

## **Important Bird Area No. SA001 is at risk!**

The right to mine South Africa's top archaeological site at Mapungubwe, which would also endanger three rivers and threaten an Important Bird Area, is to be fought "tooth and nail" by BirdLife South Africa.

The country's respected bird conservation organization will join other NGOs to stop the mining of "this incredibly important heritage site" BirdLife's Executive Director Mark Anderson said today.

"Frankly I don't know what the Minister was thinking in granting rights to devastate this hugely important ecological, historical and archaeological place. We will certainly fight the Department of Mineral Resources (DMR) tooth and nail over the recent approval of a new order mining right to Australian-based CoAL of Africa for the Vele coking coal project," Anderson said.

Surprisingly, another Minister, Buyelwa Sonjica – charged with environmental affairs – has also opposed the mining rights.

The mining area is situated in the buffer zone of the Greater Mapungubwe Transfrontier Conservation Area which spans three countries, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana. This conservation area includes the Mapungubwe National Park, Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape, Mapungubwe World Heritage Site and an Important Bird Area.

Mapungubwe is the site where the famous gold rhino statuette was discovered. The area supports other archaeological treasures, many of which would be destroyed by the mining operation.

BirdLife South Africa and other environmental NGOs reject the approval of the new order mining right, especially taking into account the area's immense cultural- and natural-history value.

## **BirdLife South Africa Joins the Fight to Save Mapungubwe**

Written by BLSA Press Release  
Sunday, 02 May 2010 00:33

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The NGO coalition can prove that the correct environmental management processes were not followed. CoAL of Africa is planning to develop its Vele Project in two phases. Phase 1 is aimed at "delivering an estimated 1 million saleable tonnes of coking coal per annum" and Phase 2 is "planned to deliver 5 million tonnes per annum".

According to BirdLife South Africa's Carolyn Ah Shene Verdoorn "BirdLife South Africa has joined forces with several other non-governmental organizations to formally oppose this mine and the coalition is preparing to approach the courts for relief". "It is inconceivable that the Department of Mineral Resources (DMR) can sign off on such a harmful and totally unsustainable activity in an area which has such an important natural and cultural heritage", she added.

The DMR's decision flies in the face of the objection lodged by the Department of Water & Environmental Affairs against the mining application.

Ah Shene said "This is a prime example of how unbalanced the government is when the development agenda competes with the environment agenda. This takes place elsewhere in Africa, where international mining companies are allowed to step in and destroy our continent's heritage, in order to line their foreign pockets.

Along the way, they promise medium-term job opportunities, while destroying existing long-term, sustainable livelihoods."

Coal mining will not only destroy the integrity of the areas' natural environment, but also impact severely on the scarce water resources of the region, cause harmful acid drainage and result in air pollution. This will affect not only Mapungubwe's biodiversity, but also the sustainable ecotourism that is now a viable economic activity providing jobs.

Eco- and cultural-tourism in the Mapungubwe area would be negatively affected by blasting, noise, and permanent lighting.

According to Daniel Marnewick, Manager of BirdLife South Africa's Important Bird Area

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programme, "Vhembe Nature Reserve, SA001 (the IBA listed first in *The Important Bird Areas of southern Africa* directory) was identified as an IBA using internationally-determined criteria. IBA SA001 supports a large number of globally- and nationally-threatened and range-restricted bird species, including the White-backed Night-heron, Tawny Eagle and Southern Ground-hornbill.

Anderson said the mining right will have a detrimental effect on this Important Bird Area. "Mining activities would crash the populations of these birds, and the reserve could lose its international IBA status," Anderson said

A recent study, commissioned by BirdLife South Africa, has shown that 470 species of birds -- more than half the number found in southern Africa -- have been recorded in the Greater Mapungubwe Transfrontier Conservation

Area. The study by bird experts Joe Grosel and Prof. Derek Engelbrecht showed that in terms of bird diversity Mapungubwe compares favourably with the much larger Kruger National Park.

The large diversity of birds is attributable to the Mapungubwe Transfrontier Conservation Area's position at the interface of the dry western and moister eastern regions of southern Africa. An estimated 300 resident and 30 migratory bird species breed in the area, and the numbers are bolstered during the summer months by an additional 60 non-breeding migratory birds.

The Mapungubwe area also supports no fewer than 42 threatened bird species which are listed in the South African Red Data Book, 20 of which are associated with wetland habitats. With the predicted reduction in the

area's surface water and the likely impact on important riparian vegetation impacts, a number of these Red Data Bird Species (such as Pel's Fishing-owl and Saddle-billed Stork) will be negatively affected.

Should the mining development go ahead, one of South Africa's cultural and natural treasure troves will be lost forever.