

MATOBO



SOCIETY

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NEWSLETTER 93 / AUGUST 2015

1 – MATOPOS RANKED IN TOP 50 PARKS IN AFRICA

SafariBookings.com conducted an in-depth analysis of 3,008 reviews to put to rest the question of which park was best for African safaris. With an overall rating of 4.89 out of 5, Serengeti National Park in Tanzania came out as the clear winner. Rounding up the top 3 were MalaMala Game Reserve in South Africa, and Okavango Delta in Botswana. And included in the list was the Matopos National Park – OK at place 50.

Mana Pools was ranked 4th, Hwange 19th (ahead of Kruger at 20), Matusadona at 25, Gonarezhou at 41. In total, 138 parks of the 8 major safari countries were in consideration for a place in the top 50. The analysis was based on 3,008 park reviews collected through the SafariBookings website. Of them, 2,234 reviews were contributed by safari tourists from 63 countries around the world. The remaining 774 reviews were written by renowned industry experts, most of whom are guidebook authors working for Lonely Planet, Rough Guides, Frommer's, Bradt and Footprint.

Go to <https://www.safaribookings.com/blog/258> for more information.

The information on the Matopos was not entirely accurate, omitted the enormous rock art heritage and did not mention that it is a World Heritage Site. Obviously, we have some work to do on promoting our Park! But all told, it was a positive report.

2 – MATOBO PARK NEWS

Fire breaks have been cut, and extensive cutting of thatching grass, and baling has been taking place. There is some debate as to whether or not this conforms to the mandate of our Parks, but in the absence of large grazers it does maintain some of the grassland. Cutting of reeds for thatching however exposes water to evaporation, and impacts on birdlife – factors that we do not believe have been adequately attended to.

The Park had an opportunity to restock with 150 wildebeest, but we understand that this has been deferred due to a foot and mouth outbreak in the donor area. We need to get grazers into the park to address the excess grass.

At the same time repair work has been carried out on some roads within the Park, and access to Toghwana via Mtsheli is now possible. Repairs are underway on the tennis court at Maleme Rest Camp, and there are plans for a swimming pool in time. These are good recreational additions to the Camp.

3 – NATIONAL MUSEUMS

National Museums and Monuments continue to be active in the hills with management plans being drafted for a number of key sites. We look forward to their implementation.

4 – WORLD HERITAGE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

The Management Committee, under the chairmanship of the MCS, held its scheduled July meeting, which included some valuable and interesting discussion.

5 – www.matobo.org

The Matobo Conservation Society also has a Facebook page. So, look us up and see what's happening.

6 – SUBSCRIPTIONS

You are reminded that subscriptions for the year 1 October 2015 to 30 September 2016 fall due on 30 September. Please ensure that your subs are up to date. Your committee has decided to maintain the rates at their current level, but will be writing to members who are in arrears, where after the members will be deleted from the records. It is important that we show our commitment by meeting our dues. Whilst we encourage new members, we seem to lose contact with others who remain in Bulawayo.

US\$ 20	Individual/Family
US\$ 5	Special Member (Pensioner/Student)
US\$100	Corporate

7 - NEXT EVENT

Date	6 th September 2015
Venue	Stone Hills
Meet	8:15am to leave by 8:30am, Churchill Arms Car Park
Travel	All vehicles, trucks preferred
Details	Provide own chairs, tables, meals and drinks. Don't forget your hat!

We will be travelling to the far western reaches of the Matopos, via Marula, to visit the home and conservancy of Richard and Bookie Peek. There is a fascinating “balloon tree” that we visited previously, but may be on the itinerary again. Richard will also give a talk on birdlife – and this is not to be missed!

8 – REPORT BACK

Our last outing generated a lot of attention, so much so that a second repeat will be organised in due course for those who missed the last one! On the Saturday prior to the field trip, Paul and Gavin set out to search for the Kumbudzi Stone Ruins – and their efforts were rewarded with the location of probably the largest set of ruins in the Matopos. And they were in fairly good condition. We ascertained that they were last visited by National Museums in 1972!

On Sunday we sallied forth again, met the convoy at Lumane Falls, and directed them to our newly discovered site. The attendees were rewarded with not just the ruins, but a fine view into the south eastern Matopos. The weather was superb, and the morning was completed with a series of talks from Paul on the likely history and nature of the ruins.

The convoy departed the site and drove to Kumbudzi dam for a delightful picnic lunch. The dam was full, with water lilies in bloom, against the backdrop of the magnificent Gobambeza Mountain, and surrounded by lovely *Brachystegia tamarindoides (glaucescens)* made for a most pleasant afternoon.

We received a report from Dr Jane Browning on the field trip to Camp Dwala. For a copy of the report from Jane, with pictures, or further information please contact the Secretary directly on doristoes7@gmail.com or Cathy Sharp on mycofreedom@yoafrica.com.

9 – PARK CLEAN UP DAY

A hardy few travelled out to Maleme to tackle more litter and cactus on World Environment Day. We were joined by the Area Manager, Sharon Musakwa, and a good number of Maleme staff. We had to clear areas tackled last year as there had been some regrowth – this is likely to be ongoing for several years. However, we also extended the area being cleared and good progress was made – but much remains to be done. Hopefully some form of bio-control can be introduced in the future. The Society extends its appreciation to all who were involved in this worthwhile project.

10 – CALENDAR 2015

Herewith the proposed dates for the 2015 field trips –make a note in your diary!

Sun 6 th Sept	Stone Hills
Sun 29 th Nov	AGM (venue to be advised)

Other dates

28 th – 30 th August	Matopos Classic MTB
09 th – 13 th March 2016	Matopos Heritage Challenge
03 rd April 2016	Matopos 33 miler

11– MATOPOS CLASSIC

The next major MTB event will be the Matopos Classic over the weekend of 28 -30 August. Contact the Secretary if you need more detail. There has already been keen interest in this less formal, semi-social event, which also raises funds for the Society. Last year the participants were rewarded with the magnificence of the spring leaves of the *Brachystegia tamarindoides*, and we hope to enjoy the same again this year.

12 – PAINTED HOUSES – ‘MY BEAUTIFUL HOME’

The now annual “My Beautiful Home” competition aims to encourage people living in the Matopos to continue the practice of decorating huts in the traditional manner. The 2015 competition was launched on 16 July, and photographs of some of the amazing entries in last year’s competition are currently on display at the National Gallery. We recommend that you pop in and view the houses. The owners have taken great pride in their work, and the results are commendable.

13 – MATOPOS MOUNTAINEERING / CLIMBING EVENT

About 50 people attended the “Rock Rave Event” Climbing on 30th and 31st May. Twenty-seven routes have been marked onto a portion of the north east face of Siloti, and bolts have been fitted for safety purposes.

This promises to open a new recreational activity in the hills, and your chairman was subsequently able to visit both Silozwe and Hambushamba with the “sticky fingers crew”.

The Mountain Club of Zimbabwe visited over the Heroes weekend.

14 – THE MATOPOS 33 MILER ULTRA-MARATHON

We reported that 482 participants took part this year. In fact, the number was 503. Plenty of time for you to prepare for the 2016 event!

15 – NEW SIGNS

With the exception of Bambata Cave, all signs have now been erected. The erection of the new signs was made possible through the generous donations of Market Force, National Fencing (Vernon Hammond), and Stray Dogs Furniture (Mark Swannack and Elton Lightfoot).

16 – RHINO NEWS

First Rhinos in Massive African Airlift Released in Botswana

(With acknowledgement to Brian Clark Howard, National Geographic 7th May, 2015)

It's the first stage of the world's largest rhino airlift, meant to protect a dwindling population of the animals.

Ten rhinos have been safely released in northern Botswana, after a long journey that entailed a cargo plane, a crane, dozens of soldiers, and six weeks in quarantine.

The animals were captured from an overpopulated park in South Africa and were moved to an undisclosed location in a sparsely populated reserve in Botswana last week that is better protected from poachers.

The relocation project, called RHINOS WITHOUT BORDERS, aims to move 100 rhinos by next year, the largest attempted airlift of rhinos in history.

The first ten were released on April 28, after touching down in the largest aircraft ever to land at Botswana's Maun International Airport, an Ilyushin 76, according to Dereck Joubert, one of the project's leaders.

“It was a great success and we are all feeling euphoric from the amazing experience,” Beverly Joubert, another project leader, said via email.

The Jouberts are National Geographic explorers-in-residence who are collaborating on the airlift with the tourism groups Great Plains Conservation and Beyond. The husband and wife team work as wildlife filmmakers and conservationists based in Botswana's Okavango Delta.

Dereck Joubert says the bold project is necessary because rhinos reached a tipping point last year, with more killed by poachers than were born in the wild. An estimated 4,000 to 5,000 black rhinos and 20,000 white rhinos remain in Africa, with another one killed by poachers every seven and a half hours. Their horns are hacked off and sold in China and Vietnam on the black market for medical treatments that western scientists say don't work.

Big Effort

Getting the rhinos from the airport to deep into the Okavango Delta was no easy task. Already packed in crates, the rhinos were loaded onto trucks and escorted by 60 soldiers, to deter potential poachers.

Along the way, a wheel came off one of the trucks and the two-ton rhinos had to be moved into another truck via crane. The convoy had to cross several rivers, while a helicopter was sent ahead to scout for poachers. The heat was a relentless 90 degrees Fahrenheit (32 Celsius), which meant the team had to make sure the animals didn't overheat.

By sundown, the rhinos were released into their new homes, less than 24 hours from the start of their journey from the staging area in an undisclosed part of South Africa. There, the rhinos had been monitored for disease for six weeks and fitted with microchips to monitor their locations. But under the watchful eye of the Botswana military, the rhinos "finally ran free," says Dereck Joubert.

"One bull [male rhino] turned back and as a deep sign of appreciation charged the container he had been cooped up in, putting a massive dent in it," says Joubert.

The relocation process is expensive, about \$45,000 per rhino, but RHINOS WITHOUT BORDERS has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars from supporters and will soon be moving more rhinos.

The ultimate goal is doubling Botswana's wild rhino population, now estimated at 77 to 100 animals.

17 – RAINFALL

Forecasts for the 2015/2016 season continue to paint a bleak picture. We will endeavour to keep you posted!

18 – ROCK ART – NEW BOOK RELEASED

Archaeologist Siyakha Mguni claims to have uncovered the religious symbolism behind southern Africa's most mysterious rock paintings in his newly released book "Termites of the Gods".

Mguni takes to the Matopo Hills in Zimbabwe, an area with the highest concentration of formlings – seemingly decorative oval patches of paint, sometimes with detailed inscriptions and joined together by long, thin lines. Since their discovery hundreds of years ago, researchers have pondered what they represent. Are they abstract artistic shapes? Shields? Waterfalls? Bubbles? Unrecognisable extinct animals?

When Mguni started looking closer, he noticed that finer details like microdots, oval flecks, irregular shapes and notches didn't match any of the earlier explanations. "I believed there had to be something that previous writers had missed," he says in the book. It wasn't until the chance discovery of a cave on an ordinary expedition that Mguni experienced what he describes as his "eureka! moment".

Hidden at the edge of a rock-art panel in the cave was a type of formling that Mguni had never seen before. It was well outlined with a distinctive black shape in the middle – a kind of empty hollow. At the top of the shape were four "crowned forms" that stood about 3cm tall. "They reminded me of beefsteak mushrooms, which grow on termite mounds, a rare delicacy that I recalled from my childhood days at my grandparents' home on the western fringes of the Matopo Hills," he explains.

The resemblance of the formlings to the structure of termite mounds was uncanny. Mguni started asking himself if formlings could in fact be representations of termite nests. But Mguni's peers argued that the complexity of the drawings was out of sync with the spiritual subject matter of the rest of the rock art in the area. It was only when Mguni pointed out that there were San spiritual beliefs that were embodied by termite nests that the link to complex San cosmology became accepted. Mguni describes them as the San God's house. "I began to wonder whether the termitarium symbolism for God's house was not in some way suggesting that the spirit and natural worlds are in fact one and the same phenomenon."

Mguni's book seeks to prove that they are.

19 – GLOBAL WARMING UPDATE

(With acknowledgement to FIONA MACDONALD, 22nd June 2015)

It's official: scientists say we're entering Earth's sixth mass extinction

And humans may struggle to survive it.

Biologists have used conservative new estimates to prove that vertebrate species on Earth are disappearing faster than at any time since the extinction of the dinosaurs, and humans are now at risk of being wiped out.

"[The study] shows without any significant doubt that we are now entering the sixth great mass extinction event," one of the researchers, Paul Ehrlich from Stanford University in the US, said in a press release. Even worse, the research shows that we triggered the event ourselves.

Although many biologists have long believed that Earth is in the middle of a major extinction event, sceptics have argued that estimates were overstating how fast species were being wiped out as a result of inconsistent data. Scientists work out whether we're in a major extinction event by comparing the current extinction rate to the background extinction rate - the rate at which you'd expect species to normally disappear.

By looking only at well-verified data and fossil records of vertebrates - our best-studied group of organisms - the new research came up with a background extinction rate that's twice as high as previous estimates.

But even using this background rate and the most conservative species loss estimates, the researchers found that animals are still being wiped out around 15 to 100 times faster than they should be - in fact, the rate of species loss hasn't been this high since the dinosaurs disappeared 65 million years ago.

"Rather than the nine extinctions among vertebrates that would be expected to have occurred in normal geological circumstances since 1900, their conservative estimate adds in another 468 extinctions, spread among mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish," Jan Zalasiewicz writes for The Guardian.

At this rate, the team estimates that around 41 percent of all amphibian species and 26 percent of all mammals will be wiped out. Such dramatic biodiversity loss will also put humans in danger within just three generations, the team estimates, particularly if we also lose crucial pollinators such as the honeybee. "If it is allowed to continue, life would take many millions of years to recover, and our species itself would likely disappear early on," said one of the lead researchers, Gerardo Ceballos from the Universidad Autónoma de México.

"We are sawing off the limb that we are sitting on," added Ehrlich. The researchers also found that the main culprit for this mass extinction isn't a major event such as a volcanic eruptions or meteor strike. Instead, it's human activity. The researchers found the following four activities had been particularly damaging:

- Land clearing for farming, logging and settlement
- Introduction of invasive species
- Carbon emissions that drive climate change and ocean acidification
- Toxins that alter and poison ecosystems

"We emphasise that our calculations very likely underestimate the severity of the extinction crisis, because our aim was to place a realistic lower bound on humanity's impact on biodiversity," the researchers write in the journal *Science Advances*, where their results are published.

But it's not all bad news - the researchers remarked that we could still avoid such steep biodiversity loss through intense conservation action. "But that window of opportunity is rapidly closing," they conclude.

Hopefully the threat of wiping out our own species will be enough to finally make us sit up and take action. Find out more about the research in the Stanford University article below.

20 – TREE PLANTING

Bhutan breaks Guinness record for tree planting

(With acknowledgment to Vikas Pandey BBC Monitoring, Delhi, 2 June 2015)

A team of 100 volunteers in Bhutan has set a new world record by planting 49,672 trees in one hour.

They smashed the previous record by almost 10,000 trees. It had been set by an Indian team three years ago. Bhutan's planters gathered in the capital, Thimphu, for their feat, which Guinness World Records confirmed. The government of the mountainous Himalayan kingdom lays great emphasis on protecting the environment. Bhutan has more than 75% forest cover. "The whole country is happy. Our world record shows that Bhutan's young generation wants a clean and green future. We will never compromise on that," tree planting event organiser Karma Tshering said.

The Buddhist nation of just over 700,000 people is sandwiched between India and China. It has tried hard to protect itself from the influence of the outside world, only permitting television and the internet just over a decade ago. The tree record was welcomed by many on social media platforms in Bhutan. The official Twitter account of Guinness World Records retweeted the Bhutanese achievement. Mr

Tshering said that he and other volunteers planned the event in part because former King Jigme Singye Wangchuck loves the environment and "we respect him for that".

"He is marking his 60th birthday in 2015 and we thought what can be a better gift than planting so many trees in his honour?" Mr Tshering explained. The team practised for more than a week - Sherub Dorji, one of the volunteers, said that helped build physical strength and also planting technique. The health of Bhutan's environment is one of the key indicators of the country's famed Gross National Happiness index.

Senior Bhutanese journalist Namgay Zam says team members planted an average of eight trees each per minute on steep and unfriendly terrain. "I was blown away," she said. "And we have our result: Almost 10,000 more than India's previous record of 40,885 trees in 2012. I am so proud of our planters." Mr Tshering says he is confident the saplings will be looked after well because the volunteers have promised to look after them until they become bigger. Species planted include indigenous ones such as Blue Pine and Cypress. "We have pledged to work in groups for at least six years. I can't wait to see a forest in the area," Mr Dorji said.

A lesson for Zimbabwe!

21 – MCS APPAREL

You are reminded that the Society has a stock of fleece sleeveless jackets, in olive green with orange MCS logo. They are ideal for the cool mornings and evenings. These are available at \$20 each. We still have stocks of hats and caps (at \$10 each). CD's are also available.