

Article: **Persuading all to hold nature dear**

*In the run up to the fifth World Parks Congress, Leon Marshall looks at how money, poaching, poverty and history hinder the true importance of conservation.*

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## **Persuading all to hold nature dear**

by **Leon Marshall**

**The fifth World Parks Congress will be held in Durban next month. Leon Marshall looks at how money, poaching, poverty and history hinder the true importance of conservation**

Hosi Shilungwa Mhinga II is a regal figure with the quaintest of mannerisms. He likes holding hands with his guests, and so taken was the young reporter by the kindly way he answered her questions, she appeared poised to lean her head on his chest and hug him.

It was in similarly gentle tones that he explained in a speech to a media party why his Mhinga tribe had instituted a claim under South Africa's new land restitution law to a northern portion of the Kruger National Park.

Hosi, or chief, Mhinga was a lawyer in Johannesburg before he assumed the tribal position some years ago on his father's death.

It was an unlikely occasion he chose for making his point to the media party visiting his tribe's upmarket Wisani Lodge and Cultural Village, built with state funds as a community-development ecotourism project outside the Kruger Park.

The visit was part of the promotional campaign for the launch of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, joining South Africa's Kruger with Mozambique's Limpopo and Zimbabwe's Gonarezhou parks.

It was a moment for celebrating the giant new park, not for undercutting it. But the chief insisted that was not his purpose.

He explained that the Mhinga had occupied the land in question since the 14th century, but after Kruger's declaration as a national park in the early 20th century they were systematically forced out.

At question time, a corpulent man from a lunch group that did not form part of the media contingent asked: "Why don't you do as we in Zimbabwe do and simply take what is yours?"

Hosi Mhinga smiled indulgently. "No," he said. "What we want is an acknowledgement that this is our land. We want a say in its management, a share in profits and traversing rights so we can visit our ancestral graves and erect memorials."

The episode happened some months ago, and the outcome of the application is still pending. But the issues it raised go to the heart of what the upcoming World Parks Congress in Durban, from September 8-18, will be about.

The congress is held under the auspices of the influential World Conservation Union. Staged once a decade, and bringing together top environmentalists and interested parties from around the globe, it has a key part in setting the agenda for the world's protected areas.

Past congresses have helped governments create more protected areas, and have helped get more resources directed into conservation. This will be the first time the congress is held in Africa, which is highly opportune. The struggle to protect nature is not this continent's alone.

Globally, nature is under pressure from a growing population wanting space and resources. The destruction of natural forests, for instance, is as frightful in South America and Asia as it is in Africa. So is the number of fauna species under threat, most alarmingly from the trade in bushmeat. And so, too, are the global effects of pollution, among others.

What makes it such a good time for Africa to be hosting the congress right now, though, is its own changing mood, as marked by the advent of the African Union, the energetic promotion by the likes of President Thabo Mbeki of the New Partnership for Africa's Development, and initiatives to stop its destructive conflicts.

Swathes of Africa's beautiful wildlife remain under threat from military marauders, from thoughtless commercial exploitation and from the destruction that goes with mass poverty. But as minds turn to ways of constructing a brighter future, so, surely, must its fabulous natural beauty enter the equation, as is indeed happening.

The continent boasts a remarkable two-million square kilometres of protected areas. And one of the most positive developments from the recent AU assembly in Maputo was the adoption of the revised African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, aimed at upgrading conservation standards.

The fifth World Parks Congress, promises to focus the international conservation spotlight on the continent. The potential benefits are legion.

Already a global trust fund is being mooted for assisting its conservation efforts. Technical assistance, too, can be expected. But what will count most in the end is the way it contributes to Africa's own spirit of revival and conservation.

Southern Africa will indeed be offering a ready example to congress delegates of the role environmental protection can play in socio-economic reconstruction generally. The extension and consolidation of protected areas, even across national boundaries, since the end of apartheid and the region's pre- and post-colonial conflicts have been truly phenomenal. It is heavily attributable to tourism being earmarked as a prime growth and job-creating industry. But it springs as much from simple care.

The people in the public and private sectors driving it hardest are environmentalists whose prime concern is to see precious remaining parts of nature preserved, for its own sake and for the enjoyment of future generations. On the other hand, the sub-continent offers as good a case study of the relentless pressures there are on protected areas.

With time and resources for putting more of our dwindling natural environment under legal protection already tight, much money and effort still has to be spent on just keeping existing protected areas safe.

Poaching, raids on vegetation and other forms of illegal intrusion remain a widespread problem.

Greed and criminality have their part, but sometimes it springs from more complex situations, such as when park demarcations and management clash with the traditional rights and practices of local communities. At the other end of the scale, conservationists have to be perpetually vigilant against developments in the name of ecotourism, for example, that could tip the delicate balance away from conservation and turn protected areas into nothing more than commercial undertakings. But worst of all remains the threat of mass poverty underpinned by ignorance about the purpose of parks. An estimated four million people, encompassing some of South Africa's poorest communities, live on the western side of the Kruger Park.

How safe could even the pride of SA's parks be if thoughts are entertained about its being the fancy of conservationists, or the playing field of the rich, or its proving that, to the privileged classes, animals and plants are more important than people?

Adding to the conundrum are the insensitivities of a previous political era that went into the creation of parks, and which have been rebounding as in the Mhinga case. Fortunately, with the wisdom of time and modern communication it has come to be realised, in SA as in many other parts of the world, just how important it is that protected areas exist in harmony with society. They cannot be safe unless surrounding communities get a practical sense of their benefits, in the same way that the global conservation drive cannot make headway unless broad society comes to appreciate and support protected areas better for their vital role as reservoirs of diversity, as the filters providing fresh air and water, and as places where people can reconnect with nature. It is what makes the fifth congress's theme of "benefits beyond boundaries" so entirely fitting.

There are now about 44 000 parks around the globe, together coming to about 10% of Earth's landmass.

They are the product of exhaustive battles going back deep into the 19th century, and are a tribute to the few whose foresight and commitment, in the face of much public indifference and often of political and commercial opposition and outright obstruction, produced this miracle.

It is an ongoing struggle, though. It is vital, for Earth's wellbeing and that of humankind, that vastly greater land areas be saved from destruction.

It is as vital that marine life becomes a similar priority for legal protection, for though the oceans constitute about two-thirds of Earth's surface, not even 1% are designated protected areas.

Such are the challenges that will be confronting the World Parks Congress in its efforts to chart the way ahead for protected areas.

Following last year's World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, which highlighted the deterioration of the natural environment, it presents a good opportunity for taking stock and for

setting a hopeful course for the future.

In a sense it can be as remarkable as the first congress held in Seattle in 1962 where, at a time when East and West were threatening each other with nuclear obliteration, environmentalists chose to talk about the global significance of protected areas.

That congress set the tone for its 1972 successor in the US's Yellowstone Park, where the emphasis was on establishing global standards for administering protected areas. The 1982 congress in Bali, Indonesia, underscored the need for broader understanding of the value of parks. The 1992 congress in Caracas, Venezuela, took the theme further by emphasising the importance of fitting in protected areas with local, regional and international planning. The Durban congress will undoubtedly come up with sound practical proposals regarding the declaration, financing and administration of protected areas. But its hallmark will come from the principles it sets for strengthening the relationship between parks and society. It means finding ways of making them meaningful for surrounding communities to cherish and protect. It also means finding ways of mustering more people behind the cause of conservation by convincing them of the true importance of protected areas for our wellbeing. The ideal is a global partnership of those who hold nature dear.