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Launch of the enlarged Marakele National Park

SOUTH African National Parks (SANParks) today unveiled a bigger Marakele National Park in the Limpopo Province. The park, situated to the northeast of Thabazimbi, forms a pivotal part of the organisation's parks expansion programme.

The parks' expansion programme is aimed at increasing the landmass of areas under protection in South Africa. At the moment, only about 6,5 percent of the country's land volume is under protection. The world conservation body, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) recommendation is 10%. South Africa hopes to achieve this target by 2010.

Marakele was officially proclaimed as a national park in 1988, and is surrounded by privately owned farms and game reserves. Finding more land to cope with the increase of both the plant and animal species in the area has always been a challenge.

In order to help achieve the objectives of Marakele's expansion programme Dutch businessman and ardent conservationist, Paul van Vlissingen, approached SANParks management in 1999 with a plan to help fund the acquisition and development of much needed ecologically valuable land to the north of the core area of the park.

Land acquired through this agreement was proclaimed as a contractual national park run by a management company, Marakele Pty Limited, set up by Van Vlissingen.

Marakele Pty Limited plays a major role in the development of the park and is involved in such aspects as fencing, rehabilitation, game introduction and assistance with general management of the park.

Among the dignitaries present during the launch were former President Nelson Mandela, who some years ago had challenged Van Vlissingen to engage and make a contribution to conservation in South Africa.

His Royal Highness Prince Bernhard of The Netherlands, co-founder of WWF, and an avid contributor to conservation and Premier Ngoako Ramatlhodi of Limpopo, were also present.

The enlarged Marakele National Park is to benefit with the release of a bull elephant captured from the Mopani and Shingwedzi areas in the northern Kruger National Park. This bull has tusks weighing between 32 and 46 kilograms.

The elephant was brought to Marakele primarily for ecological purposes and for tourism. Since being captured from Kruger two days ago (August 26), it was kept in a special holding boma. It will be exposed to an electric fence to prevent it from escaping from Marakele following its release.

Three spotted hyenas (2 females and a male) were also released at the launch. They were captured in the northern part of Kruger and will form the nucleus of the first spotted hyena family to be introduced in Marakele.

During the launch of the bigger Marakele National Park, SANParks and the Welgevonden Private Game Reserve (a "big 5" reserve measuring 34,000 hectares and situated on the eastern boundary of Marakele National Park) signed an agreement for the removal of fences between the two conservation areas.

The removal of the fences will create a 110,000 hectare park by linking the Marakele National Park and Marakele Park (Pty) Limited and the Welgevonden Private Game Reserve.

The Thabazimbi Local Council presented Honorary Citizenships to Premier Ramatlhodi and Mr Van Vlissingen.

Msimang said he was delighted that Marakele was growing in leaps and bounds: "One of the most challenging aspects in fulfilling our conservation mandate is land acquisition – an exercise that requires substantial funding.

"We are very grateful of the partnerships that we have forged with the private sector, particularly companies like Marakele Pty Ltd. This partnership is an excellent example of the success we can achieve when working together as private and public entities.

"In just a few days, we will be heading to Durban for the 5th World Parks Congress where South Africa will showcase its achievements in the area of bio-diversity management.

"However, we are still faced with tremendous challenges and I would like to call on the private sector, in particular, to come on board and help us find solutions to these challenges."

In his input Van Vlissingen said he was delighted at the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to conservation in South Africa.

"Together with many people and SANParks we have made a most successful private-public partnership, an exciting new way forward for maintaining and developing national parks in Africa. Our organisation, African Parks, is proud to launch a book on this partnership today," said Van Vlissingen.

The first books were presented to Mr Mandela and to HRH Prince Bernhard.

"The African Parks concept will be made available to other African countries as a management option," added Van Vlissingen.

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- In 1980, the then National Parks Board approved the concept of establishing a national park in the Waterberg, an area that had no tourism industry at the time.
- Marakele National Park was established in 1988 and was initially known as Kransberg National Park.
- In 1994, a proposal was made to the board of trustees of SANParks to consider a name change for the park.
- Evidence suggested that the historical name of the area dated back to at least 1872 and included reference to "Marakele" a se-Tswana name meaning 'the place of herding'. The context was believed to refer to the herding of cattle to a place of safety.
- Several ecologically valuable farms to the west of the park have been acquired and these have increased the size of Marakele National Park significantly.
- Marakele National Park plays an important role in the conservation of the Cape Vulture – up to 900 pairs have been recorded at Groothoek, the largest colony in Africa.

- One species of butterfly on the Red Data List *Erikssonia acraeina* is found within Marakele.
- Most of the large herbivore and carnivore species present in the area in historical times were exterminated. In 1990, SANParks began a programme to re-introduce game into the park. This has included the re-introduction of elephant, white rhinoceros, black rhinoceros, buffalo, hyena, cheetah, African wild dog, giraffe, eland, waterbuck, red hartebeest, zebra, blue wildebeest, hippopotamus and many other smaller mammal species.