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South African National Parks launches a R45 million Poverty Relief Project at Vhembe Dongola National Park

THE South African National Parks (SANParks) today announced the launch of a R45,3 million Poverty Relief Programme at Vhembe Dongola National Park near Musina in the Limpopo province.

This follows a substantial grant to SANParks from the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism to help create much-needed jobs to improve the lives of communities surrounding all the country's national parks.

At the moment, Vhembe Dongola National Park forms part of an ambitious project to develop a major national park in Limpopo. Together with its surrounding areas, the park has a potential to be a sanctuary for viable populations of some of the most threatened large mammals on earth, such as the black and white rhinoceros, wild dog, and the continent's flagship species, the African elephant.

Through the Poverty Relief Programme, the DEAT grant will help create about 500 jobs at Vhembe Dongola National Park. The grant will also be used to establish a wide-range of tourism facilities including rest camps, fences, roads and staff housing.

The development of Vhembe Dongola into a major tourist destination is based on the rich bio-diversity of the area and its great scenic beauty. The area is also of immense cultural significance because of the archaeological treasures of Mapungubwe.

The artefacts found at Mapungubwe rank among the most important pieces of ancient art yet found in sub-Saharan Africa. They also document the rise of the Zimbabwe culture.

The finding of gold artefacts, beads, burial grounds and other remains indicate that Mapungubwe was one of the major centres of this culture and bear testimony to the way of life of African people more than 1 000 years ago.

SANParks Chief Executive Officer Mavuso Msimang says the funding from DEAT demonstrated government's commitment to turn the tide against poverty and to improve the lives of all South Africans.

He adds that in this regard, the importance of tourism could not be over-emphasised.

"We have embarked on a vigorous parks expansion programme. Our parks are part of our natural heritage, they are our pride and joy. The development of Vhembe Dongola as a major tourist destination is part of that expansion process.

"We also recognise that communities that live in the vicinity of our parks have a major role to play in their development, protection and sustainability. As a result, SANParks has adopted appropriate structures and mechanisms through which they will not only gain employment but continue to be major role-players as well," said Msimang.

SANParks believes the development of Vhembe Dongola National Park will also serve as a (southern African) regional growth point for tourism and conservation because of its positioning on the international borders of Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

It is envisaged that it will become a major component of a trans frontier park shared by the three countries.

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