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## **NEWSLETTER 109 / OCTOBER 2019**

### **1 – ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

Once again, the Annual General Meeting looms – to be followed by Christmas and the New Year. Hard to believe but another year is drawing to a close. And what a year it has been – forget the economy and politics – it has been a hectic year in the Matobo Hills.

The year has been dominated by the crippling drought. Once more dams and rivers have dried up, lodges are having to ship water in, and then fires spread through the hills in October, leaving a charred and very dry landscape. The disastrous power supply situation has seen a rise in illegal logging within the Hills. But there have been some notable successes this year – as described elsewhere in this newsletter. We are also hopeful that our quest to host a workshop on lantana eradication will yet be held in 2020.

We are all under pressure to manage our own affairs in this difficult environment, but we are appealing for new committee members to come forward. We need help to manage all the projects underway, and there is always more to do.

### **2 – BRACHYSTEGIA UTILIS?**

Meg Coates-Palgrave visited the hills again this year to have a look at our mystery *Brachystegia*. Accompanied by Cathy Sharp, and accommodated at Camp Dwala, we continued our study of this tree which is increasingly looking like a *Brachystegia utilis*. This was enhanced by the fact that specimens of this tree were markedly in full red leaf, even some in flower, whereas most of the *glaucescens* had yet to come into leaf. On Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> September, in freezing weather, we were able to visit trees located at Camp Dwala and nearby Siloti. Careful collection of samples for DNA purposes were collected and we hope to have results by the end of the year. On Sunday we travelled down the Old Gwanda Road so that Meg could see a “new” area. On Monday 9<sup>th</sup> Meg and Cathy were taken across to our earlier sites in and around Rhodes Indaba Site where more samples were collected and trees studied.

### **3 – RAINFALL**

At the time of writing there has been no rain received. We had hoped for the occasional fall by now, but alas after some hot followed by cold days we finally reached record temperatures in mid to late October.

### **4 – MATOPOS RHINO**

As we focus on rhinos this September 22, we have some cause to celebrate. The national goal is a 5% increase in the rhino population over a four-year period and the Matopos rhinos are above that with a 6% increase in the black rhino population and an 8% increase in the white rhino population. These numbers represent small successes in the push to save these animals teetering on the edge of extinction. Now, more than ever, it is important to build on this success. Please contact us to find out how you can get involved.

### **5 – MASSIVE FIRES DAMAGE THE MATOBO HILLS**

During the first weeks of October fires spread across the Matobo National Park, and most adjoining Lodges, leaving them standing intact but amongst a burnt-out environment.

The Site Museum at Nswatugi was totally destroyed in the blaze – sadly as this had only recently been refurbished by the MCS. Dialogue has started with National Museums on the way forward – should it be rebuilt, tuned into toilets or abandoned all together. Nswatugi cave was at one time the most visited national Monument in Zimbabwe after the Victoria Falls. The MCS is prepared to assist NMMZ.

## 6 - NEXT EVENT

Date	24 <sup>th</sup> November 2019
Venue	Gordon Park
Meet	08:15am, Cresta Churchill Hotel
Travel	All Vehicles
Details	Provide own chairs, tables, meals and drinks. Don't forget your hat, sunblock and plenty of water!

We will be holding our AGM at Gordon Park at 10:00am on Sunday morning, 24<sup>th</sup> November. For those members who would like to go out a day earlier, we are welcome to spend Saturday night. There is limited accommodation, and plenty of space for camping. No charge, but donations to Gordon Park would be in order. Please contact the Secretary to confirm details. Further information will be provided in an update ahead of the AGM itself.

## 7 – REPORT BACK

On the 8<sup>th</sup> September we ventured south down the Old Gwanda Road to visit areas of *Brachystegia glausecens*. In the company of Meg Coates-Palgrave we had decided to visit Gulubaghwe cave, Mbolele cave and then to go onto Dzhi Dzhi Dam for lunch. We found that this year we were early – not all the trees had flushed, but it was still an interesting day out. Focusing on *Brachystegia* we could not but help notice a number of other interesting tree species and specimens, and so, as always, the day was both interesting and rewarding. It is a magnificent part of the Matopos – even if it was particularly dry. As so often happens, the day started with freezing wind and overcast conditions, but these did clear during the morning so that a lovely afternoon was enjoyed by all.

We were also joined by Victoria Falls Primary School Grade 6 class that were taking part in the first ever OBZ outing in the Matobo Hills. They were introduced to rock art at Gulubaghwe, and then to pre-colonial history at Mbolele cave that has fine grain-bin specimens. They then did a short cross-country hike to Dzhi Dzhi Dam, where some even threw themselves into the dam! It was quite a challenge getting the school bus down the road to collect the children – but it all worked out! After lunch and some more “tree examination” folk made their way home.

PS – At the time of writing – mid-October – the *Brachystegia* were finally coming into leaf!

## 8 – ZIMBABWE TAKES TOURISM COMMEMORATIONS TO MATOBO

*September 27, 2019; with acknowledgement to Mr Farai Matiashe; Newsday.*

Zimbabwe will today celebrate the World Tourism Day at Matobo National Park.

The day is set aside to raise awareness of the socio-economic benefits that are derived globally through travel and tourism related initiatives. Tourism acting minister Nqobizitha Mangaliso Ndlovu said it was of paramount importance for the nation to celebrate the day, as the tourism sector was key to economic growth.

“The day is significant to Zimbabwe because of the importance of the sector, which generated 2,5 million arrivals in 2018 and earned the country \$1,386 billion in the same year, while employing over 30 000 people directly and indirectly,” he said in a statement. “The theme for this year’s World Tourism celebrations is Tourism and Jobs, A Better Future for All. In line with the theme, the ministry will host the main celebrations at Maleme Rest Camp, which is located in Matobo National Park.”

Ndlovu said Matobo National Park facilities and conversation create a lot of job opportunities that feed into the Matopo tourism value chain. He said the celebrations were a platform for tourism industry players and the public to interact and share ideas. Tourism, we are rolling out initiatives designed to create jobs at village, district and provincial level and we call on all stakeholders to join us in this endeavour.”

“By taking the 2019 World Tourism Day celebrations to Matabeleland South, one focus will (be) on how best to grow the tourism economy in that province. As TeamTourism, we are rolling out initiatives designed to create jobs at village, district and provincial level and we call on all stakeholders to join us in this endeavour.”

## **9 – CHIEF’S TURN HEAT ON GOVERNMENT**

*Newsday, Sept 28* - Chiefs in Matabeleland have vowed to defy a government ban on the coronation of South Africa-based Bulelani Collins Khumalo as Ndebele king revealing that plans are afoot to hold the ceremony soon. They accused the Local Government ministry of double standards and tribalism by allowing a similar ceremony in the revival of the Mambo dynasty through the coronation of the Lozwi king recently.

## **10 – MATOPOS GAME CENSUS**

6 am starts to the work day may be a downside BUT the early-morning rose-coloured light over the Matobo Hills, and waterbuck and black rhinos blocking your commute more than make up for it!!

The Dambari Wildlife Trust (DWT) team is busy with a mammal count in Rhodes Matopos National Park (RMNP). While rangers regularly report on numbers, there hasn't been a formal wildlife count in the park in a long time. For good reason... The landscape in RMNP is more challenging than that found in Hwange, Mana or Gonarezhou so options that work for other parks don't quite work for us here. For example, because of the rugged topography and the wide distribution of water in the park, we can't do floodplain transects as done at Mana or waterhole counts.

DWT is testing three methods to get population estimates of large mammals – road transects in the mornings and evenings, walked transects to record sightings and sign, and the data generated by our camera traps. In addition to estimating mammal population sizes, the goal is to establish which method/s will be most suitable and cost-effective so that regular future counts can be instituted. The project is funded by the Matobo Conservation Society, Wildlife and Environment Zimbabwe, and Marwell Wildlife. So far, in two weeks, we've counted 20 mammal species along the transects. We will bring you more results as they come in!

## **11 – ROCK ART CONSERVATION PROJECT**

The MCS is pleased to report that the Natural History Museum in Bulawayo has started work on a Matobo Rock Art Conservation Project, with assistance from the World Monuments Watch.

A very positive stakeholder meeting was held recently at the Museum, and conservation plans were tabled for the first four selected rock art sites. These are Nswatugi and Pomongwe within the Rhodes Matopos National Park and Buhwa and Silozwane within the Matobo communal areas. Museums staff are busy with thorough documentation of the current status of these and other sites, in order to monitor any damage, and have started a community outreach programme to get rural folk involved in the conservation programme. It is hoped that World Monuments Watch will provide technical assistance in 2020 for documentation and study and for restoration of damaged panels and that this project can be extended to all the major sites in the Matobo Hills.

In Europe several important sites have been closed to the public because of damage to rock art by air pollution, carbon dioxide and visitor pressure. In the Matobo Hills we mostly have clean dry air, but many different threats to our heritage of cave paintings. These are:

### Natural Weathering & Non-Human Threats

- Water Wash. On sections where there are openings for rain water
- Manganese and Salt Deposits. Mainly on sections that have been affected by water
- Flaking and Peeling. Granite surface flaking and pigment peeling
- Droppings. Bird droppings, and perhaps bat and dassie droppings
- Wasps. Both mud and paper wasps
- Dust. Either from the floors, blown in or perhaps lifted by wild animals (klipspringer, genet and leopard presence reported at Nswatugi)
- Fading. Due to surfaces exposed to direct sunlight
- Smoke. From veldt fires

- Erosion. Both on the access paths and within the shelters

#### Human Threats

- Dust. Lifted by human footfall/visitor pressure
- Touching. Leaves oily substance
- Liquid damage. From visitors pouring liquids onto panels to enhance their photographs
- Camera flash. Although the damage is reduced with modern flash technology
- Graffiti. Usually chalk or charcoal drawings by folk trying to emulate their predecessors
- Vandalism. In the form of deliberate destruction of perceived demonic images, or chipping pieces off for muti
- Smoke. From people (perhaps cattle herders) seeking shelter in the caves
- Sealing. Well-meaning attempts to protect the panels that have in fact badly damaged them, as at Pomongwe

There was lively discussion at the stakeholders meeting on actions that can be taken to mitigate the specific threats at each site and on how to teach/persuade both visitors and the rural communities to respect the sites. Actions already taken are laying of a loose granite slab floor at Nswatugi and sealing of the opening through which rain water can enter the cave. The approach that Museums have taken is that each action must be followed by monitoring, and the action reversible if required

Museums have drafted five-year conservation plans for these sites, including the nomination of the Buhwa site as a national monument. They will hold regular stakeholder meetings to report on progress. Congratulations to the Natural History Museum on this valuable initiative

## **12 – DID MAN EVOLVE SOUTH OF THE ZAMBEZI RIVER?**

Scientists say they've pinpointed the homeland of all humans alive today to a region south of the Zambesi River.

The area is now dominated by salt pans, but was once home to an enormous lake, which may have been our ancestral heartland 200,000 years ago.

Our ancestors settled for 70,000 years, until the local climate changed, researchers propose.

They began to move on as fertile green corridors opened up, paving the way for future migrations out of Africa.

"It has been clear for some time that anatomically modern humans appeared in Africa roughly 200,000 years ago," said Prof Vanessa Hayes, a geneticist at the Garvan Institute of Medical Research in Australia.

"What has been long debated is the exact location of this emergence and subsequent dispersal of our earliest ancestors."

Prof Hayes' conclusions have drawn scepticism from other researchers in the field, however.

Lakeland haven

The area in question is south of the Zambesi basin, in northern Botswana.

The researchers think our ancestors settled near Africa's huge lake system, known as Lake Makgadikgadi, which is now an area of sprawling salt flats.

"It's an extremely large area, it would have been very wet, it would have been very lush," said Prof Hayes. "And it would have actually provided a suitable habitat for modern humans and wildlife to have lived."

After staying there for 70,000 years, people began to move on. Shifts in rainfall across the region led to three waves of migration 130,000 and 110,000 years ago, driven by corridors of green fertile land opening up.

The first migrants ventured north-east, followed by a second wave of migrants who travelled south-west and a third population remained in the homeland until today.

This scenario is based on tracing back the human family tree using hundreds of mitochondrial DNA samples from living Africans - the scrap of DNA that passes down the maternal line from mother to child.

By combining genetics with geology and climate computer model simulations, researchers were able to paint a picture of what the African continent might have been like 200,000 years ago.

Reconstructing the human story

However, the study, published in the journal Nature, was greeted with caution by one expert, who says you can't reconstruct the story of human origins from mitochondrial DNA alone.

Other analyses have produced different answers with fossil discoveries hinting at an eastern African origin.

Prof Chris Stringer of the Natural History Museum, London, who is not connected with the study, says the evolution of Homo sapiens was a complex process.

"You can't use modern mitochondrial distributions on their own to reconstruct a single location for modern human origins," he told BBC News.

"I think it's over-reaching the data because you're only looking at one tiny part of the genome so it cannot give you the whole story of our origins."

Thus, there could have been many homelands, rather than one, which have yet to be pinned down.

Evolutionary milestones in human history:

400,000 years ago: Neanderthals - our evolutionary cousins - begin to appear and move across Europe and Asia

300,000 to 200,000 years ago: Homo sapiens - modern humans - appear in Africa

50,000 to 40,000 years ago: Modern humans reach Europe.

*EDITOR* - The Matobo Hills constitutes one of the longest permanently inhabited areas in the world, with habitation going back 100,000 years. So, if modern man evolved between the Makgadikgadi, and Zambezi, it is highly likely that the Matobo Hills would have been the southern limit of this triangle of evolution.

### **13 – SOCIETY CALENDAR OF EVENTS FOR YOUR DIARY**

24 <sup>th</sup> November 2019	Annual General Meeting
25 <sup>th</sup> – 29 <sup>th</sup> March 2020	Matopos Heritage MTB Challenge
4 <sup>th</sup> April 2020	Matopos 33 Miler
6 <sup>th</sup> June 2020	World Environment Day Clean-Up
21 <sup>st</sup> August 2020	Matobo Classic MTB Event
September 2020	Matopos Heritage Trail Run (moved from May to September)

### **14 – MATOPO MISSION CONSERVATION CLUB**

The MCS and Camp Dwala have been sponsoring the participation of Matopo Mission Primary in the annual WEZ Wildlife Quiz for Primary Schools. The Mission team has made steady progress in the provincial competition – and this year came in third. As a result, they will be travelling to the Midlands for the National Finals. We wish Patson and his team all the best!

### **15 – MEMBERS NOTEBOOK**

#### **SUBSCRIPTIONS**

Subscriptions for the year 1 October 2019 to 30 September 2020 fell due on 30 September 2019. Please ensure that your subs for 2019 are up to date. There has been no increase in rates.

US\$ 5	Pensioner Individual/Couple
US\$ 20	Individual/Couple
US\$100	Corporate

The last AGM resolved that from 2019 we would accept only US\$, but we will accept an equivalent value in Zimbabwe Dollars from local members. Please use an appropriate exchange rate on the day of payment. We would prefer the former if you are able to pay in US\$. However, we appreciate that the extraordinary rate of inflation may challenge many of our members and so we would ask you to please consult with the Treasurer if necessary. If you need any information, please contact the society on [matoboconservationsociety@gmail.com](mailto:matoboconservationsociety@gmail.com).

#### **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) and cloth shopping bags (at \$5 each). CD's are also available.

#### **WEB SITE & FACEBOOK**

The website for the Society [www.matobo.org](http://www.matobo.org) has been updated, so make some time to visit the site. Contributions are welcome. We have also revamped our Facebook page "Matobo Conservation Society". 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. Over 1,000 people are following us on Facebook.

**THE NATURAL HISTORY OF THE MATOBO HILLS**

This book has been published by the MCS to celebrate our 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

The book is still on sale, contact the MCS on [matoboconservationsociety@gmail.com](mailto:matoboconservationsociety@gmail.com). Selling price US\$30 (sorry, only real money)

This would make an ideal Christmas present.