

**SPEECH Presented by SANParks CEO, Dr David Mabunda at the annual Kudu Awards  
Ceremony held in Skukuza, Kruger National Park on 28 November 2011**

**TRANSFORMATION OF NATIONAL PARKS CAN CREATE A BETTER SOUTH AFRICA**

It is approximately 139 years since the first national park in the world was established. The reasons for establishing national parks have evolved from protecting wildlands, and wildlife to protecting biological life forms, promoting socio-economic development and patriotism. Revolutionary changes similar to those that ushered in political changes from Julius Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon, the French Revolution and the Arab Spring Uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, are sweeping across the conservation sector. As we speak the world is gathered in Durban for COP 17 of the United Nations Framework on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to find solutions to a growing global warming problem which has increased temperatures to unsustainable levels. Thanks again to our own peaceful revolution in 1994 that today South Africa is part of the global village playing a leading role in global events such as COP 17 to secure a sustainable future for our planet. Change is inevitable.

Unfortunately environmental matters in the new South Africa are still steeped in the context of the previous racial stratification. Through a well crafted apartheid system environmental policies, practices, repressive management approaches and models of service-delivery succeeded in alienating Black people from enjoying access and benefits accruing from the country's natural capital, including wildlife viewing. This exclusion by design, of the majority of our population, has bred a deep-seated resentment and bitterness towards national parks and conservation in general and it will take another "long walk to freedom" to normalize the situation in future. National Parks were and still are perceived as a playground for the elite and changing this negative public image is like climbing a greasy pole on a hot summer day. However difficult as it may seem, change is inevitable

We must begin mobilising support for national parks from the broad mainstream of society – from the squatter camps of our townships, deep rural villages from Venda to the Transkei, to the leafy suburbs of our towns and cities. Public proprietorship or support for national parks in South Africa remain skewed in favour of those who enjoyed them previously. People living in townships and rural areas are still excluded (by financial means and attitudes) and attempts to bring these folks on board continue to be opposed by the same anti-transformation lobby. If national parks are to become a mirror of our society's environmental values and vigorous symbols along with the national flag, the national anthem, the coat of arms and the Union Buildings, then they ought to reflect the demographics of our new nation in all respects. The roar of the Kruger lion, the iconic view of Table Mountain, the night call of the jackal at Mokala, the ancient graves of the Balemba people on Mapungubwe Hill, the Nama *vastrap* of the Richtersveldt people, the red sand dunes of the Kgalagadi and the trumpet of the Addo elephant ought to evoke a love of our country for its intrinsic values and to define our patriotism.

It will be an unforgivable mistake if we were to accept the sickening tendency by a handful of 'old-school' conservationists appointing themselves as agents of positive societal change. They continue to campaign for the retention of past policies and privileges as they were over the last 100 years. That campaign will not succeed in a democratic society. As society changes we too must change. We have taken a long hard look at ourselves as new conservation leaders and practitioners and decided to reinvent our organization into a modern institution that is more adaptive and innovative. This is in order to better respond to the challenges we face in our Second Century of existence. Our Board has debated and eventually adopted a new vision and mission "to connect our national parks to society".

**[South African National Parks Connecting to Society]**

The new vision is an attempt to address the deep concern that we see playing itself out in the open where national parks in particular are becoming irrelevant to a society whose majority is disconnected from nature and history. We have a tall order to help all 50 million or so South Africans (including naturalised foreigners and the youth) to discover a personal connection to their national parks. It can only be the entire nation, not just those who understand biodiversity, which can make our parks come alive in our national psyche. All citizens will relate to and cherish national parks if given a chance to connect, through offering a diversity of products or by using available cutting-edge technology. If people cannot physically visit parks our outreach programmes should benefit them in their homes in ways that parks cannot. It has been said by those resisting change in form or thinking that products like hotels have no place in a national park environment. This is a point that fails to recognise that the tastes and profiles of our visitors are changing. A new society is being born. .

Our new vision derives its meaning from the provisions of the new Constitution which stipulates the existence of protected areas in the socio-economic and political context of South Africa. Section 24 (a)-(b) (ii) and (iii) says: "Everyone has a right to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures that (ii) promote conservation; and (iii) secure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources while promoting justifiable economic and social development". Quoting the relevant section in the Constitution exposes two very key points which must not be treated with triviality. The first one is that the government of South Africa in executing its mandate of protecting the environment is expected to benefit present and future generations by developing reasonable legislation and other measures, including practices and processes. Furthermore, the government is expected to promote conservation and ecologically sustainable development and resource use. There is nowhere in the Constitution that says there shall be no development done in national parks or that there are certain groups or individuals

who are not allowed to benefit from the existence of protected areas including national parks. Our parks must change to benefit all 50 million of our citizens. We therefore agree with our Minister (Edna Molewa) when she refers to national parks as “hubs of economic development in our society”. We must create more job and business opportunities for this region and the rest of the country through the conservation function. We must add meaningful value to society.

The work that we do is far more than keeping tourism facilities in a state of good repair, welcoming visitors to a wilderness experience, protecting the rhino from poachers, keeping the elephant population in check or making a government bureaucracy run smooth. Our work is at the very core of nation-building in post-apartheid South Africa. We should become a national institution that represents the love and commitment of all South Africans for their living heritage, as opposed to the love and commitment of a by-gone era purist ideology. The idea of a “safari in Africa” is an idea whose time has passed for it was crafted with the vision of a continent that is filled with exotic animals and what was then regarded as a sub-human species whose only existence was for the assistance of the supposedly civilized European visitors to navigate the “dark continent”. We were never consulted in its crafting and neither were we considered. Today we should help South Africans celebrate the best of themselves, their places, wildlife, stories and experiences that make us who we are.

By inviting all South Africans, instead of just some, to visit the parks we so proudly maintain on their behalf, we ensure that each new generation will be nourished by unique personal experiences that help them learn what it really means to be one with this place that we call our home and native land. We make their previously suppressed and ignored passion for wildlife a living experience. We take their yearning for understanding and learning and give it fulfilment. We provide them with spiritual healing and therapy to help them deal with the harsh realities of an emerging society that faces rampant crime, poverty and high unemployment. We make them understand that our country faces a challenging but not an impossible future. We give them South Africa in all her natural diversity and human complexity.

In recent months we travelled to the United States of America and Canada to visit a few of their national parks and learnt to our consternation how limited and archaic our views of visitor management are. This visit showed us how other countries have gone out to embrace the challenges of growing populations, intrinsic diversity and an increasingly demanding populace by creating products which cater to the differing needs and challenges from virtual experiences, to solitary camping in the wild and to the ultra-luxurious

accommodation in posh hotel establishments. Of course all of this did not come without its attendant challenges, which was one of the valuable lessons we learnt from the visit. In Canada it was very interesting to learn that they have a programme to introduce “new Canadians” to the national parks system of Canada by providing a suite of activities that will attract their interest and bring them closer to the national parks. Both countries were also insistent on the fact that National Parks are not Nature Parks; their role far exceeds that of the traditional practice of protecting nature without consideration of social and economic dynamics of society. They kept reminding us that their national parks are managed for the benefit and enjoyment of their citizens and not as exclusive pieces of land for the enjoyment of the “elite” and the preservation of stick in the mud conservation practices.

Our national parks face a daunting future underwritten by the effects of clinging on obsolete traditional conservation methods, climate change, air and water pollution, plundering of natural resources by poachers, declining state subsidies, historical infrastructure maintenance backlogs, accelerated rates of biodiversity loss and many other challenges. It cost R1,4 billion to run the affairs of SANParks and this figure is growing annually. To overcome these challenges we need futuristic ideas than personal biographies and the previous century’s ideological paradigms. . Perhaps the only thing we know for sure is that we must think and act in new ways. Solving these national challenges for our sector requires the collective intervention of all communities (sophisticated and traditional), government, educational institutions, business (the tourism industry) and organs of civil society to work differently – and work together. The state has other financial priorities and will not be channelling millions to conservation. We must adapt and be innovative. There is enough room to do so. We still manage 99% wilderness and all accommodation for general public access. We only commercialized the few 5 Star concession beds, shops and restaurants. Nothing more. Our Rangers are still doing traditional wildlife management, we have not outsourced this to “Robocop” or private security and we have no future plans to do so. Our development footprint for all national parks stands at a paltry 0,17% and the rest is as natural as it comes. We have no intention of overdeveloping or over-commercializing this heritage and national asset.

In this context we give you South African National Parks in its Second Century of existence in the best form ever. We urge all citizens to join us in creating a South Africa that works, a South Africa of people with diverse cultural and political persuasions connected to their national parks, to their stories and one another to make South Africa a better country than it is at the moment. Our national parks should inspire our natural faith, that through acts of conscious conservation stewardship and full public enjoyment, we begin to fulfil our profoundest duties to each other and the living world around us. Our national parks are not just ecological geographical landscapes or playgrounds for the elite but an important part of

our proudly South African existence. Each of our national parks is part of the country's collective soul and an inalienable component of our nation's promise to its future. Our transformation and product diversification programmes seek to achieve that future for the benefit of all citizens and live up to our new vision of "South African National Parks connecting to society".

As we celebrate the hosting of COP 17, tonight's winners of both the Chief Executive Officer's Award and the Kudu Awards we should be thinking of the meaning of these new words and how they affect us individually and as a proud family of the national parks of South Africa. Congratulations to everyone who will be ascending the podium tonight and may you continue to contribute to conservation in the country in a meaningful and significant way by helping each of us to discover our personal connection to this – our national heritage. .

Thank you.

*Dr David Mabunda is CEO of South Africa National Parks*