

iSimangaliso investments in development and conservation starting to yield benefits

The region in which [iSimangaliso Wetland Park](#) is located was experiencing a declining tourism economy when it was listed and proclaimed as South Africa's first world heritage site in 2000. The proclamation consolidated 16 separate parcels of land - including a patchwork of earlier proclamations from 1895 - which saw the beginning of a new era of developing to conserve through restitution and growth. Presently, the 395 odd tourism jobs of 1999 grew to 8,000 and tourism contributes 7% of Kwazulu-Natal's tourism GDP with the number of tourism businesses in and around the park having grown by 89%.



Tourism business owner

Benefiting local communities

Importantly, local communities are starting to see real benefits. All privately owned lodges in iSimangaliso have local community equity – a mandatory requirement set by iSimangaliso. There are nine community-owned and operated companies running tourism activities like game drives, boat tours, and turtle tours.

iSimangaliso also supports 215 black-owned small and medium enterprises, provides on average 11,000 temporary jobs per annum and has supported 87 neighbouring students at University since 2010. And that's just scratching the surface.

With a population of some 640,000 people around it, iSimangaliso is situated in one of the poorest regions in the country. Eighty percent of people around iSimangaliso live below the poverty line and unemployment is rife – youth unemployment is around 80% and only 15.3% of the economically active population is formally employed. There is a high dependence on social grants for survival.

iSimangaliso's fragile beauty and sense of place are being protected for future generations through environmentally benign forms of economic growth. It is a place where nature and conservation contribute to reconciliation and restitution by providing tangible benefits to those communities living in and around the wetlands.

Where people and nature can reconnect and flourish

"This ethos," says Buyane Zwane, Chairman of the iSimangaliso Board, "continues to underpin the Park's vision today – to recreate the wholeness of nature, where people and nature can reconnect and flourish, and where enhancing access, equity and the economic empowerment of our local communities remain the cornerstone of our conservation and development approach."

"iSimangaliso's economic development and empowerment have continued its consistent upward trajectory since 2000. In 2017, the final touches are being made to complete the redevelopment of the southern sections of the Park (Western Shores, Eastern Shores and the Lake St Lucia Estuary) and uMkhuze. An EIA record of decision has been issued for the major redevelopment of Sodwana Bay and detailed planning for infrastructure in the Coastal Forest Reserve and Kosi Bay is in progress. This planning includes 24 local community-driven tourism investment accommodation opportunities," continued Zwane.



Tourism business owner

“Local communities are part-owners of the three privately-run facilities in the Park. Equity participation ranges from 17.5% to 68%. A fourth lodge – 100% community-owned – is in EIA stage. The new lodge developments will follow this model,” says Andrew Zaloumis, CEO of iSimangaliso.

Zaloumis stresses, “In our planning and development, we are cognisant that we must uphold and strengthen the Park’s world heritage values. The R60 million restoration of iSimangaliso’s centrepiece, the 350km² Lake St Lucia, is well underway. This is South Africa’s largest and most ecologically significant wetland and estuarine rehabilitation project.”

The World Heritage Convention Act sets out iSimangaliso’s very specific mandate:

- (a) Conserving the world heritage values
- (b) Empowering local communities
- (c) Optimising tourism potential.

This balancing act does not mean that all three are treated equally and the bottom line remains the world heritage values. Implementation of this work and creating the balance is carried out under the guidance of the iSimangaliso board, which includes community, land claimant, amaXhosi, conservation, and tourism representation.

So how exactly is the UNESCO World Heritage Site achieving this?

Transformation

- All iSimangaliso’s none government run tourism facilities have local BEE. Three of these iSimangaliso community-private-public tourism accommodation partnerships with local community equity ranging from 17% to 68%. Three more community-public-private partnerships are underway. One of the projects is undergoing an EIA and the other is at refurbishment stage. Fourteen new opportunities are being scoped and eleven existing sites have been earmarked for redevelopment – all with a minimum mandatory local community equity of 20% or more.
- Nine local community-owned (upwards of 70%) activity operations including game drives, estuary cruises, turtle tours and charter fishing.
- Eight co-management agreements with land claimants, which include a number of benefits. One of the benefits is the payment of 8% of commercial revenue on an annual basis to land claimants. These payments have been made following iSimangaliso’s annual audit since 2010.

- 215 entrepreneurs in the SMME programme. At any one time, 110 small businesses actively engage with mentors. Some R7.8m has been disbursed to 106 business. Businesses range from tourism operators, Internet cafes, spaza shops and poultry producers to hairdressers, salons, nurseries and caterers.



Environmental monitors

- Members of local community fill 90% of jobs created through third-party services. Third party services include fence maintenance, access control, environmental monitors, cleaning, greening, security and day-to-day conservation management. Approximately 164 956 temporary jobs have been created through iSimangaliso's infrastructure and land-care programmes in the last 15 years. Over 80% of iSimangaliso's expenditure is spent on BEE providers annually.
- 87 bursaries to students since 2010 through the iSimangaliso Higher Access Education Programme. Forty-eight students have graduated and a further ten are expected to graduate in 2017. The pass rate on the programme is 81% in contrast with the national average of circa 33%. Studies are related to conservation, tourism and park management and are supported by work-place experience.
- 14 internships. All of the interns have secured permanent placements – eight of which are in iSimangaliso.
- 40 tourism guides trained. These guides are now going through a second programme and an additional ten new guides are being trained.
- 55 schools on average per annum participate in iSimangaliso's Environmental Education Programme. The programme includes field trips and a biennial school awards programme which invites learners to engage creatively with conservation through art, poems, stories, quizzes, and songs. iSimangaliso is now exploring mechanisms for improving maths and science in the regional schools to increase the number of students that qualify for tertiary study.



Environmental Education Programme

- 70,000 people obtain free access annually as part of iSimangaliso's equitable access programme;
- Natural resource harvesting programme, which includes 3,500 Ncema (grass) harvesters and 1,000 subsistence fishers.
- 14 agricultural gardens. These were established to improve food security and support sustainable agricultural practices. Funding for this programme has not been available for some years and is currently being pursued.
- 200 crafters. The programme includes training and support in design, production, and distribution of craft. All products are handmade and produced using raw materials from iSimangaliso.
- 50 local artists trained in printmaking, painting, sculpture and the business of art. Some of these artworks can be seen in the Presidential Suite of the Moses Mabhida stadium in KZN, as well as Dube Tradeport. Two commissions sold for R100,000 each to a private buyer. Newly secured funding will allow the programme to continue this year.

Land rehabilitation and infrastructure development

- Some 20,000ha of alien invasive plants and 16,000ha of pine and gum plantations have been removed as part of the ecosystems restoration programmes of the Park.
- Approximately R300m in infrastructure spend fencing the park, rebuilding day visitor facilities, roads, water infrastructure and tourism facilities. The programme has been rolled out on a progressive implementation basis beginning with the construction of major arterials and feeder routes that have the dual purpose of supporting tourism and assisting community-access to economic centres. The rollout plan has also been informed by the internal rate of return.
- Game reintroductions – all but one of the species that historically occurred in the park have been reintroduced.

The redevelopment of the south of the park and uMkhuze sections is all but complete. This includes 300km of visitor roads, day visitor facilities (hides, picnic sites, canopy walks, jetties, ablutions and beach facilities), park entrance complexes, craft markets and visitor centres as well as over 70km of water reticulation systems.

The next phase of the infrastructure programme is the redevelopment of Sodwana Bay and the completion of detailed planning for the Coastal Forest Reserve and Kosi sections of the Park, as well as the 24 tourism investment accommodation opportunities.

"The investments that have been made by iSimangaliso with government in the southern sections of the Park have boosted

tourism significantly and created a platform for the roll-out of our programme in the northern sections of the Park. We are looking forward to this next phase,” concludes Zwane.

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