

South Africa's uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site Celebrates 30 Years of Wilderness

BY SONJA KRÜGER and JOHN CROWSON

Introduction

While the United States of America celebrates 40 years of its Wilderness Act during 2004, South Africa is currently celebrating 30 years of its first wilderness proclamation in the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site (UDP WHS).

Proclamation of wilderness in South Africa was modeled after the United States of America's Wilderness Act of 1964. The South African Department of Forestry managed the majority of the catchment areas in the Drakensberg mountains of the KwaZulu-Natal province. During the 1970s, Secretary Ackerman for the Department of Forestry encouraged the designation of wilderness areas in South Africa. Since most of the land managed by the Department of Forestry still retained much of its original character, he was determined to ensure the long-term protection of these wild areas for the benefit of all South Africans.

The National Forests Act (No. 84 of 1998) protects state forests, forest nature reserves, and wilderness areas and the plant and animal life contained therein. In addition, the act allows for management programs to be established in order to prevent soil erosion and fire, maintain the natural genetic and species diversity, and control plants and animals that are harmful to a particular area. The act provides for the control and reasonable access to state forests for the purposes of recreation, education, culture, or spiritual fulfillment. Also, people are prohibited from damaging state forests or contributing to the threat of fire. Forest officers are empowered to arrest any person who has contravened this act and may seize such person's property.



Article co-authors (from l to r) Sonja Krüger and John Crowson. Photo by Henry Hibbet.

During 1973, the first three wilderness areas were proclaimed in South Africa under the provisions of the National Forests Act. The first two wilderness areas to be proclaimed were Mdedelelo (27,000 ha; 66,690 acres) and Mkhomazi (48,000 ha; 118,560 acres) (Government Notice 791 of 1973) in the UDP WHS. Next came the proclamation of the Cedarberg wilderness in the mountains of the Western Cape province.

The uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site

The uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park is an inland mountain range in southeastern Africa (see Figure 1) that received World Heritage status in 1999 for both its natural and cultural values. The UDP WHS comprises 12 component protected areas (referred to as reserves), totaling 242,813 ha (599,748 acres)



Figure 1—The location of the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site within KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

that is state owned. The land is managed by a provincial conservation body, Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife, which is also the proposed management authority of the World Heritage Site. The UDP WHS also forms part of the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Area, and shares its borders with three provinces of South Africa and an international border with Lesotho.

The mean annual temperature of the Drakensberg is about 16°C (61°F), and the annual precipitation totals vary between about 1,000 mm (40 inches) in the foothills to 1,800 mm (72 inches) at the escarpment. Precipitation occurs predominantly (70%) in the summer months (November to March). Snowfalls, with an average frequency of about eight days of snowfall per year, occur in winter, predominantly at high elevations. With altitudes varying from 1,280 meters (4,200 feet) to nearly 3,500 meters (11,483 feet), a range of 2,200 meters (7,218 feet), the Drakensberg has a great variation in its topography, with summit plateaux and peaks, vast basalt and sandstone cliffs, deep valleys, and intervening spurs.

The UDP WHS is the largest protected area established on the Great

Escarpment of the southern African subcontinent (KZN NCS 2000). This escarpment formation, which includes the Drakensberg Escarpment component, is intimately linked to the geomorphic history of the subcontinent and the fragmentation of the Gondwana supercontinent. The Great Escarpment reaches its greatest and most spectacular expression in the Drakensberg Mountains that lie within the UDP WHS and contain landscapes and features of exceptional natural beauty. The geomorphological processes by which they were formed are of universal importance.

Biological Values

Also of outstanding universal importance are the mountain and wetland ecosystems (the UDP WHS was proclaimed a Ramsar Site in 1997) with their full complement of plants and animals, including many endemic and internationally recognized threatened species. The UDP WHS is an outstanding example of one of the few high mountain grassland areas within the African Grassland Biome sufficiently large enough for the existing and original ecological and biological processes to operate without interference (KZN NCS 2000).

The habitat within the UDP WHS ranges in diversity from the high-altitude mountain peaks and summit plateaux with their diverse vegetation communities and unique alpine tundra (fynbos types), to steep slopes in midaltitude areas supporting a wide variety of grassland, fynbos scrubland, and woodland vegetation communities, to lower lying areas in river valleys that contain various grassland and forest vegetation communities. Found within these habitats is a remarkable richness of plant and animal species.

The UDP WHS is located within the Drakensberg Alpine Region, a center of plant diversity and endemism. A total of 2,153 species of plants have been recorded for the UDP WHS with an endemism percentage of 29.5%, and 109 listed threatened species per *Red Data List* category (Hilton-Taylor 1996; Walter and Gillett 1998).

The UDP WHS is considered to be one of the eight major centers of herpetofauna diversity in southern Africa (Branch 1998) and contains four local endemics and 40 South African endemic species. A total of 296 bird species have been recorded for the UDP WHS (Johnson, personal communication, 2004) of which 43 are southern African endemics, and 32 species are endemic to South Africa. Some 18 species recorded for the UDP WHS are listed in the South African *Red Data List* as threatened species, such as the endangered bearded vulture, *Gypaetus barbatus* (see Figure 2). There are 48 species of mammals occurring in the UDP WHS. Although the invertebrate fauna are poorly known, studies that have been undertaken on several taxa have found Paleogenic insects unique to South Africa and particularly to the Drakensberg mountain region, as well as many species endemic to the region.

Cultural Values

In addition to its natural values, the UDP WHS is globally significant from



Figure 2—The Bearded Vulture, *Gypaetus barbatus*, an endangered species whose breeding range is limited to the Drakensberg escarpment in South Africa. Photo by S. Krüger.

a cultural perspective, in particular the rock art painted by the San hunter-gatherers who have inhabited the area from about 8,000 years ago (KZN NCS 2000). The uniqueness of the San rock art is evidenced by the diverse subject matter, the minute detail portrayed, the art techniques, and the animation and variety of positions depicted, as well as the remarkable state of preservation. The number of sites is estimated at 600, and the number of individual images in those sites probably exceeds 35,000.

Numerous historic sites, living cultural sites, and sites of archaeological importance are located within the UDP WHS. These sites include old grave sites, painted shelters, and various artifacts. The Drakensberg region ranks as one of the most important archaeological areas in southern Africa. Archaeological sites from the Early, Middle, and Late Stone Ages and the Late Iron Age are present, indicating that the period of human occupation in this mountainous region possibly extends over the last million years.

Recreational Values

There are 15 entrance gates to the UDP WHS, where members of the public enter either as day or overnight visitors. Overnight visitors can use camping facilities, or camp in caves, and mountain and other huts. The UDP WHS can accommodate approximately 2,000 persons per night.

World Heritage Site Wilderness Resource

Almost the entire area of the UDP WHS is in unmodified, near-pristine condition. The UDP WHS, although used by humans for a long time, has never been occupied by significantly large human settlements, nor has the area been subjected to significant human-induced land disturbances.

It is estimated that the total area of the UDP WHS transformed by both alien plant infestation and infrastructural development is approximately 1.4% of the area (3,452 ha; 8,526 acres). The natural ecological and geomorphological processes function with little or no significant detrimental interference from human activities. Where there have been impacts, the UDP WHS management approach is to restore such areas to their former status (Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife 2003).

Apart from the 30-year-old Mdedelelo and Mkhomazi wilderness areas, the UDP WHS also contains the Mzimkulu, 28,340 ha (70,000 acres) (1979) and Mlamboja, 6,270 ha (15,487 acres) (1989) wilderness areas (see Figure 3). In addition, the Mkhomazi wilderness area was extended by another 8,155 ha (20,143 acres) in 1989. The proclaimed wilderness areas comprise 48.5% of the UDP WHS and were one of the primary factors contributing to the World Heritage Site designation.

The focus and vision of the UDP WHS management team is wilderness; valuing and managing existing areas to a higher state, and identifying candidate wilderness areas within the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation area. A comprehensive management plan has been drafted for the effective management and sustainable utilization of the wilderness areas in the UDP WHS. The management

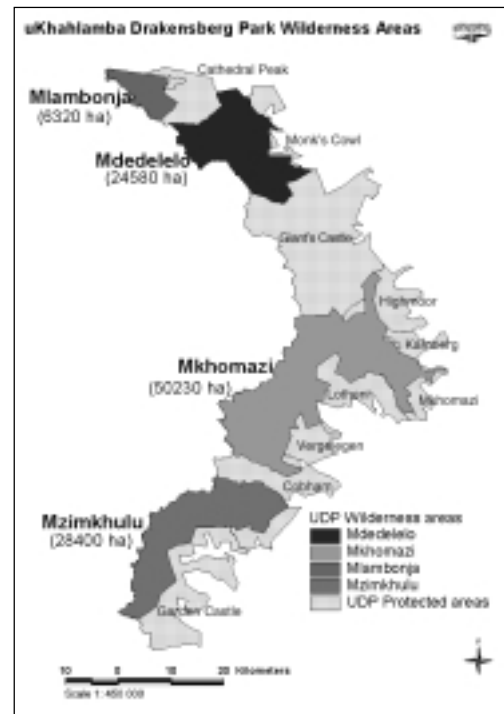


Figure 3—The location of the four proclaimed wilderness areas within the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site.

policy for the UDP WHS wilderness areas is to “leave no trace” so as to retain the wild character of these areas by prohibiting all forms of human-made developments. Although people may gain access by foot, recreational opportunities within wilderness areas are managed to allow for an experience of solitude within an intrinsically unaltered natural environment, and, thus, to provide opportunities for inspiration, enrichment, self-reliance, and physical adventure.

Thirty years of Wilderness

The wilderness philosophy is one of the pillars of Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife’s corporate identity, embracing a deep respect for the natural world, restoring it as far as possible to what it once was, and preserving it in as whole and natural a state as possible. For the past 30 years, the UDP WHS wilderness areas have been managed according to stringent wilderness principles in an attempt to preserve wilderness for future generations to visit, and to ensure that there will always be places where people



Figure 4—Members of the southern Drakensberg management team looking at a plant fossil site (left) in the Mkhomazi wilderness area (right). Photo by S. Krüeger.

will be able to absorb wilderness firsthand and be changed by it.

The Mkhomazi Wilderness

The Mkhomazi Wilderness is part of and managed by four major reserves within the UDP WHS: Mkhomazi, Lotheni, Cobham, and Vergelegen. In celebration of the 30 years of nationally proclaimed wilderness, the southern Drakensberg management team visited a plant fossil site in the Mkhomazi wilderness in the Vergelegen Reserve (see Figure 4). These plant fossils are 60 million years old and represent South Africa's best site for plant fossils in the Molteno Formation.

Several commemorative activities are planned throughout 2004 aimed at increasing wilderness awareness among

the youth that live in communities nearby the UDP WHS wilderness areas. The primary event celebrating 30 years of the Mkhomazi wilderness will take place in September 2004, coinciding with the celebrations of The Wilderness Act in the United States. Various celebrity speakers will be present, and educational materials in the form of wilderness pamphlets, posters, and T-shirts will be available.

The Mdedelelo Wilderness

The Mdedelelo Wilderness is managed by the Cathedral Peak and Monk's Cowl Reserves within the UDP WHS. Participants of the Mountain Protected Areas Workshop of the World Parks Congress 2004 undertook a commemorative walk to the Mdedelelo



Figure 5—Participants of the Mountain Protected Areas Workshop of the World Parks Congress standing in front of the Mdedelelo wilderness area. Photo by S. Krüger.

wilderness area in the Cathedral Peak Reserve (see Figure 5). This section of the wilderness area encompasses the Didima Special Conservation Area, an area set aside to conserve the wealth and diversity of the San rock art.

Conclusion

UDP WHS wilderness managers face many challenges, the most obvious of which is defending a philosophy that is little understood in the country as a whole. Other threats to the wilderness include deproclamation, invasive and alien plants and animals, arson fires, reduced budgets, and law enforcement issues such as poaching, illegal hunting with dogs, cross-border drug trafficking, and cattle rustling. These challenges must be met and the threats managed to ensure that the UDP WHS's natural and cultural values and the wilderness resource are managed for the benefit of current and future generations. ♪

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SONJA KRÜGER is employed by Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife as the regional ecologist for the UDP WHS. E-mail: skrueger@kznwildlife.com. JOHN CROWSON is employed by Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife as the Conservation Manager for the southern section (comprising six reserves) of the UDP WHS. E-mail: johnc@kznwildlife.com.