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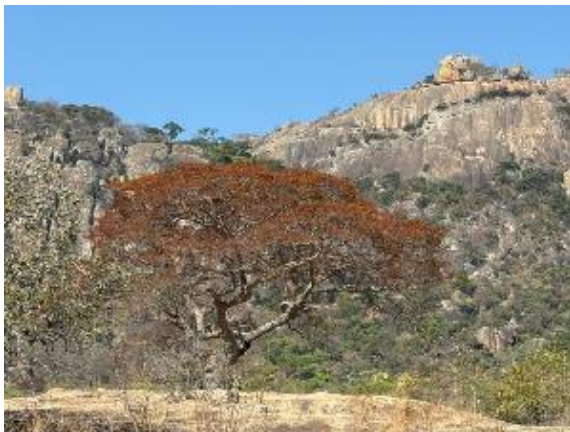
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NEWSLETTER 131 / NOVEMBER 2025

1 – ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting will be held at Khayelitshe House on Sunday 23rd November at 10 for 10.30am. Please see directions in item 3 of this newsletter. We hope to see you there. As always, we will welcome nominations to the committee and enjoy the opportunity to exchange ideas with our members. Make a date in your diary!

It is important that we discuss the requirements of the PVO Bill and how we approach the matter. This may require an adaptation of our constitution so it is important that a quality discussion is held on this matter.



Brachystegia glaucescens



Brachystegia glaucescens in mixed leaf

2 - YEAR UNDER REVIEW AND AHEAD

Another year is rushing to its conclusion. Spring this year seems to have been especially bountiful. The good rains last season, after three dry years, no doubt played a part and the vegetation responded with a bounty of flowers and foliage. The hills are still pretty wet with surface water in the vleis and even some streams. Then our rains started perhaps a bit earlier, and dams that were drying out are suddenly spilling.

Next year marks the centenary of the declaration of the Rhodes Matopos National Park, making this Park the oldest in the country, on a par with Rhodes Inyanga NP and two years younger than Hwange NP. It's origin of course goes back to the 1902 will of C J Rhodes who left his Worlds View and Hazelside farms to the people of Bulawayo. These farms, the former a National Monument, are the core of the existing Park. A game sanctuary was initially established, along with an arboretum. This arrangement continued for the next 24 years. I guess it took the establishment of self-Government in 1923 for the formal declaration of a Park to take place. The original Park was much larger than that which we enjoy today, incorporating what we now call Khumalo and Gulathi Communal lands, and yes, this Park included people! It was many years later that a decision was taken to reduce the size of the Park and resettle the inhabitants into the aforementioned areas.

With the Matobo National Park plan about to be unveiled, 2026 could yet be an important milestone in the history of our special hills.

3 - NEXT EVENT

Date Sunday 23 November 2025
Venue Khayelitshe House, Matopos
Meet 08:15am, Cresta Churchill
Travel All vehicles

We will travel out via the Matopos / Kezi Road, and be hosted at African Bush Camps guest villa Khayelitshe House, on the border of the Matopos National Park. The turnoff, which is on the left, is just between the ZimTours Hermits Peak gate and Big Cave Camp gate. **Last road before Big Cave Camp.** Please note that there are detours on the Kezi Rd after the Cyrene Mission Rd turnoff. For a preview, play the You-Tube video, via the link below:

https://youtu.be/kC_i3sCXGBE?si=jkx1-dl4i3XF1xdR

We will have an update on tourism in the area, as well as undertake a number of walks. This area has magnificent trees and interesting rock formations.

4 – REPORT BACK – ZHILO WETLAND

The field trip on Sunday 14 September was again not as well attended as it could have been, with only 14 members. However, that did not stop those who participated from enjoying the beauty of the eastern Matopos. Whilst most brachystegia had turned green there were still a few remarkable colours to be enjoyed. The drive is always a little longer, but once within the hills you don't notice the distance. But we arrived in time for morning tea before walking across the wetland, and following the stream south. Beautiful clear water flowing from the end of the vlei – life generating!

After lunch we followed the old Zhilo track south, admiring the beautiful brachystegia forest. A short cut home did however end up in an all fours scramble up a steep dwala! But we all made it back.



Ficus ingens



Magnificent *Brachystegia glaucescens*



Zhilo vlei



Brachystegia glaucescens at the Zhilo wetland



5 – EMA ISSUES WARNING ON INVASIVE SPECIES.

With acknowledgement to E Vhera, Herald



THE Environmental Management Authority (EMA) has advised the nation to be wary of Invasive Alien Species (IAS), which can cause significant decline in crop, fish production and biodiversity loss.

IAS are non-native organisms that, when introduced to a new habitat, can out-compete indigenous species for resources, disrupt ecological balances and exert negative impacts on the environment, economy and human health.

The invasive species are plants, animals, pathogens and other organisms that are non-native to an ecosystem. These species can also be aquatic or terrestrial.

In a recent notice, EMA said the environmental consequences of IAS in the country were profound.

“Many IAS reduce crop yields by competing for nutrients and water with the spread of these, leading to increased reliance on pesticides and herbicides, posing health risks to farmers and consumers alike,” said EMA.

The authority said managing the spread of IAS and mitigating their impacts placed a heavy burden on agriculture and conservation efforts, diverting resources from other critical areas.

According to convention on biological diversity, invasive species often thrive in their new environment as they are free from their natural predators.

Invasive species can spread rapidly, inflicting long-lasting damage on native ecosystems. The Environmental Management Act (CAP 20:27) defines IAS as exotic plants which have become naturalised and threaten the existence of indigenous species by penetrating and replacing indigenous vegetation.

EMA revealed that a number of IAS came into the country as ornamental plants from other countries and once introduced, some of these escaped their enclosure or cultivation and become established as viable populations.

Accidental introduction can also be from contaminated freight or movement of contaminated wood. The most common IAS in Zimbabwe are lantana camara, water hyacinth and opuntia fulgida.

“Other plant species, including the *Vernonathura polyanthes* commonly known as Bee bush or *Mupesepe* which have invaded the Eastern Highlands and other animal species are undergoing the due process of being declared as such through relevant legislation amendments,” said EMA.

EMA said effective management practices and key strategies being employed in Zimbabwe to combat spread of IAS included monitoring and research, public awareness campaign, integrated management approaches and international collaborations.

Plant Quarantine Services Institute (PQSI) is spearheading the control of the country’s borders and airports from the threat of IAS by monitoring and inspecting plant materials to ensure compliance with regulations as well as conducting risk assessments to identify potential bio-security risks.

PQSI head, Mrs Louisa Makumbe said they were educating stakeholders on bio-security best practices and enforce regulations to act against smuggling and non-compliance.

“As humans, we are attracted to plants as we travel around the globe. Traders tend to get attracted to fruits, plants and flowers but if they do not import them safely, they bring pests and diseases. As Plant Quarantine Services Institute we are in conflict with people who want to bring in something that they love but are unaware of the risks that it brings into the country without proper inspection and documentation,” she said.

Editor – The MCS has in the past assisted ZNPWMA with the successful eradication of azolla fern from Maleme dam, but the fight against exotics such as lantana, eucalyptus, wattles, bottle brush, cactus and sisal continues. Sadly, government authorities are long on talk but slow on action.

6 – ZIMPARKS FLAGS MINING ACTIVITIES IN PARKS

With acknowledgment to Newsday, 7 May 2025

The Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZimParks) has voiced concern over a growing number of entities seeking to conduct mining operations within national parks across the country.

The authority warned that the trend posed a threat to Zimbabwe’s conservation efforts and the country’s vital tourism sector.

ZimParks corporate secretary Nyasha Mutyambizi revealed this when she appeared before the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Tourism and Hospitality Industry on Monday this week.

“There is a prevailing belief that the richest mining deposits are located within park areas, leading to immense pressure, particularly in the Matopos region for coal,” she said.

Mutyambizi also highlighted the widespread interest in exploiting resources within protected areas.

“Everybody wants to come and mine in the parks. This again is putting a lot of pressure because our international tourist market is now questioning how conservation and mining can coexist.

“They are asking why they should visit Zimbabwe if our laws fail to protect wildlife. Many individuals are deeply passionate about animals and believe that the government and ZimParks should be able to halt the mining activities,” she said.

Mutyambizi said the interest from mining entities remained high despite government initiatives and legislation aimed at curbing mining in national parks.

“So, we are experiencing significant pressure, and despite government’s implementation of Cabinet resolutions, we are continually surprised to see applications progressing through our counterparts at the Ministry of Mines,” she said.

Mutyambizi further revealed that ZimParks has received numerous complaints and petitions from various concerned parties regarding the detrimental impact of mining on their conservation endeavours.

“In our view, it is unclear why these applications continue to be considered. We have received countless complaints and petitions from around the globe, including embassies, yet it appears we do not adequately value conservation,” she said.

“We understand that by safeguarding our animals and natural areas, we possess the potential to generate greater revenue. Conservation, unlike mining, does not destroy the environment, allowing future generations to continue enjoying these areas.”

ZimParks recently flagged a proposed coal mining project in the Hwange National Park saying it posed a threat to the country’s endangered black rhino population.

The authority further called on the Mines and Mining Development ministry to cancel the mining project saying it will increase the risk of extinction of the rhino and diminish prospects for population recovery.

Chinese firm Sunny Yi Feng has applied to prospect for coal in an area comprising more than 16 000 hectares less than eight kilometres from the rhinos’ protected zone, the Government Gazette

7 – UNPARALLELED SNAKE ANTIVENOM MADE FROM MAN WHO WAS BITTEN 200 TIMES

With acknowledgment to James Gallagher

A black mamba is arguably the world's deadliest snake.

The blood of a US man who deliberately injected himself with snake venom for nearly two decades has led to an "unparalleled" antivenom, say scientists.

Antibodies found in Tim Friede's blood have been shown to protect against fatal doses from a wide range of species in animal tests.

Current therapies have to match the specific species of venomous snake anyone has been bitten by.

But Mr Friede's 18-year mission could be a significant step in finding a universal antivenom against all snakebites - which kill up to 140,000 people a year and leave three times as many needing amputations or facing permanent disability.

In total, Mr Friede has endured more than 200 bites and more than 700 injections of venom he prepared from some of the world's deadliest snakes, including multiple species of mambas, cobras, taipans and kraits.

He initially wanted to build up his immunity to protect himself when handling snakes, documenting his exploits on YouTube.

But the former truck mechanic said that he had "completely screwed up" early on when two cobra bites in quick succession left him in a coma.

"I didn't want to die. I didn't want to lose a finger. I didn't want to miss work," he told the BBC.

Mr Friede's motivation was to develop better therapies for the rest of the world, explaining: "It just became a lifestyle and I just kept pushing and pushing and pushing as hard as I could push - for the people who are 8,000 miles away from me who die from snakebite".

'I'd love to get my hands on some of your blood'

Antivenom is currently made by injecting small doses of snake venom into animals, such as horses. Their immune system fights the venom by producing antibodies and these are harvested to be used as a therapy.

But venom and antivenom have to be closely matched because the toxins in a venomous bite vary from one species to another.

There is even wide variety within the same species – antivenom made from snakes in India is less effective against the same species in Sri Lanka.

A team of researchers began searching for a type of immune defence called broadly neutralising antibodies. Instead of targeting the part of a toxin that makes it unique, they target the parts that are common to entire classes of toxin.

That's when Dr Jacob Glanville, chief executive of biotech company Centivax, came across Tim Friede. "Immediately I was like 'if anybody in the world has developed these broadly neutralising antibodies, it's going to be him' and so I reached out," he said.

"The first call, I was like 'this might be awkward, but I'd love to get my hands on some of your blood'."

Mr Friede agreed and the work was given ethical approval because the study would only take blood, rather than giving him more venom.

The research focused on elapids – one of the two families of venomous snakes – such as coral snakes, mambas, cobras, taipans and kraits.

Elapids primarily use neurotoxins in their venom, which paralyses their victim and is fatal when it stops the muscles needed to breathe.

Researchers picked 19 elapids identified by the World Health Organization as being among the deadliest snakes on the planet. They then began scouring Mr Friede's blood for protective defences.

Their work, [detailed in the journal Cell](#), identified two broadly neutralising antibodies that could target two classes of neurotoxin. They added in a drug that targets a third to make their antivenom cocktail.

In experiments on mice, the cocktail meant the animals survived fatal doses from 13 of the 19 species of venomous snake. They had partial protection against the remaining six.

This is "unparalleled" breadth of protection, according to Dr Glanville, who said it "likely covers a whole bunch of elapids for which there is no current antivenom".

The team is trying to refine the antibodies further and see if adding a fourth component could lead to total protection against elapid snake venom.

The other class of snake – the vipers – rely more on haemotoxins, which attack the blood, rather than neurotoxins. In total there are around a dozen broad classes of toxin in snake venom, which also includes cytotoxins that directly kill cells.

"I think in the next 10 or 15 years we'll have something effective against each one of those toxin classes," said Prof Peter Kwong, one of the researchers at Columbia University.

And the hunt continues inside Mr Friede's blood samples.

"Tim's antibodies are really quite extraordinary - he taught his immune system to get this very, very broad recognition," said Prof Kwong.

The ultimate hope is to have either a single antivenom that can do everything, or one injection for elapids and one for vipers.

Prof Nick Casewell, who is the head of the centre for snakebite research and interventions at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, said the breadth of protection reported was "certainly novel" and provided "a strong piece of evidence" that this was a feasible approach.

"There is no doubt that this work moves the field forwards in an exciting direction."

But he cautioned there was "much work to do" and that the antivenom still needed extensive testing before it could be used in people.

But for Mr Friede, reaching this stage "makes me feel good".

"I'm doing something good for humanity and that was very important to me. I'm proud of it. It's pretty cool."

8 – VELD FIRES DESTROY OVER 70,000 HA OF LAND

Herald, Wednesday August 20,

At least 70 000 hectares of land have been destroyed by veld fires since the beginning of the fire restriction season on July 31, one of which yesterday swept through an open parking space near the National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ) Harare complex, torching more than 20 tyres. The NRZ fire, which witnesses said began as a grass blae, quickly spread to a pile of tyres dumped near a bushy area, sending thick black smoke billowing into the sky and visible from several kilometres away.

9 - ZIMPARKS WARNS OF ACACIA TREE WIPEOUT IN HWANGE NP

With acknowledgement to Marlven Chinembiri

Fears are mounting that the iconic *Acacia erioloba* tree may soon face extinction in Hwange National Park, as the remaining trees have been severely depleted by elephants. An ecological crisis is looming, with acacia trees serving as a critical food source for the park's elephant population.

Hwange, which was designed to accommodate around 15,000 elephants, is now home to over 45,000, triple its intended capacity. The overpopulation is placing immense pressure on the park's ecosystem and biodiversity.

Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZimParks) spokesperson Tinashe Farawo has raised the alarm over the worsening situation. Said Farawo, "We have continued to say that our national park is overpopulated. This is creating problems with elephants almost eating up all the acacia trees. If you look around, there are no new trees shooting up, and the consequence could be even bigger soon." Environmentalists have warned that without natural regeneration, Hwange National Park's ecological balance could collapse, resulting in widespread food shortages for wildlife and a sharp rise in human-wildlife conflict. As food becomes scarce within protected areas, elephants are increasingly straying into nearby human settlements, where they damage crops, destroy infrastructure, and sometimes cause fatal encounters.

Just last month, ZimParks was forced to cull three elephants after a herd entered villages in Bulilima District, Matabeleland South Province, destroying drying crops and threatening local livelihoods.

The elephants, shot by ZimParks rangers on Thursday, 26 June 2025, in Madlambudzi Ward, were identified as the leaders of the herd and had become repeat offenders in the area.

10 - RAINFALL

We have enjoyed a relatively good start to the year. Year to date rainfall (to 10 November):

Western Matopos	50 mm
Central Matopos	26 mm
Eastern Matopos	71 mm.

11 – FARMERS KEEN ON TITLE DEEDS

Herald, Friday May 2

Over 5 000 farmers have shown interest in acquiring title deeds which are part of the government's initiative to provide security of tenure to Land Reform Programme beneficiaries. Currently, more than 100 title deeds are being processed, indicating a positive shift in land ownership security

Editor – How the wheel turns. Certainly, the only sure way to conserve our environment is through private land ownership – but what would that mean in an area like the Matopos? Though this scheme is not targeted at existing Communal Lands, it is the logical extension. Traditional leadership, political parties and even many individuals may well resist such progress as it all undermines their authority and power. Interesting debates ahead – but not expecting any quick progress.

12 - CONSERVATIONISTS SEEK POLITICAL SUPPORT TO PROMOTE BIODIVERSITY

With acknowledgement to Newsday, 22 May, 2025

There are growing calls for Southern African Development Community (SADC) member States to reaffirm their commitment to protecting the region's rich natural heritage, including over 300 000 elephants that roam across the shared landscapes.

This emerged at the ongoing 25th edition of the SADC Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCA) Conference and Heads of State Summit which opened in Harare on Monday.

The event seeks to secure stronger political and financial commitments to elevate TFCAs' role in promoting biodiversity conservation, regional integration and sustainable development.

It also seeks to address urgent threats to the region's biodiversity, including climate change, habitat loss and the significant conservation funding gap.

World Wide Fund for Nature country director Itai Chibaya underscored the successes of TFCAs in promoting regional integration, conservation and community livelihoods.

"TFCAs are no longer just conservation zones, they are corridors of connectivity, bridges between nations, cultures, ecosystems and economies," he said.

"They represent regional integration in action, not only in conference halls, but in the savannahs and forests where real people live, herd, farm and thrive."

Chibaya said TFCAs had seen the growth of elephant populations in the KAZA area as well as reduction in cases of illegal logging in the Ruvuma region in Tanzania, among other positive developments.

However, TFCAs now face new challenges such as climate change, infrastructure development and funding uncertainty.

"We must confront the hard truths. Climate change is drying rivers, shifting wildlife movements and compounding human-wildlife conflicts," Chibaya said.

"Expanding infrastructure and land use change continue to fragment critical corridors."

"These are not reasons to retreat. They are reasons to act with urgency, ambition and innovation."

Chibaya also emphasised that TFCAs could be used as "engines of peace, prosperity and planetary health" while also aligning with the continent's visions, including African Union's Agenda 2063 and the Global Biodiversity Framework.

13 – ANOTHER HARARE WETLAND INVADED

NewsDay, Friday October 10

Residents of Monavale and Meyrick Park in Harare have expressed outrage over the ongoing grading and imminent construction work on the Monavale wetland, a protected site under the Ramsar Convention. The environmentally disastrous development comes barely two months after the country renewed its commitment to protect ecologically sensitive spaces within its borders at the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) on wetlands held in Victoria Falls. In a joint statement, Conservation Society of Monavale (COSMO), Sherwood Golf Club & Community Hub, and Concerned Residents of Monavale & Meyrick Park said the developments were being carried out illegally, without valid permits from City of Harare and Environmental Management Agency (EMA). "EMA responded swiftly (when residents reported) and issued the developer, one Mr Tiripano, reportedly of TripTrans, with a fine for violating section 97(2) of the Environmental Management Act.

14 – NOT A CHINESE PROBLEM BUT WEAK GOVERNANCE

New Zimbabwe. Monday October 6, 2025

Ex-Minister Blames Corrupt Local Officials for Zimbabwe's Mining Related Environmental Destruction.

Harare - Former Energy Minister Fortune Chasi has called on Zimbabweans to stop blaming Chinese for environmental degradation, arguing that local corruption and weak governance are at the heart of the country's mining-related ecological damage.

Chasi was responding to growing outrage over the ongoing destruction of Christmas Pass Mountain in Mutare, where the Chinese reportedly working in collusion with political elites are accused of tearing apart the landmark for mineral extraction.

There have been various videos on social media showing the destruction going on in the Christmas Pass Mountain with locals accusing the Chinese of damaging the scenic environment.

This comes at a time when mountains, monuments and escarpments are being destroyed countrywide by Chinese companies in the mining sector with examples being Boterekwa in Shurugwi, Muvaradonha Wilderness in Muzarabani and now Christmas Pass.

Responding to one of the debates on X, Chasi said while Chinese investors are often vilified for destructive mining practices, the real problem lies with local officials who enable such activities for personal gain.

"For years, we have blamed the Chinese for destroying our environment through mining, but the truth is harder to face, the real culprits are locals.

"Local officials sign the licences, local elites pocket the 'facilitation fees'. Local silence allows rivers to turn into sludge. The Chinese did not corrupt our system, they found it already for sale," Chasi wrote.

The former energy minister argued that environmental destruction in Zimbabwe reflects a broader governance crisis rather than foreign exploitation alone.

"This isn't a 'Chinese problem.' It is a governance problem. If rules can be bought, someone's selling," he added.

"Every destroyed riverbed tells a local story, a signature, a bribe, a blind eye. Foreign miners only exploit the vacuum we created.

"Blaming outsiders has become a fashionable, convenient self-deception. Environmental destruction thrives because enforcement is selective and oversight compromised," Chasi wrote.

"The reform we need is not about nationality; it is about integrity.

Until our institutions stop trading ecological integrity for quick cash, nothing will change. The Chinese did not destroy our mountains and rivers. Our signatures did," he added.

15 – THE POLITICS OF CONSERVATION; PATRONAGE AND THE DEATH OF MERIT

With acknowledgement to Sir Ranulph Fiennes

Trying to make sense of it all - So watching the media the conservation sector has been consumed with conferences and meetings... yet this continues:

The Politics of Conservation: Patronage and the Death of Merit

I recently read a piece by Seako Masibi, itself inspired by Wiseman Mbali, and its searing commentary on police corruption, and it struck me with uncomfortable clarity that the same moral collapse it described runs through our conservation sector too. It moved me to write this, not as critique for its own sake, but as reflection from someone who has watched and felt the erosion of purpose in a field that purports to act in the public interest, and in whose trenches, I have spent the last 25 years.

In the constant maelstrom of conservation conferences, awards seasons within the sector, attended by the same actors seeking validation from the same attendees, the appointment of self-seeking talking heads to governance structures, I am struck by how much of what passes for conservation today is marketing veneered as mission. The narratives are preselected, the applause predictable by the preselected, and the outcomes self-congratulatory.

International gatherings/conferences, editorials and opinion pieces are heavy with jargon and light on courage, and have become rituals of self-validation, preaching to the same faces while keeping the entitled together. They sustain the illusion of progress, while insulating the comfortable from the consequences of their inaction.

It is from that realisation, and from Masibi's courage in naming corruption for what it is, that this reflection on the politics of conservation was born. Because the decay he describes in policing mirrors that in the conservation sector: a culture where patronage replaces professionalism, and where the public

trust in our governance of our ecological commons is quietly traded for access, pliability, loyalty, and appearance.

Even for the most committed conservationist, there comes a time in their career where one inwardly admits defeat, not because they have failed, but because the system rewards failure. That quiet despair of an honest conservationist, the one who has spent decades in the field, captures that exact moment when ecological integrity meets institutional patronage, and science meets the stupidity of politics and entitlement.

We have in this country some excellent ecologists, naturalists, environmentalists, and field biologists; men and women who have given their lives to the natural patterns and processes. Men and women who fade into the cracks of the ecological slide and decay, and forced to watch as careerists, boards, agencies, and opportunists have created and are captured by cliques who know more about influence and status than ecology.

What we see in the conservation sector is not stewardship. It is theatre, a performance of virtue funded by donors and taxpayers alike. This is the crisis of conservation in South Africa, not a lack of knowledge, not a lack of commitment, but the deliberate exclusion of competence from the flow of influence and funds.

Patronage has become the new ecology. It separates the loyal from the qualified. It replaces scientists and committed conservationists with spokespersons, conservation with branding, and courage with compliance. Recent, though unsurprising, example is the CEOs of well sponsored and marketed NGOs serving on the boards of major funding and governance bodies from which they are beneficiaries, shaping allocation decisions to advance their own agenda despite clear conflicts of interest. This kind of insular and self-serving behaviour excludes others, undermines genuine progress, and ultimately stifles conservation and has caused the business-as-usual decay of national conservation efforts. A patronage merry-go-round.

In such an environment, conservation no longer inspires. It humiliates. Because the young ranger or field biologist sees the truth: that the one who risks his life and wellbeing protecting wildlife remains on contract, if at all, while the one who sits on the right committee signs off the budget. When young people see that influence, not impact, determines success, they lose faith in conservation as a calling. They do not leave because they lack passion, but because the system has made mediocrity and status quo profitable. How do you tell a young ecologist from the wrong side of privilege to stay ethical, when the permit goes to the one with the right surname or connection? How do you tell a student in the Karoo to study predator ecology, when the party that gets the funding does so because it flatters power and appeasement, not science?

That is the collapse we refuse to measure, the quiet collapse of integrity. It's not merely the corruption of money, but of meaning, of a mission that once demanded courage.

The Forgotten Law of the Land

At the heart of this collapse lies a forgotten truth: In law, South Africa's wild animals and ecological assets are *res nullius*; belonging to no one, and so they exist only under the guardianship of the state as trustee for the people and its will.

That principle, the public trust doctrine, is the moral spine of conservation, or should be. It means that the leopard, the river, the fynbos, and the coastline are not commodities or campaign props. They are held in trust for the collective, governed for the benefit of present and future generations. But when governance fails or is handed to the entitled, *res nullius* becomes *res corrupta*, i.e. property without protection, ripe for capture. Without accountable trusteeship, the wild belongs not to the people, but to the few who have mastered the art of controlling access, to permits, to the manufactured commodity, to data, to land, to donor funds, and access to the those who make the allocation.

And so, a nefarious underworld of conservation patronage has emerged; quiet, well-dressed, fluent and articulate in the "language" of sustainability, big time, but operating by the same logic as organised crime.

Here, access to a *res nullius* asset — a river concession, a predator study area, a conservation partnership, even a provincial reserve, and linked funds to conduct conservation, becomes a token of favour. The "right" connection unlocks opportunity; the right allegiance secures funding; the right silence guarantees longevity.

This system feeds a shadow economy of entitlement, a belief that proximity to power confers ownership over what legally belongs to none. Public trust is consumed by private networks. Science is replaced by influence, and integrity by the quiet choreography of cabals managing who eats from the ecological table.

The Cult of Circular Authority

Within this underworld, a familiar pattern repeats. The same names orbit every major board, donor programme, and policy advisory council and or voice for conservation. They introduce each other at conferences, review each other's publications, appear on the same panels, and review each other's funding proposals. They write forewords for one another's reports and exchange awards at events sponsored by the very funds they allocate.

What emerges is a closed loop of validation, a self-referential system that confuses exposure with expertise, and repetition with legitimacy. This conference-circuit elite reproduces itself endlessly, its authority derived not from fieldwork or results but from visibility and alignment. It is an ecosystem of echoes, each voice amplifying the next until the illusion of consensus drowns out dissent and creates an illusion of partnerships.

For the outsider, it looks like collaboration. In truth, it is containment, a structure designed to keep uncomfortable science, independent thought, and public accountability safely outside the tent. Thus, a small fraternity governs access to the *res nullius* commons, deciding who may access, own, study, fund, film, or speak for the wild.

Their service is not to the public trust but to the perpetuation of their own entitlement.

Conservation doesn't fail because the leopards vanish or the rivers dry. It fails because minds and morals erode first, because the cabals that rule our sector have turned it into a marketplace of favours. That entitlement is what decays the ecology, as it does with all aspects of life.

South Africa's tragedy is not that it lacks conservationists or expertise. It's that it lacks conscience in conservation leadership. We have world-class biodiversity, world-class expertise, but governance that treats it like a personal asset. We export ecological assets and import public relations. We train ecologists who emigrate, while we appoint loyalists to "manage ecosystems" they have never set foot in.

Patronage has turned conservation service into personal service. Institutions are no longer centres of ecological excellence; they are shelters for the connected. That is why our reserves bleed corruption, our NGOs blur into vanity projects, and our scientists are silenced or complicit. Because every board seat, every permit, every fund allocation is political, not professional.

And every honest professional who dares to question the system is marginalised, defunded, discredited, or destroyed. The look of defeat of ethical conservationists is not personal. It is national. They carry on their shoulders the disappointment of every South African who believes that the land and its creatures deserve better. Until we replace allegiance with accountability, until we restore merit over marketing, until we put ecological truth above institutional loyalty, we will keep watching the collapse, not only of ecosystems, but of ethics.

The revolution conservation needs today is not bureaucratic. It is moral. It is time to decolonise not just our slogans but our structures. It is time to value data over drama, fieldwork over photo-ops, and integrity over influence. Because when mediocrity governs conservation, extinction becomes permanent.

So let the message be clear: We will no longer clap for corruption wrapped in conservation marketing. We must no longer celebrate the loudest campaign; we must demand the most competent science. We must no longer believe that truth has no place in governance. Because the future of South Africa's wildlife depends not on patronage, but on the restoration of merit, integrity, and the sanctity of the public trust.

16 – SOCIETY CALENDAR OF EVENTS FOR YOUR DIARY

23 November	AGM at Khayelitshe House, Matopos
28–30 November 2025	Matobo Classic
25–29 March 2026	Matopos Heritage MTB Challenge
11 April 2026	Matopos 33 Miler (pending sponsorship)
21–23 August 2026	Matopos Heritage Trail Run

17 – MEMBERS NOTEBOOK

Subscriptions

Subscriptions for the year 1 October 2024 to 30 September 2025 are now due. Please ensure that your subs are up to date. There has been no increase in rates.

US\$ 20	Individual/Family
US\$ 5	Pensioner/Student
US\$100	Corporate

If you need any information, please contact matoboconservationsociety@gmail.com

Gift Subscriptions

If you are looking for a suitable gift for conservation-minded friends and family, please consider a gift subscription to the MCS. You will need to complete the on-line membership application form via the link below

[MCS On-Line Membership Application Form](#)

And email matoboconservationsociety@gmail.com to make arrangements to pay the subscriptions for that member.

MCS Branded Apparel

The Society has a small stock of sleeveless fleece jackets, in olive green with orange MCS logo, available at US\$20 each. They are ideal for the cool mornings and evenings. We also have stocks of hats and caps at \$15 each and shopping bags at \$5 each. Please contact the Secretary via WhatsApp +263 71 240 2341 for further details

Website – www.matobo.org

Visit our website and make use of the RESOURCES tab for maps and information.

Please email queries to matoboconservationsociety@gmail.com

Facebook

Don't forget to join our Facebook page, with over 1400 followers now.

The Natural History of the Matobo Hills

This MCS publication is available at the Natural History Museum for US\$20. The price has been reduced from US\$30.

Umvukela – The 1896 Anti-Colonial Rebellion in Matabeleland by IJ Cross

This limited-edition book has just been re-printed by the Matobo Conservation Society, after the first print was sold out in a few months. This book records an important part of the Matopos History. Available at \$50 each, as stocks last. Contact the Secretary.

**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
SUNDAY 23RD NOVEMBER 2026
AT KHAYELITSHE HOUSE
SEE YOU THERE!**