceived to have competing mandates have realised the common vision of growth and prosperity for our country and are beginning to walk this path towards sustainability together," said Beaumont.

"I hope that this will set an example for other companies with mining and similar interest in environmentally sensitive areas to also act responsibly and ensure that any potential impacts are properly managed, including by way of offsetting." -- NNN-SA NEWS

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