

Extract from
Essence of A Land: South Africa and its World Heritage Sites.
Editor: Max du Preez, Photography: Tim Hauf.
© 2006 Green Vision Foundation
ISBN-10 0-9720743-8-4
ISBN-13 978-0-9720743-8-4
www.greenvisionfoundation.com

iSimangaliso Wetland Park / Greater St. Lucia Wetland Park

Land, Water, Life

By Kian Barker

The Greater St. Lucia Wetland Park is the only place on earth where the world's oldest land mammal, the rhinoceros, and the world's biggest terrestrial mammal, the Elephant, share an ecosystem with the world's oldest fish, the coelacanth, and the world's biggest marine mammal, the whale.

But there is more to this piece of paradise than just old and big animals. When the World Heritage Committee granted the park its status in 1999, it noted its "exceptional biodiversity" – 521 bird species, for instance. This is largely due to its location between tropical and subtropical Africa and its long coastline. The park consists of lake systems, swamps, reed and papyrus wetlands, savannah, vegetated coastal dunes and sandy beaches. It extends into the Indian Ocean as a marine sanctuary and includes the southernmost coral reefs of Africa.

The St Lucia area was inhabited from the earliest days of human existence. Middens with the remains of shell fish and mussels left by humans many thousands of years ago have been found along the beaches. In the north the Kosi community still operate the fish traps originally constructed more than 700 years ago. Nguni-speaking farmers, ancestors of the Zulu people, grazed their

cattle on the plains even further back than that. European hunters and traders first visited the area some five hundred years ago.

The park is located in the southern end of the Mozambique coastal plain in northern Kwazulu-Natal, known as Maputoland, and it stretches over 280 km from Kosi Bay in the north to St. Lucia in the south. It covers an area of 328 000 hectares. The St. Lucia Lagoon, the Mkuze Park and the St. Lucia Marine reserve, the Sodwana Bay National Park, Lake Sibaya and the Kosi Bay Nature Reserve are all part of the Greater St. Lucia Wetland Park.

The park has five major eco-systems. The marine ecosystem; the coastline with Africa's highest sand dunes; the grassy coastal plains; the Great Lake of St. Lucia and the savannah. Within these ecosystems there is incredible species diversity.

The marine ecosystem has almost a thousand fish species including huge whale and dolphin populations. A large variety of albatross visit in the winter months.

The strong Agulhas current that has flowed down the East Coast of Africa for millennia has shaped this coastline. These surprisingly warm waters are home to a tropical environment, not only in the sea but onshore as well. Seasonal winds blowing across the Mozambique Channel from Madagascar rotate this massive body of water which can reach a comfortable 31 degrees Celsius in summer. These waters are home to tropical reefs, graced by hundreds of fish species, turtles and dolphins all year round, as well as a large migratory population of whales in winter. The marine system also features wide submarine canyons.

The ocean along the coast is also home to the famous "living fossil", the coelacanth. Scientists knew this fish for a very long time - as an order of peculiar lobe-finned fishes which appeared in the fossil record about 350 million years ago, about the same time the first creatures emerged from sea to land and were

extinct for approximately 70 million years.

But in 1938 a living coelacanth was caught off the South African coast, identified as such by an exasperated Dr JLB Smith, a leading South African ichthyologist. In terms of evolution, the coelacanth is more closely related to land animals than to fish. The specimen's paired fins have jointed bones, like arms and legs.

It was fourteen years before the next specimen was caught, this time in the waters of the Comoros. And on 27 November 2000 divers found three coelacanths at Sodwana Bay in the St. Lucia Marine Protected Area. The largest was between 1.5 and 1.8 metres long, the other two 1.2 and 1 metres. In 2001 the divers observed fifteen coelacanths, one of them pregnant.

The park's beaches have for millennia been the nesting grounds of the world's largest reptile, the Leatherback sea turtle. They return every three to five years to deposit another generation in the mineral rich sand. Here the titanium heats the sand and retains moisture. Thus winds and currents have deposited sand to form sand dunes to create the world's largest egg incubator. The forest covering the dunes stabilises the dune and ensures that a steady supply of moisture reaches the beach. This water keeps the turtle eggs from drying out.

The coastal dunes, almost 200 metres high, are made of titanium-rich wind-blown sand. This sand contains 22 minerals and was the subject of an intense ecological battle in the 1970s and 1980s to prevent these sand dunes from being mined. The ecologists won the day and ensured the future of this ecological wonderland.

The almost impenetrable coastal bush, short shrubby thorn trees with wood like iron, run parallel to the coast from Maputo to Port Natal. The dune forest has a variety of birds, including Livingston's lourie, barbets, trogons, fly catchers and

Crowned eagles, and it is also home to the rare Samango monkey and Setaros dwarf chameleon.

The Coastal Plains stretch for thousands of kilometres to the north. They are generally swampy in this southern area and are home to typical wetland mammal species like waterbuck, reed buck, hippo, buffalo and also more than 2 200 flowering plants, including a large variety of water plants.

The jewel in the ecological crown of this World Heritage Site is Lake St. Lucia, Africa's biggest estuarine system with a total water surface of 350 square kilometres. Four major river systems supply the lake with large volumes of fresh water, especially during summer. Salt water is fed into the lake at St Lucia village.

More than a thousand hippos live in Lake St. Lucia. They eat tonnes of grass from the coastal plains and swampland, mostly at night. By day they wallow in the warm lake waters and dump masses of nutrient rich dung into the lake, nutrifying the waters. These waters support over 2 000 crocodiles, tens of thousands of fish, birds and invertebrates. It can be said that the hippo is a keystone species, the driving force in this ecosystem and creates a perfect home for large crocodile and bull sharks. The lake and environs are also the breeding ground of large colonies of pelicans, storks, herons and terns.

The largest of the rivers feeding the delta is the Mkuze. The southern end of the lake tapers down and is the final conglomeration of five rivers, forming a single channel – the Narrows. All the rivers reaching into this park arise to the West, in the last of the five ecosystems – the savannah.

In summer the grassland is partly flooded. A shaky seasonal track led the old traders from Cape Vidal through this grassland, navigating the red swirling waters of the Nakazana stream that enters Lake Bhangazi. It then turns

westwards, towards Inhlela Inhlovu (Elephant Road) or Brodies Crossing, which was the only viable lake crossing, although notorious for crocodile and hippo attacks.

The Savannah ecosystem is a summer rainfall area with lots of grassland, interspersed with thorn trees. It is home to lion, elephant, buffalo (black and white), rhino, giraffe, buffalo, waterbuck, kudu, nyala, impala, duiker and reedbuck

Indiscriminate hunting and bad management seriously decimated the wildlife of St Lucia, especially larger animals. An extensive management and restocking project over a number of years have restored the numbers.

Ancient peoples and later the San or Bushmen, all hunters and gatherers, lived in these parts for many millennia, but the first agriculturalists only arrived about 2 000 years ago. They were iron-working societies with complex social structures, members of the large Bantu-speaking family.

By 900 AD Muslim traders in their creaking dhows hugging the coast, had established trade routes with settlements on the East African coast as far south as present-day Mozambique, extending inland. The farmers of what is today called the KwaZulu/Natal coast must have taken part in this trade, probably selling ivory and animal skins.

By the 1500s the Arabs were joined by the Portuguese – it was the Portuguese seafarer Vasco da Gama who gave the name Natal to the coastline he was passing on Christmas Day 1497.

In the two centuries following these first visits by non-Africans, the greater St Lucia area was frequently visited by European adventurers and hunters. Big

game was plentiful, but so were the challenges they were not familiar with: swamps, predators, heat and diseases.

In the early 19th century a small British trading community established themselves at Port Natal, now known as Durban. In the 1830s white farmers who had trekked from the Eastern Cape frontier, called the Voortrekkers, arrived in the region. The British colonial authorities at the Cape thought their arrival could threaten British interests and destabilise the region, and in 1842 Natal was annexed as a British colony. Most Voortrekkers left for the high-lying interior of what became known as Transvaal and the Orange Free State.

Many early hunters and their trek animals succumbed to disease in the St Lucia area: ngana or sleeping sickness from the Tsetse fly; malaria from the mosquito; and Corridor Disease from ticks. Sleeping sickness and Corridor Disease have now been eradicated, although malaria still occurs.

St. Lucia was first named "Rio de la Medaos do ura" (River of the Dhows of Gold) in 1554 by the survivors of the Portuguese Ship Saint Benedict. On 13 December 1575, the day of the feast of Saint Lucy, Manuel Peresterello renamed the delta area Santa Lucia.

In 1895 the lake and its islands were declared the St Lucia Game Reserve. It was declared a National Park in 1939 when land around the lake and the estuary were included, and other areas have since been added. The lake, swamps and beaches of the Maputaland Coast were listed by the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance in 1971.

Today the Greater St. Lucia Wetland Park is a tourist haven, visited annually by tens of thousands of eager eco-tourists and anglers. There are tarred roads and the area has cell phone reception. Luxury lodges are highly-rated with good restaurants, but simpler accommodation and camping sites are also available.

The park is a paradise for photographers and eco-tourists have a choice of a variety of outdoor activities: snorkelling, kayaking, game viewing, birding or taking boat rides on the lakes or waterways. Scuba diving at Sodwana Bay is regarded as among the world's best. There are a number of shorter and longer trails for hikers in all parts of the park.