



where rarity rules

Tucked away among the rich diamond fields of the Northern Cape, Mokala is the most recent addition to South Africa's collection of national parks. This sliver of semi-arid wilderness serves as a stronghold for some of the subregion's rarest and most threatened wildlife species – and indeed, says **Stephen Cunliffe**, has a rarity value of its own.

WHEN LAND CLAIMANTS SECURED control of a large section of Vaalbos National Park and announced that they intended to mine in it, South African National Parks (SANParks) immediately set about scouring the Northern Cape for a suitable chunk of pristine wilderness to replace the soon-to-be-deproclaimed sanctuary. Five potential locations were shortlisted before a game ranch known as Wintershoek, some 80 kilometres south-west of Kimberley, was selected. Deon Joubert, the manager of Mokala, explained the process. 'Two independent studies were conducted to look for an alternative locality,' he said. 'Both concluded that the Wintershoek area would make an ideal new site in terms of SANParks' biodiversity, conservation and tourism mandates.'

Given the name 'Mokala', from the Setswana word for the camelthorn trees that pepper the dry landscape, the new park was officially opened to the public on 19 June 2007. SANParks, however, had been managing the land for a year already and the massive challenge of translocating the animals from Vaalbos was well under way. Prompted by the arrival

of hundreds of herbivores to supplement the existing wildlife populations, SANParks looked to expand the newly protected area. Lilydale Farm, to the east, was purchased in 2008 and two years later, by acquiring Valsfontein Farm, the park authorities were able to link Mokala and Lilydale and thereby create a contiguous conservation area of 26 485 hectares.

For its comparatively small size, the new park boasts a surprisingly large diversity of habitats and is similar to Vaalbos in terms of its climate and vegetation types. Between 300 and 500 millimetres of rain fall each year, feeding a



STEPHEN CUNLIFFE (4)

ABOVE Named for its 'roan' (reddish brown) coloration, this striking antelope sports a distinctive 'clown' mask and both sexes carry horns that can be up to a metre long.

RIGHT The perennial Riet River flows past the recently refurbished chalets of the Lilydale restcamp in the east of Mokala National Park and provides opportunities for fishing and boating.



Large numbers of red hartebeest have been successfully relocated from Mokala to Namaqua National Park, 1 000 kilometres to the west.

perennial river on the north-eastern boundary. And the landscape, characterised by Kalahari thornveld, large tracts of open savanna and Nama Karoo terrain interspersed with isolated dolerite outcrops, is pristine and varied, giving the place an unexpectedly wild and secluded feel.

There's a network of well-maintained roads for independent exploration, but Mokala offers specialist guided game drives too, including ones focusing on endangered species, as well as night drives. There are also opportunities to visit culturally significant locations, such as rock-engraving sites and South African War battlefields, while the absence of large predators means that the park is ideal for walking, mountain biking and horseback safaris, all of which are to be introduced in the near future.

In order to really understand what Mokala is all about, I joined the head guide, Stephan Prins, on one of his regular outings. 'The park serves as a reservoir of rarity,' he began. 'It's a stronghold and prime breeding ground for a wide variety of endangered herbivores.' In fact, the conservation area has been given a mandate to protect and actively propagate threatened wildlife species. 'The aim is to build up stock so that the progeny can be used to repopulate other South African national parks and private game reserves,' he explained.

'Game-capture operations and wildlife translocations are the main management tools for controlling wildlife numbers and maintaining genetic diversity in a small enclosed park such as Mokala,' he continued. 'So from time to time we swap animals like rhinos with Kruger and other national parks to avoid inbreeding.' I also learned that Mokala's sable population was given a huge boost with the arrival of a herd from a Czech zoo as part

of the Back to Africa project, which helps to return rare captive-bred animals to their distant homelands to augment local gene pools (see *Africa – Environment & Wildlife*, the forerunner of *Africa Geographic*, March 2001).

Prins went on to explain that as well as translocating animals to maintain genetic diversity, Mokala auctions excess wildlife to generate revenue that can be ploughed back into the national park. These surplus animals are used to restock denuded parks and newly created conservation areas around the country. 'We auction about 50 disease-free buffaloes a year. Marakele National Park was the most recent beneficiary, receiving 11 individuals from us just last week,' he told me.

After a long rehabilitation process, Namaqua National Park recently began reintroducing indigenous game species and once again tiny Mokala came to the fore, providing red hartebeest and gemsbok. But its far-reaching impact on South African conservation does not end there; it has supplied eland to Golden Gate Highlands National Park and sold excess tsessebés to private game reserves nationwide.

When we came across a sizeable herd of impalas, Prins killed the engine. 'Impala, blesbok, waterbuck and nyala don't naturally occur in the semi-arid Northern Cape,' he pointed out. 'We refer to these non-indigenous species, which we inherited from the game-farm owners,



as extralimitals and we're systematically removing them from Mokala.' The black wildebeest is another contentious customer; it's highly debatable whether it would have occurred naturally in the area, but park authorities have opted to keep it as it fits in well with their ethos of providing a reservoir for rare and endangered species.

Mokala may not boast the Big Five, but it does provide an opportunity to view some of southern Africa's rarest animals. Tsessebe sightings are all but guaranteed, roan and sable viewing is consistently good, and with a little luck you may even encounter a black or white rhino.

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Mokala National Park has excellent accommodation facilities. For more information, go to sanparks.org.za/parks/mokala

RETURN OF THE QUAGGA

Bringing back an extinct 'species' seems like a near-impossible undertaking – quaggas, after all, were thought to have died out more than a century ago. But then the DNA analysis of museum specimens proved that the quagga exhibited minimal genetic variation from plains zebras and was no more than a colour variant or subspecies. Furthermore, plains zebras from South Africa were found to be more closely related to the quagga than to plains zebras from elsewhere in Africa. In fact, the species' black-and-white pattern becomes less distinct and more 'quagga-like' in the southern reaches of its range.

In the wake of these discoveries, the Quagga Project was initiated in 1987 with the long-term objective of trying to concentrate the diluted and dispersed quagga characteristics from plains zebras. Quaggas were distinguished by having black-and-white stripes mainly on their forequarters while their hindquarters were almost solid brown, so the project focused on selecting for breeding only zebras with reduced striping and darker background coloration. SANParks joined the initiative in June 2000, making Vaalbos – and later Mokala – a hub. Young zebras with heavy striping are removed before they reach sexual maturity to ensure that only those with the desired quagga-like traits are kept in the Mokala gene pool. Interestingly, although these animals exhibit reduced striping towards the hindquarters and on the legs, they have a distinctive pale – rather than brown – rump. This aberration has led to the Mokala plains zebra (left) being dubbed the 'witgat zebra'.