



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

### **COAL MINING THREAT TO CULTURAL AND BIRD TOURISM IN THE LIMPOPO VALLEY**

Proposals for a power station and coal mine within sight of the Mapungubwe National Park have raised concerns that these developments could destroy the eco-tourism and cultural-tourism potential of the area and have significant negative effects on one of Limpopo Province's ten Important Bird Areas. BirdLife South Africa believes that the proposals are incompatible with the current sustainable land-use practices in the area.

Mapungubwe National Park, 1 May 2009

Scoping reports for a coal mine and a power station have been issued to the Department of Minerals and Energy for approval. These developments fall within the proposed Transfrontier Conservation Area and the proposed Vhembe Biosphere Reserve. They will have a direct impact on the BirdLife International-registered 'Important Bird Area' of Mapungubwe National Park. The area is one of the jewels in, not only the cultural and heritage tourism routes of Limpopo, but also of the Greater Limpopo Birding Routes. The area is home to various globally- and nationally-threatened bird species, as well as unique and irreplaceable habitat along the Limpopo River Valley.

An application to develop an open-cast coal mine and construct a coal-fired power station has been issued by the Coal of Africa mining company to the Department of Minerals and Energy. The proposed site is within a few kilometres of the entrance to Mapungubwe National Park, a World Heritage Site, in the far north of Limpopo Province, 75 km west of Musina, South Africa.

The application is strongly opposed by BirdLife South Africa as it will have a detrimental impact on Mapungubwe, an internationally-registered "Important Bird Area". This area is home to more than ten globally- and nationally-threatened bird species, including Cape Vulture, White-backed Vulture, Black Stork, Saddle-billed Stork and Kori Bustard.

These developments also fall within the proposed Limpopo/Sashe Transfrontier Conservation Area (the MOU for its establishment was signed by the relevant ministers of Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa in 2006) and within the proposed Vhembe Biosphere area (which has been approved by the Limpopo Government and the national minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism).

BirdLife South Africa has developed the avi-tourism potential of the area through the Greater Limpopo Birding Routes over the last four years and the Mapungubwe area, with its special birds and unique landscapes, has attracted eco-tourists from all over the world. The proposed developments are of such a magnitude and nature that they could well destroy this fragile, unique and irreplaceable area. This will be a loss, not only to bird-watchers, but also to all citizens of the province, the country and indeed the world.

The loss of the Mapungubwe Important Bird Area would also have a detrimental effect on bird species that have huge tourism value, like Pel's Fishing Owl, Southern Ground Hornbill and Martial Eagle. Birders from around the world travel to the Mapungubwe area to view these magnificent birds.

Paul Hatty, owner one of the BirdLife South Africa-registered Birder Friendly Accommodation Establishments close to the proposed development, commented "I have established a world class tourism accommodation business at Mapungubwe, where over 60% of our guests are from international destinations. We have also accommodated our former President, Thabo Mbeki, and several cabinet ministers. International tourists will not want to come and see and experience an African bush safari spoilt by clouds of coal mine pollution and within view of ugly coal dumps. My tourism business will be ruined and all that my staff and I have worked for over the last eight years in building this special lodge in a very special area, will be in vain."

The cultural and natural heritage of South Africa is being threatened by this short-sighted development which could destroy the future of tourism in these areas. BirdLife South Africa is not opposed to development

as such, but would like to ensure that the utilization of one valuable resource does not destroy the potential to use other valuable resources in the future. Natural and heritage resources can be used sustainably and the resulting tourism income can bring benefits to the Limpopo Province in an ongoing way. It is therefore absolutely imperative that the applications for the mine and power station be thoroughly and independently investigated to determine long-term implications of this proposed development.

The area in question forms part of the proposed Vhembe Biosphere Reserve and as explained by John Rosmarin who is involved in it's establishment, "The Biosphere principles do not only promote conservation but, importantly, the Biosphere also promotes development... A key aspect of all Biospheres is however to achieve a balance between conservation and development."

BirdLife South Africa urges the relevant national and provincial departments to rather consider sustainable forms of income-generation for this area, especially so that they will not affect the proposed Limpopo/SasheTransfrontier Conservation Area and the Vhembe Biosphere.

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**Notes for the editor:**

Background information is available on the Greater Limpopo Birding Routes website: [www.limpopobirding.com](http://www.limpopobirding.com) and [www.birdingroutes.co.za](http://www.birdingroutes.co.za)

Information on Important Bird Areas is available from [www.birdlife.org.za](http://www.birdlife.org.za) or on request.

Information on the Vhembe Biosphere is available from John Rosmarin at [odinp@global.co.za](mailto:odinp@global.co.za)

Information on Mopane Bush Lodge can be found at [www.mopanebushlodge.co.za](http://www.mopanebushlodge.co.za) or from owner Paul Hatty at [info@mopanebushlodge.co.za](mailto:info@mopanebushlodge.co.za)

The mission of BirdLife South Africa is to promote the enjoyment, conservation, study and understanding of wild birds and their habitats.

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