

Cultural heritage research in action

Text by Ndukuyakhe Ndlovu

IN ADDITION TO BIOLOGICAL HERITAGE, SANPARKS IS ACTIVE IN PROTECTING CULTURAL HERITAGE. THE PAST YEAR HAD MANY HIGHLIGHTS, LIKE THE ONGOING EXCAVATIONS AT LETABA, IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SANPARKS ELECTRONIC CULTURAL HERITAGE COLLECTIONS SYSTEM, RESTORATION OF STONEWALLS AT THE THULAMELA SITE, AND STARTING THE PROCESS TO DECLARE TWO SITES IN KRUGER AS NATIONAL HERITAGE SITES



A student (left) setting up the site before taking photographs of an area about to be excavated (below) on the Letaba River in the Kruger National Park where flooding threatens to wash away important Iron Age artifacts.

Progress on Letaba Iron Age excavations

Excavations at Letaba, Kruger National Park, have been ongoing since September 2021. The main aim of these specific excavations led by archaeologist Dr Xander Antonites (Department of Anthropology and Archaeology; University of Pretoria), is to safeguard through exploration and excavation, the archaeological record, which is under threat from erosion and runoff. Over the past year, various artefacts including large and small animal bones have been



excavated and safely curated. A successful media tour took place in 2022, generating considerable media attention and providing the project much-needed publicity. The project also aims to identify ways to safeguard archaeological records in situ, ensuring that they are preserved for future studies.



Several journalists during the Media Tour to the Letaba Iron Age excavations organised in 2022.

Restoration of Thulamela cultural heritage site, Kruger National Park

Heritage sites require ongoing conservation, maintenance and management. Thulamela is one of the better-known heritage sites open to visitors and is accessible in the presence of a trained archaeological guide. Minor restoration work, in collaboration with community members who have expertise in the restoration of dry-stone walls, took place over the past year to keep the integrity of the site intact. This was made possible by Norwegian-based funding.



A restored dry-stone wall at Thulamela, northern Kruger National Park.



Declaration of Masorini and Thulamela Iron Age sites, Kruger National Park

SANParks is in the process of requesting the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) to formally grade and declare two heritage sites in the Kruger National Park, namely the Masorini Iron Age site near Phalaborwa and the Thulamela Iron Age site near Pafuri. The application is in recognition of the sites' significance and to enhance overall appreciation of the rich cultural heritage in SANParks.



Dry-stone walling at Masorini, Kruger National Park.

Annual cultural assessment of sites within parks

On average, two park-based heritage assessments are conducted annually. Assessments and associated reports were completed for Augrabies Falls and Camdeboo National Parks.