


Celebrating cultural heritage within national parks


Author:

 Ndukuyakhe Ndlovu^{1,2} 
Affiliations:
¹Conservation Services Division, South African National Parks, Pretoria, South Africa

²Department of Anthropology, Archaeology and Development Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

 Ndukuyakhe Ndlovu,
ndukuyakhe@googlemail.com

How to cite this article:

 Ndlovu, N., 2024, 'Celebrating cultural heritage within national parks', *Koedoe* 66(2), a1816. <https://doi.org/10.4102/koedoe.v66i2.1816>
Copyright:

© 2024. The Author. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

The South African National Parks (SANParks) has a long, rich, and well-decorated history regarding the management of biodiversity in the country. It has an unparalleled status as a leading biodiversity agency in Africa. However, there has been much bias against cultural heritage in the national parks managed by SANParks, as well as other conservation bodies in the country. Over time, cultural heritage was not given the same recognition as the wildlife and vegetation biomes of the many protected areas managed by the entity. According to Meskell (2009:99), the consensus was that '...safari tourism, featuring charismatic mammals (faced with threats and danger and extinction), offers a more reliable fiscal return'. This highlighted the perceived value of biodiversity over cultural heritage. Yet, I would argue that national parks are 'home' to many cultural heritage resources that hold the rich history of the southern African region (see Carruthers 2007).

The history of cultural heritage within the SANParks illustrates that it was historically managed in a 'by the way' kind of approach. The efforts to manage cultural heritage were not as coordinated as they have been when it comes to biodiversity, whether in terms of budget allocation or the provision of human resources. The extent of research on cultural heritage has generally been very low. Cultural heritage has always been a 'stepchild' that is acknowledged but is not given the space to fully exist and thus moved from one department to another during the various reformatory phases of SANParks.

When interest in cultural heritage within SANParks began increasing, the People and Conservation Department was tasked with managing cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge (Swemmer & Tajaard 2011; see Taljaard 2008). One could argue that cultural heritage was best placed within the context of working with various communities to make a positive impact in their lives, so that they benefit and by extension, see value in the management of biodiversity. A portion of cultural heritage resources were linked to the many communities neighbouring the national parks, some of whom would have been forcibly removed to make way for the protected areas.

Following transition to the democratic era, cultural heritage moved to the Social Ecology Unit, whose main aim was 'to improve strained relationships with neighbouring communities, avert threats such as poaching and land grabs and respond to the general trends towards democracy in southern Africa' in 1994 (Swemmer & Tajaard 2011:2). Nine years later, Social Ecology Unit was transformed into People and Conservation Department, which continued to be responsible for the cultural resource management and indigenous knowledge. This is the history that has led to the legacy whereby there are no Heritage Officers stationed at national parks. This function is being fulfilled by Socio-Economic Transformation (SET) Officers – who provide a significant liaison between SANParks and the various neighbouring communities. They have become, by de facto, Heritage Officers. This is even though they do not have the necessary academic background to be given such a responsibility. Noting such limitations, SET Officers have played a critical role in the organisation to safeguard the many cultural heritage resources in all our protected areas.

Today, the responsibility to look after cultural heritage falls within a unit specifically dedicated to the management of the diverse and significant resources that represent many pages in the history of South Africa. Cultural Heritage Unit is under Conservation Services Division.

A lot is changing, in terms of how cultural heritage resources are being managed by SANParks. The Cultural Heritage Unit has become much more active within the entity. Its presence is being seen, more and more. This is even though, for instance, the staff complement is still not pleasing. Of great assistance though has been the enormous commitment made by senior authorities to support the management of cultural heritage resources within our protected areas. This has been a welcomed development. The impact being made by the Cultural Heritage Unit is far greater than the number of employees performing the various tasks – something that should be commended.

Note: Special Collection: Celebrating Cultural Heritage within National Parks.

Read online:


Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

This brief historical reflection sets the context within which this Special Issue is conceptualised. Titled *Celebrating cultural heritage within national parks*, it highlights the different research programmes undertaken within the protected areas under the jurisdiction of the SANParks. The articles cover a broad range of time, from palaeontology (geoheritage), archaeology (forager or farmer interactions, faunal analysis, geoarchaeology), involvement of communities in heritage management, to more historical times (South African War, preservation of mudbrick buildings). I chose Koedoe not only for its rich history dating back to 1958, but because of the long predilection the journal has had in publishing largely biodiversity-related articles. This is even though its mission statement does refer to 'cultural heritage within protected areas'. A quick review of the locations covered by articles I have included in this Special Issue also indicates a specific bias.

Majority of the archaeological contributions, which represents more than half of research articles published in this special issue, are from the northern region of South Africa, with a strong focus on Mapungubwe and Kruger National Parks. There are five publications from the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape, which includes Mapungubwe National Park. This landscape was inscribed as one of the World Heritage Sites for its cultural significance. Since the early 1930s, the area has been attractive to archaeologists, who have studied the farming communities that are credited with establishing the first civilisation in southern Africa, between 1200s and 1300s AD. Most research projects, however, have obliterated the presence of foragers, who are known to have been living on the landscape when the farmers arrived. It is pleasing, therefore, that three articles address various elements of the forager or farming relationship: (1) the shift of stone tool technologies from pre-contact into contact periods, (2) experimental archaeology to replicate how stone tools could have been used and to help study use-wear on these tools, and (3) research trends in the region and understanding how foragers have been represented in various archaeological studies. The fourth article on Mapungubwe presents the study of faunal remains from Schroda to establish the diversity of animals that were consumed as well as how such were procured during the Middle Iron Age. Such procurement strategies indicate that, over time, farmers increased their exploitation of wild animals. The last article on the Mapungubwe landscape is a geoarchaeological study of soil to establish palaeoenvironmental evidence behind the habitation of the area, making it possible to understand how they exploited their environment at the time as well as the decline of the political entity that had managed the valley.

There are two articles from the Kruger National Park. The first presents an archaeological study of settlements linked to Early Iron Age on the southern bank of the Letaba River.

While these settlements were first explored in the late 1970s, it is in the past three years that they have been more intensely investigated. Early revelations indicate that farmers who lived in the area were active in trade networks with the wider Indian Ocean world. The second contribution from Kruger National Park is an investigation linked to the South African War (1899–1902) in the southern region of the park – where the British volunteer unit (Steinaecker's Horse) operated. The main purpose of the unit was to control the movement of people, especially to prevent contact between the Boers and the pro-Boer people in Mozambique. One of the sites from which the Steinaecker's Horse operated was the Sardelli Ship at Sabiepoort, which was excavated. Considering the rich archaeological heritage of Marakele and Golden Gate Highlands National Parks, I invite interested researchers to explore these localities. Such studies, in the context of the latter, would add to the ongoing palaeontological research whose findings have provided a significant source of knowledge for the Kgodumodumo Dinosaur Interpretation Centre.

Besides these seven archaeological research articles, another contribution from Mapungubwe is that which examined the reasons behind the low visitor numbers of domestic tourists in the area and advocating the significance of involving 'descendant' communities in the management of the landscape. While these communities have access to the protected area for their ritual ceremonies, it seems they feel there are reasons for them to be much more involved than is currently the case.

The two remaining articles address vernacular architecture of the Tankwa Karoo National Park and geoheritage from Garden Route National Park, West Coast National Park, and Addo Elephant National Park. There is a significant number of mudbrick structures, which represent the farming history of the landscape and were built over the past 120 years. While most of these structures are in a bad state of conservation, the article presents a rich oral history of the families who lived in these houses and the skill behind their construction and continued maintenance, which has been affected by the inclusion of the various farms into the protected area over time. The cemented dunes and beach deposits on South Africa's Cape coast have trace-fossil evidence that provides insights into the palaeoenvironment and palaeoanthropology of the area. One of these has evidence for the oldest tracks attributed to *Homo sapiens*. Among the threats to this geoheritage sites is graffiti that gets engraved on the track-bearing surfaces. More importantly, the article also gives insight into the challenges and solutions that can be implemented to address the threats against the geoheritage of the Cape coast.

I wish to thank all the authors who responded to the invitation to participate in this Special Issue. While these research articles do not comprehensively represent palaeontological and archaeological studies that have or are still being carried

out at the different national parks around South Africa, they provide great insight into some of the findings that have improved our knowledge. Ideally, it would have been beneficial to have articles that represent the different geographical locations of the national parks, especially in the arid and central regions of South Africa.

The sterling role played by the two interns: Ms Boitumelo Machaba and Ms Tshwanelo Kgosana is highly commended. They undertook the initial reviews of all contributions submitted to ensure that all articles were suitable for the proposed Special Issue and to improve their general outlook. The two interns further played a significant role in managing the review and pre-publication phases of the process. They were later joined by another intern, Ms Tebogo Nkosi, who similarly made a great contribution, ensuring that articles were edited and prepared for publication. Their contribution is highly appreciated, and I hope they have acquired valuable lessons through their involvement.

I am equally appreciative of the support received from Mr Thabo Kgomommu, the General Manager for Cultural Heritage within SANParks. He has supported the idea of the Special Issue from the time I conceived of it.

I thank Dr Ernest Daemane and Dr Llewellyn Foxcroft who provided funding support for the idea to be realised. Funding is the glue that puts the idea and efforts together, to produce this Special Issue, which I hope will celebrate the richness of cultural heritage in our national parks.

References

- Carruthers, J., 2007, 'South Africa – A world in one country: Land restitution in national parks and protected areas', *Conservation and Society* 5(3), 292–306.
- Meskill, L., 2009, 'The nature of culture in Kruger National Park', in L. Meskill (ed.), *Cosmopolitan archaeologies*, pp. 89–112, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.
- Swemmer, L.K. & Taljaard, S., 2011, 'SANParks, people and adaptive management: Understanding a diverse field of practice during changing times', *Koedoe: African Protected Area Conservation and Science* 53(2), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/koedoe.v53i2.1017>
- Taljaard, S., 2008, *An investigation into the development of environmental education as a field of practice in South African National Parks*, Unpublished MEd thesis, Department of Education, Rhodes University.