“iSimangaliso must be the only place on the globe where the oldest land mammal (the rhinoceros) and the world’s biggest terrestrial mammal (the elephant) share an ecosystem with the world’s oldest fish (the coelacanth) and the world’s biggest marine mammal (the whale)”

– President Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, 2001
Overview of the Park

The iSimangaliso Wetland Park was established in November 2000. From Kosi Bay in the north, bordering Mozambique, to Maphelane, south of St Lucia, iSimangaliso is South Africa’s second largest protected area, covering 332 000 hectares. The Park includes many different areas; the eastern shores and Cape Vidal, Lake St Lucia (the biggest estuary in Africa), the western shores and Charter’s Creek, False Bay, Sodwana Bay (voted one of the top ten reefs to dive in the world), Lake Sibaya and the Coastal Forest. Together with Kosi Bay (high numbers of nesting leatherback and loggerhead turtles), Maphelane and uMkhuzu, these areas are the Ten Jewels of iSimangaliso.

The iSimangaliso Authority was established in 2000 to manage the Park. The Authority contracts Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife to undertake day-to-day conservation in the Park.

iSimangaliso is one of the greatest environmental treasures in the world. The beauty and biological wealth of iSimangaliso was recognised by the world in 1999, and the Park became South Africa’s first World Heritage Site. The Park is home to the Big Five (lion, rhino, leopard, elephant and buffalo) and many other animals, including five species of turtles, 1 258 fish species and 526 bird species.

The park is an amazing place. iSimangaliso has 50% of South Africa’s bird species and 25% of all the bird species in Africa. There are 110 species of butterflies on the eastern shores of Lake St Lucia alone. No other place on earth has such a wide range of wetland types in a single protected area. It has three major lake systems – Kosi Bay, Lake Sibaya and Lake St Lucia, and 25 000-year-old forested dunes that are among the highest dunes in the world. The deep underwater canyons in the ocean are home to coelacanths, and leatherback and loggerhead turtles return every year to lay their eggs on iSimangaliso’s unspoilt beaches.

WHAT IS AN ESTUARY?

An estuary contains both freshwater and salt water, and is connected temporarily or permanently to the sea.

iSimangaliso uBhejane wami, Ikusasa lethu sonke
iSimangaliso Land Claims

When the Apartheid government was in power, it forcibly removed hundreds of thousands of men and women from their land. After the first democratic election in 1994, Regional Land Claims Commissions were established in every province of the country. Those who had been removed from their land were invited to lodge claims for restitution (to reclaim their land). The people of iSimangaliso lodged fourteen land claims that covered the entire Park. By 2011, nine of the fourteen land claims on iSimangaliso, covering 75% of the land area of the Park, had been settled.

Trustees from Land Claims Committees have entered into Co-management Agreements with the iSimangaliso Authority. Landowners may not live or farm in the Park but they have the right to enter the Park without charge, access significant burial sites, and harvest certain natural resources. Trusts benefit from development sites in the Park, and are paid 8% of the commercial revenue generated on their land in the Park. A land claim trustee and an Inkosi serve on the Board that governs the Park.
Development in iSimangaliso

The iSimangaliso Authority’s mission is to protect and conserve the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, its World Heritage status and cultural values for current and future generations. It aims to deliver benefits to the communities that surround the Park by growing tourism that provides jobs in the area.

iSimangaliso represents a new model for Protected Area development and management in southern Africa. The Authority understands that it is impossible to conserve the natural environment without putting the needs of the people who live in that environment at the centre of the conservation strategy. This is why iSimangaliso protects World Heritage values through development programmes, and works hard to make sure that as many community members as possible have access to income generation and job opportunities, as well as free training and capacity building. The land care programme provides jobs to local communities to clear alien plants such as guava, chromolaena, and lantana, which do not occur naturally in South Africa, kill other plants and use precious water. More than half of the thousands of people who have worked on the land care programme in iSimangaliso are women.

The Authority also offers skills development programmes. The Authority has helped local people to take up jobs in the local tourism industry by training them in hospitality and tour guiding. The Authority also supports local businesses by providing entrepreneurs with training and buying equipment and materials to grow their businesses. The construction and maintenance of fences, roads, field ranger camps, picnic sites, park furniture, hides, public toilets and viewpoints make an important contribution to local livelihoods by providing opportunities for community-based contractors to
supply these services and create local jobs.

The Authority also focuses on developing youth and works with many schools on the Environmental Education and School Awards programme. Every year, iSimangaliso hosts schools on day trips to the Park and runs environmentally themed competitions for learners from the local primary and high schools.

The iSimangaliso Higher Education Access Programme has supported 67 young people to get their degrees and diplomas at universities and technical colleges. This programme won the Mail&Guardian’s Greening the Future Award in 2014. We hope that iSimangaliso's managers will, in the future, be drawn from the ranks of land claimant communities and Park neighbours. This year (2015), some of these young graduates are working as interns within the iSimangaliso Authority.

The iSimangaliso Authority has reintroduced many animal species that were hunted out of the iSimangaliso area a century ago. Between 2001 and 2014, mammals from 20 different species were introduced into the Park, including elephant, giraffe, lion, buffalo, white and black rhino, wild dogs and cheetah. The reintroduction of game draws many tourists to the Park, which in turn increases the money available for community benefits.
iSimangaliso’s Ecosystems and Animals

iSimangaliso’s five major ecosystems are:

• **The marine ecosystem**, characterised by a warm sea, through which Humpback and Southern Right whales migrate between July and December; the southernmost extension of coral reefs in Africa; underwater canyons (where coelacanths live) and long sandy beaches (where turtles lay their eggs);

• **The coastal dune system**, where dunes can reach a height of 180m; sub-tropical forests; grassy plains and wetlands (this is where rhinos live);

• **Lake systems**, consisting of two estuarine-linked lakes (St Lucia and Kosi) and four large freshwater lakes;

• **The Mkuze and Mfolozi swamps**, with swamp forest, extensive reed and papyrus wetlands; and

• **The inland western shores**, with ancient shoreline terraces and dry savannah woodland (this is where elephant and rhino live).

Rhino

iSimangaliso contains both black and white rhino. There is no real difference in colour between the two species. The first Dutch settlers named the white rhino the ‘Weid-mond rhino’, meaning ‘Wide-mouth rhino’, because the mouth of the white rhino is broad and flat, adapted for grazing on grasslands, while the mouth of the black rhino is distinctly hooked and beak-shaped, and adapted to feeding on shrubs and trees in the thick vegetation the black rhino prefers. In English, the word ‘weid’ was repeated as ‘white’.

The black or hook-lipped rhino is a shy and solitary animal with very poor eyesight but with exceptional hearing and smell.

A black rhino will react to a smell even when it is asleep. It will investigate any noise or strange smell at once, which makes it seem aggressive. Black rhino communicate with each other using sounds that human ears can’t pick up.

Black rhino are much smaller than white rhino. A large black rhino weighs about 1 000kg, while a large white rhino can weigh 2 500kg. White rhino are quite different from black rhino. They are more sociable and less likely to
charge. Like the black rhino, their sight is very poor, though their hearing and sense of smell is very sharp. Rhinos drop their dung in one chosen spot (called a midden) that accumulates into large piles.

Although large and bulky animals, both white and black rhino can easily outpace humans and can reach speeds of up to 40km/h over short distances. There are fewer black rhino than white rhino in South Africa, and they are more endangered as a species.

Africa’s savannas once teemed with more than a million white and black rhinos. By the late 19th century, relentless hunting by European hunters had brought the rhino to the brink of extinction. Farming and the growth of towns and population meant that there was less space (or habitat) for rhinos. Responding to the crisis, both species of African rhino were given international legal protection, but by 1980, poaching and habitat destruction had reduced black rhino numbers to around 14 000. In 1991, the population stood at just 3 450 and then plummeted in 1995 to an all-time low of some 2 400 in the African wild. The conservation agencies of South Africa, Namibia, Kenya, and Zimbabwe – the countries that harbour most of Africa’s rhinos – got together in 1997 and managed to halt the animal’s decline. Numbers slowly started to rise. In 2015, the black rhino population of KwaZulu-Natal is thought to be about 500 individuals.

Some sections of the Park, such as uMkhuze, have successfully retained their original rhino population. Others, such as Ozabeni, have been without rhino for over a century. Seventeen black rhino were re-introduced to the eastern shores of iSimangaliso between 1984 and 1987, and ten black rhino were re-introduced to the western shores in 2003.

In 2015, the greatest threat to the rhino is the growing demand for rhino horn in Asian countries such as Vietnam. Although it has NO scientific medical benefits, rhino horn is being used in these countries to treat a wide range of conditions, including cancer and HIV. Because it is so valuable, the illegal trade in rhino horn has attracted the involvement of ruthless criminal syndicates who use high-tech equipment to track down and kill rhinos. During 2014, in South Africa alone poachers killed 1 215 rhinos – more than three a day. So far, in the first four months of 2015, 393 rhinos have been killed for their horns.
Coelacanths

The Coelacanth is a primitive bony fish thought to have gone extinct over 70 million years ago – until a fishing trawler captured a single specimen off East London in 1938. On 27 November 2000, coelacanths were first discovered in the iSimangaliso Wetland Park by three divers in Jesser canyon off Sodwana Bay, at a depth of 107 metres. These divers were the first to see a live coelacanth in its natural habitat.

The coelacanth is considered to be a living fossil. Adults are large, reaching two metres, (female coelacanths grow larger than males) and may weigh up to 98 kilogrammes. The word coel-a-canth means ‘hollow spine’. Coelacanths have a notochord instead of a backbone. Most of the skeleton is made of cartilage (like sharks). Each coelacanth has a unique, distinctive pattern of white spots on each side of its dark slate-coloured body. Recent research has recorded 21 individual coelacanths in the Park. Coelacanths are legally protected from capture, disturbance and trade, and access to potential coelacanth habitats in iSimangaliso Wetland Park are closed to the general public.

Scientists know very little about the breeding habits of South Africa’s most famous fish. A juvenile coelacanth has never been seen in the wild. All the coelacanths seen in the Park to date appear to be adults. Coelacanths are reported to grow slowly, mature late in life and have extended pregnancies. They are thought to start breeding at about 16 years of age, give birth to live young called ‘pups’, and to live for about 50 years. Scientists believe that coelacanths are pregnant for three years. If true, this is one of the longest gestation periods for a vertebrate animal.

Elephants

By the 1890s, almost all the elephants in South Africa had been shot by commercial hunters. Apart from the 100 or so in the Lowveld, where the Kruger Park was eventually established in 1926, only three other small groups were left of the great South African herds. By 1920, there were thought to be only 120 elephants in these four populations. By the end of the 20th century, however, the elephant population in South Africa had grown substantially. By 2006, South Africa’s elephant
population had reached a total of 17 487 animals. This great conservation victory was achieved by moving surplus elephants from the Kruger National Park into new protected areas during the course of the twentieth century.

An adult elephant can weigh more than 1 000kg. Elephants are a ‘keystone species’ – while elephant impact is most often good for the environment, their huge requirement for food (they eat trees) makes a significant impact on both plant and animal communities. Managing elephant populations sustainably in limited protected areas is the new challenge.

Elephants live in groups led by an older female elephant called a matriarch. Young bulls leave the family unit when they are adolescents and wander alone or with other young bulls, returning occasionally to the mother herd. Female (cow) elephants will not hesitate to charge if they are disturbed, especially when they have small calves. Although elephants have poor eyesight, they have excellent hearing and a good sense of smell. Cows will often charge on scent alone.

iSimangaliso’s first attempt in 2001 to bring elephants back to the park was not a success. The elephants chosen were part of a young, unstructured group orphaned by a cull in the Kruger Park that had been moved to the Hluhluwe-imfolozi Park. The move to iSimangaliso was the second time these elephants had been moved. For these young and inexperienced females (there were no older matriarchs present to undertake leadership roles), this was extremely stressful. As a result, the Authority decided that elephants should not be relocated more than once in their lifetime, particularly if they were orphans. Also, elephants would only be moved in intact family units. In 2002 and 2003, the iSimangaliso Authority decided to reintroduce small family groups of elephants to the Park from the Kruger National Park. This time, each group had a matriarch. A few large bulls were also introduced from time to time. These elephants initially chose to remain on the eastern shores but soon made their way to the western shores, where they spend most of their time. No problems were experienced with any of these translocations.
Whales

Every year, Humpback whales migrate about 25 000 kilometres from their icy feeding grounds off Antarctica at the South Pole to warmer climates to breed and have young. Humpbacks reach South Africa in June, and have often been spotted at the Cape Vidal and Coastal Forest section of iSimangaliso Wetland Park. Female humpbacks are slightly larger than males. A humpback whale can weigh up to 36 000 kilogrammes and can grow up to 16 metres long. The heart of a humpback whale weighs about 195 kilogrammes – about as much as three average human beings.

Like other large whales, the Humpback was and is a target for the whaling industry. Once hunted to the brink of extinction, its population dropped by an estimated 90% before the world community put a stop to the hunting of Humpback whales in 1966. Today, we have about 80 000 humpback whales. While populations have partially recovered, these whales are now vulnerable to collisions with ships, getting caught in fishing nets and lines, and noise pollution from sonars and underwater blasting, which can lead to fractures in their ears and death. The protected coastal waters of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park provide a safe place for Humpback whales to continue their migration journey.

Humpbacks are known for their water acrobatics. They often breach the surface (jump high out of the water) and also slap the water with their tail or fins. These displays are popular with tourists in iSimangaliso. Humpback whales are carnivores. They feed on krill (tiny crustaceans), plankton and small fish. Humpbacks eat twice a day and will consume about 2 000-2 500 kilogrammes of food each day.

Humpbacks have been recorded singing long complex songs that humans hear as squeaking and grunting. Scientists do not fully understand why these whales sing and have suggested that the songs are useful for mating and locating food.
The iSimangaliso conservation awareness programme

iSimangaliso
My Rhino, Our Future
uBhejane wami, Ikusasa lethu sonke

is partnered with the following organisations: