

MATOBO



SOCIETY

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Welfare No: W/O 30/94
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NEWSLETTER 103 / JUNE 2018

1 – RAMSAR

Elsewhere in this newsletter matters pertaining to wetlands are shared. Work on having the Matopos recognised as a Ramsar site has continued with much valuable information being collated. In fact, we are in the process of refining the data to meet the size restrictions! We hope to have this submission ready in the next two months.

Support has been garnered from both the Umzingwane and Matobo Rural District Councils, as well as from a host of Government authorities. Of particular interest is the rural activity already taking place in the Matobo Hills, particularly in Gulati where wetland restoration is underway. This is hugely encouraging.

2 – LICHEN

Imagine making a discovery that reshapes the thinking of the past 150 years. That's what happened when a group of scientists started investigating two types of genetically identical lichen (one that's toxic, one that's not). Lichen, it was long believed, existed in a symbiotic relationship between a fungus and algae. However, these scientists discovered that a third component exists, a finding that's rewriting the textbooks.

Lichen = Fungus + Fungus + Algae

7% of world's surface is covered in lichen of some shape and form, and in places it can grow as much as 3ft in a year. It provides an invaluable food source in the northern arctic regions. It is believed that some lichen is as much as 10,000 years old.

In this special relationship, algae photosynthesis and so provide food, whilst the fungus produces the structure.

Symbiosis is a word that was created to describe lichen; Two or more organisms living together.

The Matopos is particularly rich in lichen. But little research has been carried out here. It is believed that species new to science await description.

The lichens of the Matopos are under threat from adventure sports. Both rally motor bikes and off-road 4x4 driving threatens to damage our heritage. This is both within the National Park, and in the communal areas. It is our estimate that it will take between 80 and 100 years for the Lichen to recover – studies in the USA suggest even longer.

Recently visitors from South Africa desecrated the dwala's opposite Gulubaghwe Cave – a protected area – by driving 7 vehicles up the hill. Their explanation – to get a picture of the landscape!

3 – EVENTS

A. Matopos World Heritage MTB Challenge

The 9th edition of the annual Matopos Heritage MTB Challenge was successfully held from 21st to 25th March. Some foreign riders expressed the opinion that it was the finest three days of mountain biking they had ever enjoyed. Appreciation is extended to the many MCS Members who volunteered their time to manage water points, run errands, drive vehicles and assist in many different ways. The event not only raises funds for the MCS, but certainly makes a wider group of folk aware of the beauty and special nature of the Matopos.

B. Matopos Trail Run

From 18-20 May, twenty-two runners participated in the annual Matopos Heritage Trail Run. The route was unchanged from last year – but very different in conditions. Day one was clear, day two shrouded in thick cool mist which created its own special atmosphere as the runners passed along

the edge of the Mtshabezi Gorge, through the Mshahasha valley and across the high exposed dwalas of the eastern hills! We had runners from Cape Town and the UK, Harare and Vic Falls.

C. Matopos 33 Miler

The annual Matopos 33 Miler was held on 24th March with a record turnout. 155 runners ran the ultra-marathon (33 miles – 53kms), 350 in the half marathon (21 kms), 850 in the ten-kilometre run and 1,150 in the 5km fun run. The event is certainly growing in popularity and apart from being the only ultra-marathon and Comrades' Marathon qualifier in Zimbabwe, is now the second largest event in the country.

D. Matopos Classic MTB

This long running 3-day event is due to held at the end of August.

4 - NEXT EVENT

Date	17 th June 2018
Venue	Silozwane Cave
Meet	8:15am to leave by 8:30am, Churchill Arms Car Park
Travel	All Vehicles
Details	Provide own chairs, tables, meals and drinks. Don't forget your hat and something warm!

We travel out through the National Park to Silozwane, located in the Southern Hills. This cave is a National Monument, one of the finest in the Hills, and was once a rain making site. Local folk are likely to have curio for sale. We are not expected to pay an entry fee for the Park, but we suggest you bring adequate cash just in case. If we are exempt from fees, you may not venture off the direct route through the Park to the Cave.

The climb to the cave is fairly steep in places, and for those who are extra keen, we can continue to the summit after visiting the cave itself. After lunch there is a chance of climbing Silozwe itself.

5 – REPORT BACK

Making the most of the newly graded Old Gwanda Road, a convoy of vehicles drove out to Ntumja where they were met and taken to Ntunjambile Cave. There the local Headman, Mr Ncube met us, and along with Mr Norbet Dube spoke about the work being done in the vlei below the Cave. A site visit followed – the core of the vlei is now protected and looks healthy, but there are still extensive fields within the greater wetland area.

Members were then able to climb the hill to visit the cave, with a brief introduction to the site, and the more adventurous continued to the summit to enjoy the grand 360-degree views.

Following tea, we set off to visit the vlei area at Matopo Mission. Whilst there is no agriculture in the vlei, it is heavily grazed, and whilst wet, water flow was limited.

From Matopo Mission we continued to Besna Kobila to view the protected wetlands at that area. Covered by thick grass and sedge, the vlei plays host to not only 20 different orchid species, but also to probably the largest field of orchids in Zimbabwe, most of which were still in flower at the time of our visit. Crystal clear water gushes out from the vlei into clear pools.

Then onto Camp Dwala for lunch and an afternoon spent walking and swimming.

An outing that did well to demonstrate the work ahead of the Ramsar Nomination Committee.

6 – RAINFALL

After a prolonged dry spell over Christmas, good rains were recorded in February and March. At the end of the season, the following had been received; western Matopos 859mm, eastern Matopos 505mm and Bulawayo 576mm.

Surprisingly there was a marked difference between the two halves of the hills, with the east above average (800mm) and the west below its average (600mm). It was also evident in the condition of the velt – the south eastern parts of the hills (with an average of 500mm) looked drought ravished, whilst in the north west, streams gurgle down the valleys.

7 – FIRST LADY CALLS FOR ACTION ON WETLANDS

February 2, 2018, Newsday (With acknowledgement to Edgar Gweshe)

As the world commemorates World Wetlands Day, First Lady Mrs Auxillia Mnangagwa has called for collective responsibility in preserving the water sources. By Edgar Gweshe

In an interview with *Newsday*, Mrs Mnangagwa expressed concern over the rampant destruction of wetlands, especially in Harare.

Mrs Mnangagwa, who is also the Zanu PF deputy secretary for environment and tourism, pledged to work hard to ensure wetlands preservation, while at the same time vowing to ensure that measures are taken against individuals behind their continued destruction.

“Wetlands are important water sources and their destruction has negative effects on people’s lives. The situation in Harare is quite bad and I would like to call upon the Harare City Council and other responsible authorities to play their part and ensure wetlands are protected.

“Also, it is very important to ensure that we include communities in the preservation of wetlands. I am also of the view that wetland areas need to be fenced to avoid their invasion,” she said.

This year’s theme for World Wetlands Day is Wetlands for a Sustainable Urban Future. The day marks the date of the adoption of the Convention on Wetlands on February 2, 1971 in the city of Ramsar, Iran. Zimbabwe is signatory to the Ramsar Convention and under the country’s Constitution, wetlands are protected under the Environmental Management Act.

In Harare, wetlands are the major source of water after run off, but of late, they have been under threat mainly due to urban cultivation and construction.

Mrs Mnangagwa also castigated unscrupulous politicians abusing their positions to invade wetlands.

“Those people must be brought to book because their actions are illegal. No one has the authority to invade wetlands and we are appealing to communities to be actively involved in wetlands protection and ensure that individuals who abuse office to invade wetlands are brought to book.

“We need to work together against these rowdy individuals if we are to protect our wetlands,” she said. Community Water Alliance programmes manager, Hardlife Mudzingwa said complacency to implement the law, as well as lack of institutional co-ordination was behind the destruction of wetlands. He said there was need to compel local authorities to put in place, as well as implement environment management plans

The Harare Wetlands Trust (HWT) has recommended that Harare’s Master Plan and Local Environment Plan needs to be revisited to ensure that no developments take place on wetlands.

“The extent of the power vested in the Minister of Environment, Water and Climate is a double-edged sword. A minister concerned with environmental conservation has ample power to ensure this eventuates. However, a minister more concerned to allow development, may utilise his or her discretion to the detriment of the environment, and it requires an approach to the courts to correct this,” HWT said.

Harare residents have since made a passionate appeal to the First Lady to intervene and save wetlands from destruction.

In Masvingo, the major threat to wetlands is stream bank cultivation, according to the mayor, Hubert Fidze.

Chitungwiza is also one of the areas where wetlands destruction is quite rampant and the council spokesperson, Lovemore Meya said that the new commission running the affairs of the town was prioritising the protection of wetlands.

However, Chitungwiza and Manyame Rural Residents Association director, Marvelous Khumalo blamed local authorities for approving construction on wetlands.

8– ZIMPARKS FUNDS ABUSED

Zimbabwe National Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (Zimparks) board members are in a spot of bother after a Government audit revealed that they could have used funds from the parastatal un-procedurally to pamper themselves. The audit, which was conducted by officials from the Auditor-General's Office, indicated that apart from the board of directors being improperly constituted according to the law, board members were allegedly abusing their authority to loan themselves funds, including using the authority's assets for personal use without Government approval.

In one worrying incident, the board members even splurged more than \$17 000 on laptops and cell phones for personal use. Auditors concluded that not only was the behaviour of the directors in violation of regulations, but the unsanctioned allowances and benefits could also potentially attract penalties from the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (Zimra). The report, seen by *The Herald*, indicates that the composition of the current seven-member board falls foul of Section 5 of the Parks and Wildlife Act, which stipulates that at least two of the board members should be professionals in financial and business management, and law, respectively.

"I noted that the Authority's board of directors does not have members with financial and legal background, contrary to provision of the Section 5:3(a), IV and 5:3(b) of the Parks and Wildlife Act (Chapter 20:14), which states that the board should have a member with financial and business management and that one shall be a legal practitioner registered in terms of the Legal Practitioner Act (Chapter 27:07)," reads part of the audit report. "The Authority should comply with provisions of Section 5 of the Parks and Wildlife Act on board appointments. Board members with financial and legal background should be considered," it adds.

The ZimParks board is chaired by Mr Tichafa Mundangepfupfu, who is deputised by Mrs Idah Mupamhanga. Other board members that time were Messrs Cephas Mudenda, Tafadzwa Mundoga, Edison Chidziya, Wilson Mutinhima and Neville Mutsvangwa. Messrs Mutinhima and Chidziya are, however, no longer part of the board, and have since been replaced by Dr Hespina Rukato and Ms Dorothy Mabika. Mr Fulton Upenyu Mangwanya is now the new director-general, replacing Mr Chidziya. But barely three months into his appointment, in May 2016, the board chair was reportedly given a \$1 069,86 loan, which he, however, repaid over three months without interest.

"This is contrary to Section 3.21 of Corporate Governance Framework for State Enterprises and Parastatals, which states that loans made either directly or indirectly to non-executive directors are prohibited unless the granting of loans is the core business of the entity and subject to the rules and procedures applicable to the granting of loans," says the report.

Sources at ZimParks say the gap left by the departure of the former director-general of the wildlife management body, Mr Edison Chidziya, in 2015 — which was only filled on August 1, 2017 through the appointment of Mr Fulton Upenyu Mangwanya — led the board to increasingly dabble in the day-to-day running of the institution. As a result, "board members frequently visited the Authority for other business besides the scheduled board and committee meetings". However, this came at a cost to the parastatal as they were paid travelling and subsistence allowances of \$60 per visit, which, again, were not taxed.

Zimra says in terms of the 13th Schedule and 33rd Schedule of the Income Tax Act, director's fees "director's fees are taxable as employment income or business income". In essence, they are considered remuneration if paid to a director of a company or to a chairperson or member of any board of a statutory corporation from which the individual also receives other amounts considered as remuneration.

There are also concerns that the board members received payments in addition to the normal board fees and sitting allowances. For example, on December 12, 2016, the chairperson, vice board chair and three other board members received \$1 080 to attend Zanu-PF's National People's Conference in Masvingo. Among some of the discrepancies that were identified by auditors were sitting allowances — usually paid at a rate of \$152 — that were paid using the board fees' rate of \$204. Essentially, ZimParks was prejudiced of \$52 per sitting.

Similarly, though board members were entitled to fuel allowances of \$300 per month; they have been receiving \$390 per month. Overall, the Authority overpaid by more than \$5 760 during the 2016 audit review period. All these payments were made without Government approval. However, perhaps the biggest sign of profligacy was the \$17 000 spent on cell phones and laptops without Government approval.

Also during a physical verification of assets, it was discovered that Mr Mundangepfupfu was using a ZimParks motor vehicle — a Foton Station Wagon (GNP840) — for personal use. "All these benefits, which accrued to the board, including the chairman's motoring benefit, was not taxed. "Board fees, allowances and benefits should be paid based on approvals from the parent ministry. The Authority should recover all overpayments and taxes should be levied on benefits and remitted to Zimra," added the report.

Efforts to get a comment from ZimParks public relations manager Mr Tinashe Farawo were fruitless, as he was reportedly believed to be out of town.

9 – GOVERNMENT EMBRACES TOUGHER ANTI-POACHING STRATEGIES

ZBC; Feb 7, 2018

Incidents of poaching are set to further decrease in wildlife and forestry areas as government entities embrace tougher anti-poaching strategies. The majority of poaching incidents occurring in wildlife and forestry areas involve foreign poachers. In some cases, the incidents involve locals who get paid by foreigners with the use of cyanide becoming more common.

Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZimParks) Director General Mr Fluton Mangwanya said the radio communication systems have been improved while additional manpower and new all-terrain vehicles have been deployed at the boundary shared with Tsholotsho district, where elephants are the number one target.

“So we have to scale to go into high gear in our strategy to counter this poaching. We are getting to recover some of the specialised riffles some with silencers some with scoping lenses that means it’s a serious issue. So on the part of ZimParks we have to do something urgently to be on the same scale with the way these guys are actually attacking our wildlife especially our elephants,” he said.

Forestry Commission chief security officer Mr Peter Mushunje confirmed his organisation recorded a drop in poaching incidents adding a number of strategies which include beefing up manpower, use of sniffer dogs and drones have been embraced.

“We have been trying to research on the camera system and this is what we are looking at as a way of trying to improve our operations,” he said.

Government allocated \$2 million from the fiscus towards wildlife conservation and the amount is expected to further enhance security issues in wildlife areas.

Analysts believe the involvement of locals in poaching can only be reduced when they see and enjoy the benefits of wildlife, a situation which attracts them to participate in anti-poaching activities as communities.

10 – ZIM’S LAST VULTURES

February 17, 2018, (With acknowledgement to Andrew Mambondiyani)

A routine scout by game rangers in Gonarezhou National Park, in south-eastern Zimbabwe, last May, revealed a gruesome scene. Up to 94 vultures had died after feeding on an elephant carcass poisoned by poachers. The birds found dead included the white-backed vultures, a critically-endangered species. While the plight of elephants is now well known and documented, very few people in Zimbabwe are aware of the threats poachers pose to vultures, or just how important these birds are to the environment. Efforts to address this are underway.

But experts are worried about the growing carnage and fear that these birds face extinction, not only in Zimbabwe, but across southern Africa. In recent years, hundreds of vultures have died after feeding on poisoned elephant carcasses in Zimbabwe. In 2013, 200 vultures died in Hwange National Park.

Widespread poisoning could “wipe out the entire breeding population of vultures in Zimbabwe”, says Kerri Wolter, founder and manager of VulPro, a South African vulture conservation organisation. She warns that this would have serious consequences because vultures clear away carcasses and help to stop the spread of diseases like anthrax, rabies, cholera and tuberculosis.

“Without [vultures], the environment will crash,” Wolter said. “They are a keystone species in that they help keep our environment in sync. We need our vultures to prevent the extinction of other species from disease epidemics and outbreaks”.

Fadzai Matsvimbo, a vulture expert working for BirdLife Zimbabwe, agrees. She points out that in India, rabies increased when the vulture population crashed. “[Vultures] provide critical ecological services, and these stem from the birds’ unique way of life,” she said.

Wolter added that, as vultures travel across southern Africa, poisoning in one place can affect birds throughout the region. She stressed the need for on-the-ground conservation organisations with government support. “We are in a position to stop power line collisions and electrocutions by making sure power lines are safe. We have the potential to curb and control poisoning, but only with government support,” she said.

The Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZimParks) did not respond to requests for information on government activities to stop the killing of vultures.

However, Matsvimbo said BirdLife Zimbabwe was working on awareness-raising actions in partnership with relevant government departments — including the ZimParks — and non-governmental organisations. Every year, BirdLife Zimbabwe celebrates International Vulture Awareness Day to raise awareness of the status of vultures. Last year, it organised a public seminar on vultures at the Natural History Museum in the city of Bulawayo.

The organisation has also been working with Painted Dog Conservation, ZimParks and communities close to Hwange National Park to increase awareness on vultures, as most people were not aware that they were endangered. Among communities surrounding national parks, myths and legends about vultures are common.

Some people associate the birds with good luck, while others link them to witchcraft. Others note that vultures indicate the presence of a dead animal, a fact that has led poachers to target the birds directly to avoid detection. “I don’t know much about vultures, but these birds have been helping us to tell if one of our livestock has been killed by predators,” Stephen Chauke, of Malipati, a village on the outskirts of Gonarezhou National Park, said. “The vultures fly around the dead animal and it will be easy for us to know where our livestock has been killed. And besides, the vulture eat dead animals and leave our environment clean”.

Another Malipati resident, Auspicious Ndhlovu, said while villagers marvelled at the sight of vultures circling in the sky, they know a little about these birds. “We have, however, been learning from the [ZimParks] authorities that the birds can tell us about poaching activities,” Ndhlovu said. “If we see vultures circling, we know poachers could have killed an animal, particularly elephants. It’s sad the poachers are using poison to kill the elephants, which is also killing the vultures”.

Poisoning is just the latest in a series of threats to vulture populations, along with habitat loss and widespread use of a veterinary drug called diclofenac that is fatal to vultures. Many vultures have died after consuming dead cattle, whose meat contains the drug. Against this backdrop, Victoria Falls Safari Lodge in western Zimbabwe has come up with an innovative way of protecting vultures. It has developed a “vulture restaurant”, providing leftover meat as safe food and attracting as many as 200 vultures at a time. Visitors, who come to see the spectacle of these birds swooping down to feed, also learn about the threats vultures face and about their ecological importance. The tourists are encouraged to make a donation towards vulture conservation and research. And Marianne Betts, group public relations officer for Africa Albida Tourism, a company that runs Victoria Falls Safari Lodge, said the vulture supplementary feeding programme, like other “vulture restaurants” around the world, helps to conserve the birds. “A major reason for vultures being endangered is that their food supply is under threat, for example, if they consume the carcass of an animal treated with a commonly used veterinary drug, they die, and the supplementary feeding programme provides them with a safe food source,” Betts said.

But unless the government can control poaching and poisoning, the future looks grim for Zimbabwe’s vultures. Last month, Environment minister Oppah Muchinguri urged rangers to adopt a “new shoot-to-kill” policy against elephant poachers. She called for tougher penalties and for educational programmes to raise public awareness of and the effects of poaching on ecosystem health. “We need to all work together and not against each other for personal gain and egos,” Wolter, of VulPro, said. “We need to speak the same language when it comes to vulture conservation and work in unity. We need to work on the ground, be multi-faceted and work with all aspects of conservation, which includes in-situ and ex-situ conservation”.

For Zimbabwe’s most threatened vulture species, time is running out.

11 – ZIMBABWE FLORA

Members may be interested in the following link that takes them to Zimbabwe Flora, which is invaluable for the amateur and professional botanist. Pictures from the Matopos have been included in various parts of the web based records.

<https://www.zimbabweflora.co.zw/>

12 – CALENDAR 2018

Herewith the proposed dates for the 2017 events – make a note in your diary!

17 th June	Field trip to Silozwane
31 st August	Matopos Classic MTB
September	Field trip
19 th November	AGM, venue to be advised (a week earlier than previous AGM’s to avoid clashing with the Birding Big Day)

13 – MEMBERS NOTE BOOK

Subscriptions for the year 1 October 2017 to 30 September 2018 fell due on 30 September 2017. Please ensure that your subs for 2018 are up to date. There has been no increase in rates.

US\$ 20 Individual/Family

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

We have initiated an electronic register of members, and an electronic means of applying for membership. We have written to all our members asking them to complete the easy, and simple, application form! It takes a few minutes – and even if you are a member, you need to reapply so as to re-populate the data base. We ask you to please participate.

If you think you are a member, and we have missed you out, please contact the Vice-Chairman on matoboconservationsociety@gmail.com

14 - 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.

15 - www.matobo.org

The web-site for the Society has been updated, so make some time to visit the site. Contributions are welcome. We have also revamped our Facebook page “Matobo Conservation Society”.

16 – ANTS CARE FOR WOUNDED COMRADES BY LICKING THEIR WOUNDS CLEAN

“Lie still, this won't hurt a bit”, Erik T. Frank, By Jasmin Fox-Skelly

A species of ant has become the first known non-human animal to tend the wounds of its fellows. “Nurse” ants lick the wounds of fallen comrades, and this helps them survive.

Matabele ants (*Megaponera analis*) live dangerous lives. Several times a day, parties of 200-600 soldier ants set out to hunt termites, dragging them from their nests and carrying them home. The termites fight back, and their powerful jaws can administer lethal bites, so Matabele ants frequently lose one or more limbs.

In 2017, Erik Frank, then at the University of Würzburg, Germany reported that Matabele ants routinely carry their wounded back to the nest. This is odd, as social insects usually treat each other as expendable. The injured ants could “ask” for help by releasing a pheromone, which caused other ants to pick them up and carry them.

In a new study Frank, now at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland, and his colleagues have filmed what happens inside the nest when the injured are brought in. The footage shows “nurse” ants spend several minutes licking their fallen comrades’ wounds. An experiment in which some ants were denied this licking suggests it is a lifesaver. Without it, 80% of ants who had lost limbs died within a few hours. Of those that received medical care, 90% survived. “We don’t know yet if the ants are just cleaning the wound and removing debris, as we do with our wounds to prevent infection, or if they are also applying antimicrobial substances with their saliva,” says Frank.

Either way, the treatment works. “The ants are able to reach running speeds similar to healthy ants, despite missing a leg or two,” says Frank. The team also tracked the ants’ raiding parties and found they could tell which injured soldiers were worth saving and which were a lost cause. “The ants were selective in who they picked up,” says Frank. “They didn’t want to help heavily injured ants who had lost 5 legs.”

Ants that only lost one or two legs pulled in their remaining limbs and kept still, helping the other ants pick them up. However, mortally injured ants flailed about, effectively preventing their own rescue.

Lightly injured ants sometimes over-egged the pudding, over-emphasising their injuries when they were near their nest-mates. These injured ants moved slowly and kept on falling over when their comrades were nearby, possibly in hopes of being picked up. However, if nobody helped, they would quickly get back up and follow at a faster pace.

Altruistic ants?

Although primates are known to tend to their own wounds, this is the first time an animal other than a human has been shown to give medical care to others.

The behaviour probably doesn’t arise from feelings of compassion, says Frank, but because the ants’ survival depends upon it. Matabele ants live in small colonies with low birth rates, and their taste for termites means each ant risks mortal injury every day.

“Roughly a third of the colony have lost a limb at one point, so if they didn’t rescue them then many would be killed on the return journey,” says Frank. The treatment may also prevent infection spreading in the colony.

17 – LIKE US ON FACEBOOK

We continue to update our Facebook page; we welcome any contributions from Members. Go to “Matobo Conservation Society” on Facebook, and “like” the page to ensure you get regular updates. Nearly 1,000 people are following us on Facebook.