

# Big 5 National Park bringing huge infrastructural changes

The proposed Big 5 National Park project will bring huge infrastructural changes to the Lubombo Region.

Stories By Phephile Motau

These changes were disclosed by the Eswatini National Trust Commission (ENTC) Director of Parks Thulani Methula during a tour of the game reserves by ambassadors and consuls to Eswatini.

The tour was organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism and Environmental Affairs and they toured the Hlane National Park and the Mlawula Game Reserve. The tour was meant among other things to get the diplomats' buy-in into the project so that they can assist by getting investors from their respective countries.

Methula who is also the Acting CEO of the ENTC was given a chance to explain the project and he revealed that some infrastructural changes will include a new road that will link the Manzini-Hlane Road to Simunye. This new road will be the main road from Manzini to Simunye.

The road which is currently being used from Mafutseni to Simunye will run through the integrated parks. He said this road would then be open to people but will be tolled as they would have had a chance to view wildlife travelling through it.

## Transport

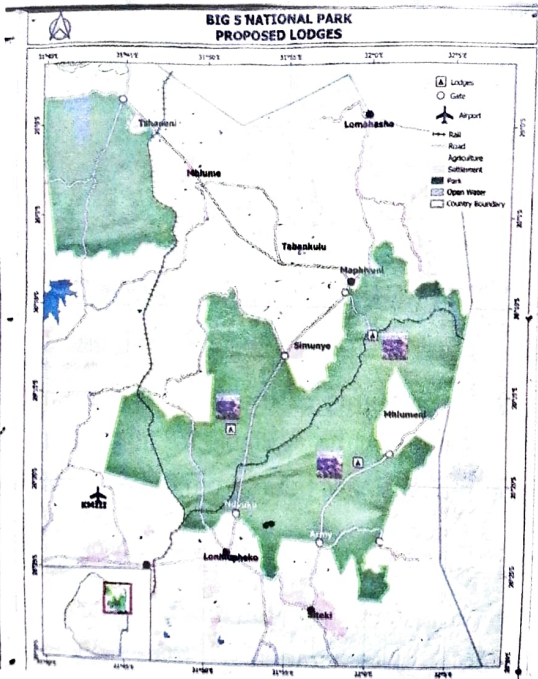
Methula said public transport will continue to move through this road, but there will be a system that will determine whether they slowed down to view wildlife.

He said they would be free to use it and not pay anything if they were within a particular time frame. Methula explained that the proposed Big 5 National Park was made to integrate various land uses and activities. He explained that the objection is to ensure the coordination or combination of all protected areas within the landscape.

He said there would be no demarcation within these parks to al-



▲ The Diplomats who participated in the tour with the Minister of Foreign Affairs Thulisile Dladla and the Minister of Tourism Moses Malindane Vilakati.



▲ A map of the proposed Big 5 National Park and the sites for the lodges.

low vast numbers of huge animals that are migratory and have huge home ranges to be able to exist and live within the area and looking at attracting tourists with all the species available.

He said the proposed park has a total of about 80 000 hectares. It includes Hlane, Mlawula, commu-

nal areas, privately owned farms, and some farms which are owned by the government. One of the farms is privately owned by the Royal Eswatini Sugar Corporation which is Inyoni YemaSwati (IYSIS)

Methula said they had a challenge as they could not get any connectivity between the parks

and IYSIS as there are sugar cane plantations between them. He said the proposal was that IYSIS will be used as a breeding station for rare game species which will be reintroduced to the park.

Methula explained that IYSIS was a mixed management group where there are livestock and wildlife coexistence. He said the farm was one of the largest producers of livestock in the country. They have 3 000 heads of livestock. He explained that the farm would be used as a breeding station for the game, which will then be introduced to the farms.

He also said they would also maintain the livestock park on the farm as beef is one of the economic drivers in the country.

He said the parks were also strategically placed close to the King Mswati III International Airport. Methula said the region will be the economic hub of the country in the next few years and tourism can be one of the economic drivers. He said once the Big 5 National Park is fully developed, it will maximize the outcome of the KMIII as its usage is quite minimal at the moment. He explained that there will also be five-star lodges which would be within the national parks.

Methula said the project is built from the big national agenda. He said there would be real five-star lodges within the area with one being within Hlane and one or two within Mlawula. He said the idea was to have the first one around the Mbuzi area which has a river passing through. "This is one of the initiatives the government is em-

barking on in terms of attracting investors to invest in the tourism sector," he said.

Methula said there was also a rail line passing through and relocating it was proving to be quite expensive. He said it would cost E30 billion to relocate the rail line and make it pass through a smaller portion of the park.

He added that they were working on feasibility studies on the coexistence of the wildlife and the rail line. Studying intensively the aspect of animal behaviour and the development of developing wildlife corridors. Visitors to the Big 5 National Park will get to see animals including lions, elephants, the black and white rhino, and many others. Mlawula also boasts of having the biggest ironwood forest in the world. Methula said they had 2 000 hectares of it. It is a highly protected and highly viable species.

We are working hard to protect it and they are working towards developing it fully as an attraction because of its rarity.

Mlawula is also home to about 350 bird species. Methula explained that there is a migratory flyway for the birds which come from SA, which goes through Hlane, then Mlawula before getting into the Maputo flyway, the Ethiopian flyway, and then Europe. Due to climate change, the birds stay longer within this region. The tourists will also get a chance to take part in hiking and to see some of the mountains which have historical significance, including the Khabane trail, which the diplomats had a chance to experience.

## E120 million for Mlawula bush clearing

Mlawula Nature Reserve needs about E120 million for mechanical bush clearing.

Methula said the bushes in the nature reserve create an imbalance within the ecosystem.

Elephants have helped at Hlane for bush control and since they

do not have any, they need to use mechanical means to clear the bushes.

He said once the park is complete, they will be able to have elephants coming through to the Mlawula part of the park and they will manage the habitat dynamics.

He added that it is quite costly to manage the bush encroachment and will cost E1 million per 50 hectares.

"We want to control 6 000 hectares. We are piloting to see if the machinery works so that a third of the park will have to be cleared,"

he said.

He said bush encroachment was their main challenge as a park and they were trying to control that. He said they were clearing the bush through a project known as ecosystem restoration.

Methula said they went and did maps and got photographs of how the park was 70 years ago where it was still opening. He said this

would help with animal visibility.

He said they had a lot of animals in the park. Methula also explained that one of the activities for bird lovers in the park is the vulture restaurant where they collect animals hit by the train and put them in a certain place so that when vultures come true, bird watchers can watch.