



An Investigation Into The Status Of South Africa's Provincial Reserves



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FOUNDATION**
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About Us

The EMS Foundation (EMSF) is a South African social justice NGO, registered as a Non-Profit and nonprofit and Public Benefit Organisation. The EMSF's key purpose is to alleviate and end suffering, raise public awareness, empower, provide dignity and promote the interests of vulnerable groups, including wild life. It supports the five interrelated principles of social justice, namely: equity, access, diversity, participation and rights.

The EMSF is cognisant of the entanglements of oppression and is committed to the promotion of inclusive justice, showing compassion across species and working to build a better future for all through campaigns, research, analysis, advocacy and holding government to account.

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1. Executive Summary

South Africa's Provincial Nature Reserves are essential for biodiversity conservation and rural economic development.¹ South Africa is the most biologically diverse country in Africa, home to approximately 87,401 species, including:

- **7% of the world's plant species**
- **7% of bird species**
- **5% of mammal species**
- **4% of reptile species**

Endemism rates are particularly high, reaching:

- **67% for plants**
- **50% for amphibians and reptiles**
- **49% for freshwater fishes**
- **Over 50% for many invertebrate groups**²

Despite their ecological importance, provincial reserves are facing a severe and widespread crisis. A 2018 Performance and Expenditure Review reported that municipal and provincial reserves spanned over three million hectares across 427 protected areas, representing 8% of the total conservation estate.³ However, a 2023 report by the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) and Wildlife & Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA) found systemic mismanagement, budget cuts, and infrastructure collapse.⁴

To build on these findings, the EMS Foundation conducted an extensive in-field investigation from 13 February to 10 June 2025, visiting 53 provincial nature reserves across all nine provinces. The results were alarming—revealing that the actual condition of many reserves is significantly worse than previously reported.

Key Findings

- **Severe underfunding** and lack of resources in all reserves visited.
- **Infrastructure decay**, including derelict roads, collapsed accommodation, failed utilities, and inaccessible entrances.
- **Lack of government support** at both provincial and national levels.
- **Closure of multiple provincial reserves** to the public, some for several years.
- **Fencing failures**, road degradation, and absence from digital mapping platforms hinder tourism potential.
- **Non-existent or dysfunctional booking services** further limit access.
- Several reserves function as **"paper parks"**—they are listed officially but are not operational. One reserve (Spitskop) has been decommissioned.
- **Land invasions** for grazing and agriculture; increased **pressure from mining and urban encroachment**.
- **Unresolved land claims and community disputes** have led to vandalism and abandonment of key infrastructure.
- **Invasive species**, such as black wattle, prickly pear, and Port Jackson wattle, are spreading unchecked.
- Poaching and snaring are escalating due to reduced anti-poaching staff and economic stress post the Covid pandemic.
- **Staff discontent** over delayed salaries, lack of equipment, and poor working conditions. In provinces like **North West, Limpopo, and Mpumalanga**, strikes are frequent.
- **Declining staff expertise**, with many positions left unfilled.
- In some provinces, reserves are primarily used for **trophy hunting** and **commercial game breeding**, shutting out eco-tourists.
 - During hunting season (May–September), reserves are closed to the public.
 - Reports indicate wildlife becomes skittish or disappears due to repeated hunting.
 - In 2024 alone, thousands of animals were authorised for commercial hunting.

1 Cloete, B. et al (2018) *Provincial Nature Reserves* GTAC <https://www.gtac.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Nature-Reserves-Technical-Report.pdf> (Last accessed: 04/06/2025)

2 SANBI (2019) *National Biodiversity Assessment. The Status of South Africa's Biodiversity and Ecosystems Synthesis Report*. Pages 1–214. South African National Biodiversity Institute, and entity of the Department of Environment, Fisheries and Forestry, Pretoria.

3 Cloete, B. et al (2018) *Provincial Nature Reserves* GTAC <https://www.gtac.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Nature-Reserves-Technical-Report.pdf> (Last accessed: 04/06/2025)

4 Patel, T. et al (2023) *The State of Provincial Reserves in South Africa, Challenges and Recommendations*

- Some reserves (notably around dams) rely heavily on fishing permits for revenue.
- **Stocking of exotic species**, such as fallow deer, negatively impacts ecological balance.

Only three of the 53 reserves assessed were found to be functioning as intended. The majority are under extreme pressure with some existing in name only. The consequences are far-reaching:

- **Biodiversity loss is accelerating**
- **Tourism revenue is virtually non-existent.**
- **Governmental mandates for protected areas are not being fulfilled.**

This failure undermines South Africa's commitment to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which aims to conserve 30% of land and water ecosystems by 2030. Despite the National Biodiversity Economy Strategy calling for an expansion of conservation land from 20 million to 34 million hectares, the current reality paints a bleak picture. Today, only 9.2% of South Africa's land is protected—and even that is shrinking.

Without urgent, coordinated intervention and reform, South Africa's conservation targets will not be met. Provincial reserves—intended to be a cornerstone of ecological preservation and sustainable development—are instead becoming symbols of systemic neglect.



Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Game Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal

2. Methodology

This study employed an in-field investigative approach to both validate the findings of the EWT/WESSA (2023) report and address potential knowledge gaps arising from its desktop-based methodology.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 53 provincial nature reserves across all nine provinces of South Africa, ensuring representation across varying geographic regions, topographical features, and ecological zones. Fieldwork involved systematic site assessments evaluating infrastructure (e.g., fencing, roads, accommodation), biodiversity integrity, and reserve accessibility (including road access, signage, and booking systems).

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured, in-person interviews with a broad spectrum of reserve personnel, including reserve managers, anti-poaching units, rangers, receptionists, booking agents, maintenance staff and surrounding community members. These interviews aimed to capture operational realities, resource constraints, and perceptions of management efficacy across the sampled reserves.



Modjadji Nature Reserve, Limpopo



Assegaaibosch Nature Reserve, Western Cap



Modjadji Nature Reserve, Limpopo

3. Background

Protected Areas (PAs) are designated regions—such as national parks, wildlife reserves, and marine sanctuaries—set aside to conserve nature and biodiversity. By conserving the Earth’s natural systems, Protected Areas are fundamental to ensuring a healthy and resilient planet—for current and future generations.

In South Africa, PAs are national assets that serve as nodes in South Africa’s ecological infrastructure network, protecting ecosystems that deliver important services to people, such as food production, clean water, medicine, flood attenuation, erosion prevention, and the aesthetic value of landscapes. They provide a home for the country’s most iconic species and recreational spaces for South Africans and global visitors. PAs can also play an important role in the development of rural economies.

Across South Africa, PAs cover more than 9% of the country’s mainland and fall into different management categories such as national parks, state forests, private nature reserves, and provincial and municipal reserves. Provincial and municipal reserves are the responsibility of provincial management authorities. According to the 2018 *Performance and Expenditure Review on Provincial Reserves*, municipal and provincial reserves cover just over three million hectares across 427 individual PAs in South Africa; or 8% of the conservation estate.⁵

1. International Participation

South Africa is a signatory to several international conventions and Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) concerning establishing and managing PAs. Examples of the key conventions and MEAs that require South Africa to establish and maintain PAs include the Convention of Biological Biodiversity (CBD), World Heritage Convention and the Ramsar Convention.

South Africa is signatory to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). The goal of the GBF is that by 2030, ensure that at least 30% of the world’s lands, inland waters, coastal areas, and oceans are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs). This is the global ambition to protect 30% of the planet by 2030 to halt biodiversity loss. Conservation efforts should include a wide variety of ecosystems (e.g., forests, grasslands, wetlands, coral reefs). Areas must be managed well, with adequate resources, governance, and enforcement. Finally, indigenous peoples and local communities must be involved in decision-making and benefit-sharing.

The importance of the GBF is to halt biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation, strengthen nature’s ability to provide essential services to people, support

climate change mitigation and adaptation and recognise the role of indigenous and local stewardship in conservation.

2. National Legislation

Nationally, South African statute law governing protected areas is primarily rooted in the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act 57 of 2003 (NEM:PAA). This Act provides the legal framework for the establishment, management, and protection of protected areas in South Africa. Key aspects include:

- **Public Trust Doctrine:** Section 24 of the Constitution establishes the “Environmental Right,” which mandates the protection of the environment for the benefit of present and future generations. This principle is embedded in NEM:PAA, requiring the state to act as a trustee of Protected Areas and manage them in partnership with the people.
- **Purpose of Protected Areas:** The preamble of NEM:PAA states that protected areas are established to conserve ecologically viable areas representative of South Africa’s biodiversity, natural landscapes, and seascapes. Section 17 further defines 11 specific purposes for which a protected area may be established.
- **Management Plans:** Protected Areas must be managed according to approved management plans that align with the objectives of NEM:PAA and the purpose of their declaration. The responsible Minister or Member of the Executive Council (MEC) must ensure these plans are implemented effectively.
- **State Obligations:** The state has a legal obligation to safeguard the integrity of Protected Areas from harm and ensure their value is maintained over time. This includes remediating harm or compensating for losses in value or integrity.
- **Integration with Biodiversity Act:** NEM:PAA works in conjunction with the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act 10 of 2004 (NEM:BA), which focuses on the conservation of South Africa’s biodiversity.

These laws collectively aim to ensure the effective management and conservation of South Africa’s rich biodiversity and natural heritage.

3. The Importance of Provincial Reserves

Provincial reserves in South Africa play a critical role in the country’s conservation network and biodiversity strategy. Their importance lies in the following key areas:

5 Cloete, B. et al (2018) *Provincial Nature Reserves* GTAC <https://www.gtac.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Nature-Reserves-Technical-Report.pdf> (Last accessed: 04/06/2025)

- **Biodiversity Conservation:** Provincial reserves are set up to protect regionally unique ecosystems and species that may not be found in national parks. South Africa is a biodiversity hotspot, and provincial reserves are intended to help conserve endangered flora and fauna at a more localised scale.
- **Ecological Connectivity:** They should, where possible, contribute to ecological corridors and landscape-level conservation by connecting protected areas across provinces, enabling species migration and ecosystem resilience—especially important under climate change.
- **Cultural and Heritage Value:** Many provincial reserves are home to important archaeological, historical, and cultural sites. They are intended to preserve indigenous and local heritage and provide spaces for community education and cultural practices.
- **Economic Benefits and Ecotourism:** Provincial reserves purportedly support local economies through tourism, job creation, and related industries. They are meant to attract domestic and international visitors, promoting regional development while supporting conservation funding.

- **Local Governance and Participation:** Managed by provincial conservation authorities (like CapeNature or Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife), these reserves are supposed to enable more localised management strategies, often with greater community involvement and responsiveness to regional needs.

In short, provincial reserves are vital for balancing conservation goals with socio-economic development, ensuring that nature is protected not only at the national but also the grassroots level.

4. Management of Provincial Reserves

Provincial and municipal nature reserves are managed by two distinct institutional models implemented by the nine provinces in South Africa. Gauteng, Free State, Northern Cape, and Limpopo have instituted an internal model. These provinces have designated a directorate within the department responsible for environmental affairs as the management authority. The remaining provinces have opted for an external model in which a Schedule 3C state-owned entity, as per the Public Financial Management Act (PFMA), acts as the management authority. These include entities such as CapeNature in the Western Cape and Ezemvelo-KZN Wildlife in Kwa-Zulu Natal.



Riverlands Nature Reserve, Western Cape



Mkambati Nature Reserve, Eastern Cape

5. The EWT/WESSA Report (2023)

This document is a report that assessed the state of provincial nature reserves in South Africa in 2023, using the Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool – South Africa (METT-SA), which is designed to assess how well the provincial reserves are performing without physical assessments of those reserves. The report was also based on online surveys and online interviews. In brief, it concluded that “many nature reserves are not effectively managed” and “are unable to fulfil their conservation mandate.”⁶

5.1. The State of Provincial Reserves in South Africa

The study assessed the management effectiveness of provincial nature reserves in South Africa, highlighting challenges and providing recommendations for improvement. It emphasised the importance of skilled management and adequate resources for conservation success. Findings were:

- Many provincial reserves are not effectively managed, with low METT scores indicating poor management.
- Infrastructure issues, such as dilapidated facilities and poor road maintenance, reflect the state of management.
- Despite challenges, poorly managed reserves still have potential for eco-tourism.

5.2. Key Challenges Affecting Management Effectiveness

The report identified significant challenges that hinder the effective management of provincial reserves, primarily related to capacity and resources. Addressing these challenges is crucial for improving conservation outcomes.

- Top challenges include capacity issues, poor management skills, and insufficient budgets.
- Expert insights reveal a consensus on the urgent need for skilled personnel and better funding.
- Many reserves require immediate support and attention to enhance management effectiveness.

5.3. Recommendations for Improving Management

The report outlined key recommendations aimed at enhancing the management effectiveness of provincial reserves. These strategies focus on staffing, infrastructure, and partnerships as well as:

- Prioritise reserves with low METT scores for management improvement initiatives.
- Recruit qualified and experienced managers to enhance operational capacity.
- Urgent refurbishment of infrastructure is necessary to unlock tourism potential.
- Explore partnerships with private sectors, NGOs, and local communities for co-management and funding opportunities.



Fort Fordyce Nature Reserve, Eastern Cape



Modjadji Nature Reserve, Limpopo

⁶ Patel, T. et al (2023) *The State of Provincial Reserves in South Africa, Challenges and Recommendations*

4. State Of Provincial Reserves

Following the release of the EWT/WESSA document, the EMS Foundation conducted a comprehensive in-field investigation from 13 February to 10 June 2025, covering 53 provincial nature reserves across all nine provinces of South Africa. The objective was to assess the actual condition of South Africa's provincial reserves.

The reserves investigated include:

Eastern Cape (10 PRs): *Commando Drift, Dwesa-Cwebe, Fort Fordyce, Great Fish, Mkambati, Mpofu, Oviston, Silaka, Thomas Baines, Tsolwana*

Free State (5 PRs): *Gariep, Sandveld, Soetdoring, Tussen-die-Riviere, Willem Pretorius*

Gauteng (1 PR): *Leeufontein*

KwaZulu-Natal (5 PRs): *Hluhluwe-Imfolozi, Ithala, Mkhuze, Ndumo, Pongola*

Limpopo (6 PRs): *Hans Merensky, Lekgalameetsi, Letaba Ranch, Makuya, Ma'nombe, Modjadji.*

Mpumalanga (4 PRs): *Andover, Barberton, Mthethomusha, Songimvelo*

Northern Cape (6 PRs): *Akkerendam, Goegap, Nababiep, Oorlogskloof, Spitskop, Witsand*

North West (8 PRs): *Bloemhof Dam, Borakalalo, Boskop Dam, Botsalano, Madikwe, Mafikeng, Molopo, S.A. Lombard*

Western Cape (8 PRs): *Anysberg, Assegaibosch, De Hoop, De Mond, Kogelberg, Riverlands, Stony Point, Walker Bay.*

Following are short assessments of each reserve by province in terms of their status, infrastructure, wildlife, management and accessibility. The short assessments are entwined by more detailed assessments of a select sample of provincial reserves.

4.1. Eastern Cape Province



Mpofu Nature Reserve, Eastern Cape

The Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency (ECPTA) is a government agency based in East London. Established under the Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency Act (2010, updated by a 2024 Act), it operates under the Economic Development, Environmental Affairs & Tourism provincial department.⁷

Findings in this assessment show that ECPTA faces challenges ranging from recurrent salary payment delays, management and conservation performance concerns, infrastructure deficiencies, rising crime in key tourism zones and inequitable policy impact and stakeholder exclusion.

⁷ Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency Act, 2010 (Eastern Cape)

4.1.1. Commando's Drift Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Poor. Open to the public
- **Infrastructure:** Reasonably maintained chalets, camp and picnic sites. Surrounds a dam. Dam with blue-green algae. No routes within park open. Abattoir for seasonal hunting activities.
- **Wildlife:** Exotic wildlife present (fallow deer) stocked for hunting activities. Predominantly ungulates such as springbok and zebra. Hunting packages auctioned annually as well as internal hunting (by staff) and culling. Fishing permitted.
- **Management:** Reception staff efficient and friendly; roads poorly maintained.
- **Accessibility:** Well signposted. Good gravel road.

4.1.2. Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Very poor. Closed due to refurbishment. Delayed due to dispute with contractor.
- **Infrastructure:** In the process of refurbishment. Razor wire fences to prevent human incursions. Northern fence down in places due to dispute with local community.
- **Wildlife:** Have buffalo. Poaching and snaring common. Marine Protected Area but disputes with local communities have led to violent exchanges with reserve officials.
- **Management:** Staff present. Severe capacity and budget restraint concerns.
- **Accessibility:** Well-signposted but approach road from Willowdale in appalling condition. Only high-clearance vehicles can access. Promises of tarring the approach road have been in the offing for six years.



Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve, Eastern Cape

4.1.3. Fort Fordyce Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Adequate. Open to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** Accommodation adequate with ongoing maintenance
- **Wildlife:** Buffalo present. Some hunting. Alien vegetation widespread.
- **Management:** Staff present and helpful. Buildings maintained. Underfunding, alien vegetation not being cleared.
- **Accessibility:** Well sign-posted. Gravel road requires high clearance vehicles.

4.1.4. Great Fish River Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Poor. Open to the public
- **Infrastructure:** Most accommodation options closed. Only five chalets functioning.
- **Wildlife:** Alien vegetation widespread.
- **Management:** Staff present. Renovations have been under way for over a year. Lack of funding. Alien vegetation not being cleared.
- **Accessibility:** Well-sign posted. Good gravel road.

4.1.5. Mkambati Nature Reserve (Case Study)



Mkambati Nature Reserve Eastern Cape

Status: 50% Poor; 50% Good

Mkambati Nature Reserve, located along the remote and rugged Wild Coast of South Africa's Eastern Cape, spans approximately 7,720 hectares and forms part of the renowned Pondoland Centre of Plant Endemism. With dramatic waterfalls, pristine estuaries, coastal grasslands, and indigenous forests, the reserve includes a Marine Protected Area and was designated a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance in 2025.

Despite its ecological significance and breathtaking scenery, Mkambati presents a tale of two management models. The Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency (ECPTA), which oversees the southern section, has been widely criticised for poor infrastructure, inadequate maintenance, and chronic underfunding. In contrast, the northern section—co-managed by the Mkambati Land Trust and a private eco-lodge—demonstrates a successful model of community-led conservation and sustainable tourism. This duality highlights the urgent need for improved governance, investment, and inclusive partnerships to secure the reserve's long-term future.

Governance & Management

Mkambati is managed through a dual model:

- Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency (ECPTA) oversees the southern, publicly accessible section, providing basic accommodation (rondavels and chalets) near the Msikaba River.
- The Mkambati Land Trust, representing ~6,600 families, partners with the privately managed

Gwe-Gwe Lodge, which operates sustainably with solar/wind energy, eco-conscious systems, and a commitment to local sourcing and employment.

Key Community Partnership:

- Gwe-Gwe Lodge contributes directly to community development and conservation through revenue sharing, job creation, and educational outreach programs.

Biodiversity & Endemism

Mkambati is a biodiversity hotspot with:

- 196 endemic plant species, including:
 - *Jubaeopsis caffra* (Pondo Palm)
 - *Bauhinia bowkeri* (Kei White Bauhinia)
 - *Ceropegia tenella* (Pondo Lanternflower)
- Rare and endemic fauna:
 - *Natalobatrachus bonebergi* (Boneberg's Frog)
 - *Copelatus mkambati* (a newly discovered diving beetle)
- **Birdlife:**
 - Breeding colony of Cape Vultures (400–800 individuals)
 - Other notable birds: Southern Ground-Hornbill, Crowned Eagle, Gurney's Sugar bird
 - Designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA)

- **Invertebrates:**
 - Over 425 terrestrial invertebrate species, including South African endemics and new species to science.

Visitor Experience & Activities

Visitors can enjoy:

- Iconic natural sites: Horseshoe Falls, Strandloper Falls, Mkambati Falls, and the Msikaba and Mtentu river gorges
- Recreational activities:
 - Hiking
 - Canoeing
 - Fishing
 - Birdwatching
 - Scenic wildlife drives with local guides

Ecological Threats

Despite its value, Mkambati faces serious ecological challenges:

- Vulture poisoning from traditional practices and off-site vermin control
- Invasive alien species are present, including:
 - Black Wattle
 - Guava
 - Tickberry



Mkambati Nature Reserve Eastern Cape

- Uncontrolled fires, often linked to poaching and grassland burning
- Chronic underfunding:
 - Provincial funding estimated at only R3–4 million per year
 - Heavy reliance on visitor fees for operational costs. Low visitor numbers.

Management Challenges

ECPTA Section:

- Severe deterioration of infrastructure and accommodation
- Complaints include:
 - Poor water quality
 - Buildings in disrepair
 - Abandoned or ruined facilities
- Causes include:
 - Delayed salary payments
 - Management inefficiencies
 - Limited provincial government support

Community-Private Partnership (Gwe-Gwe Lodge):

- Well-managed and environmentally sustainable
- All staff are locally recruited and trained
- Profits fund:
 - Community upliftment
 - School outreach programs
 - Conservation initiatives



Mkambati Nature Reserve Eastern Cape

Conclusion

Mkambati Nature Reserve represents a rare ecological and cultural jewel of South Africa's Wild Coast, with globally significant biodiversity and breathtaking natural scenery. However, the reserve tells a "tale of two parks":

- One struggling under public mismanagement (ECPTA)
- The other thriving through a collaborative model of community engagement and private investment

To ensure its future, sustained funding, invasive species control, and community empowerment must remain central to Mkambati's conservation strategy.

4.1.6. Mpofu Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Good but closed to the public during hunting season.
- **Infrastructure:** Luxury lodge and an abattoir. Roads in fair condition. Fences well-maintained.
- **Wildlife:** High value hunting animals like buffalo prevalent.
- **Management:** Well-managed with the help of private partnership with hunting operator.
- **Accessibility:** Well sign-posted. Good gravel road.

4.1.7. Oviston Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Good. Partially open to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** Borders the southern shore of Gariep Dam. Day visitors access the dam for boating and fishing.
- **Wildlife:** Limited wildlife, mainly ungulates stocked for hunting.
- **Management:** Access is largely limited to the Gariep Dam. Hunting is prevalent, with limited public access to hunting areas. Domestic animals (horses) within the reserve.
- **Accessibility:** Well-signposted. Good tar roads

4.1.8. Silaka Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Poor. Open to public.
- **Infrastructure:** Well-maintained chalets. Disused conference centre. Roads around reserve not open. Only road access is to accommodation. Picnic site and some chalets in disrepair.
- **Wildlife:** Limited. Urban settlements surround reserve and locals access through the reserve to the beach. Some alien vegetation present. People approach guests at the chalets offering to sell crayfish and shellfish.
- **Management:** Staff present.
- **Accessibility:** Well signposted. Good gravel road.

4.1.9. Thomas Baines Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Good. Open to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** Situated on a dam. Fishing activities and a yacht club. Accommodation basic but clean. Education centre. Gravel roads well-maintained.
- **Wildlife:** Some wildlife but not significant numbers or variety. Albany thicket vegetation. Some alien vegetation present.
- **Management:** Staff present and helpful. Under-funded.
- **Accessibility:** Well-sign-posted. Good tar road.

4.1.10. Tsolwana Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Poor. Closed to the public during hunting season
- **Infrastructure:** Limited accommodation. Some units in disrepair or abandoned. Abattoir. Conference centre disused. Roads reasonable gravel.
- **Wildlife:** Exotic wildlife (fallow deer) and domestic animals (horses). Wildlife skittish.
- **Management:** Staff present. Lack of funding for maintenance.
- **Accessibility:** Difficult to locate from the south due to lack of signage and accurate mapping. Easier from the north (Queenstown or Tarkastad)

4.2. Free State Province



Willem Pretorius Nature Reserve, Free State

The provincial reserves in the Free-State Province are managed by the Department of Economic, Small Business Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs (DESTEa). DESTEa drives environmentally sustainable economic growth and transformation in the Free State province by ensuring environmental sustainability through regulation, air quality control, biodiversity, climate change adaptation, and protected-area management.⁸

However, findings reveal that DESTEa faces challenges of financial mismanagement and irregularities as well as governance and administrative capacities and corruption.

Common findings across the reserves visited were a dominant focus on hunting and wildlife auctions, while accessibility varies, often requiring high-clearance or 4x4 vehicles, conservation and tourism placed secondary to hunting in most areas and staffing shortages and poor signage, which hinder public engagement.

4.2.1. Gariep Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Good. Open to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** Well-maintained. Day visitors access the dam for boating and fishing.
- **Wildlife:** Limited wildlife; mainly ungulates stocked for hunting.
- **Management:** Access is largely limited to the Gariep Dam. Hunting is prevalent, with limited public access to hunting areas.
- **Accessibility:** Well-signposted. Good tar roads.

4.2.2. Sandveld Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Good. Open to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** Chalets and roads are in good condition.
- **Wildlife:** Well-stocked. Sable antelope and rhinos.
- **Management:** Staff present at gate. Fishing, hunting and breeding occurs.
- **Accessibility:** Well signposted. Good tar roads.

4.2.3. Soetdoring Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Poor. Mostly closed to the public, open to fishing in western section.
- **Infrastructure:** Surrounds Soetdoring Dam. Dilapidated entrance and signage at the western entrance; eastern entrance closed.
- **Wildlife:** Mostly ungulates for hunting but limited numbers.
- **Management:** Operating on skeleton staff. Annual wildlife auctions. Fishing permitted western section allows free access and gate is unmanned.
- **Accessibility:** Poorly sign-posted, good tar roads.

4.2.4. Tussen-die-Riviere Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Poor. Open to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** Roads are 4x4 only. Accommodation is available but primarily caters to hunters. Main Gate entrance dilapidated and closed.
- **Wildlife:** Stocked with ungulates for hunting.
- **Management:** Main gate closed to public due to repeated flooding of the Caledon River; secondary gate open but unmanned. Very few visitors. Annual wildlife auctions and hunting packages sold.
- **Accessibility:** Well-signposted but gravel roads require high-clearance vehicles.



Main entrance (closed) Tussen-die-Riviere Nature Reserve, Free State

⁸ <https://provincialgovernment.co.za/units/view/17/free-state/economic-small-business-development-tourism-and-environmental-affairs>.

4.2.5. Willem Pretorius Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Good. Open to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** Well-maintained fences and gravel roads. Surrounds the Willem Pretorius dam.
- **Wildlife:** Well-stocked (perhaps over-stocked) with high-value hunting wildlife. White rhino (with horns), giraffe, buffalo, blue wildebeest, zebra, eland and large numbers of sable antelope present.
- **Management:** Open for day-visitors only, but accommodates hunters during the hunting season. Annual wildlife and hunting package auction.
- **Accessibility:** Well-signposted. Reasonable gravel road.

Hunting in South Africa's Provincial Reserves:

Practices, Policies, and Transparency

Introduction

Hunting within South Africa's provincial nature reserves is both a revenue-generating activity and a controversial conservation practice. Some provincial conservation authorities depend on hunting, culling, and live animal sales to supplement budgets. While culling is presented as a population management tool, its scientific basis is unclear due to lack of publicly available data. At the same time, these reserves function as tourism destinations, creating tensions between economic use, conservation, and public trust.

National policy frameworks such as the Draft National Biodiversity Strategy (2024)⁹ and the Game Meat Strategy (2023)¹⁰ promote expanded hunting and animal utilisation on state land. However, implementation across provinces is inconsistent, poorly regulated, and opaque.

Hunting Permissions by Province

Licensed hunting occurs across several provinces, though practices vary:

- **Permitted:** Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, North West
- **Conditional/Unclear:** Limpopo (12 reserves permitted, but reporting is unclear), Northern Cape
- **Prohibited:** Western Cape bans hunting in all provincial reserves

Both trophy hunting and 'biltong hunting' occur in many reserves. Trophy hunting targets high-value species for horns or hides, while biltong hunting is primarily for meat. Both forms intersect with tourism, creating reputational risks for South Africa's conservation image.

Hunting and Culling Statistics (2024–2025)

Eastern Cape

2024: 529 animals auctioned for hunting
2025: 583 animals auctioned for hunting

Free State

2024: 871 animals auctioned for hunting
2025: 921 animals auctioned for hunting, 3,150 for culling

Species included: Blesbuck, Buffalo, Duiker, Reedbuck, Eland, Gemsbuck, Giraffe, Impala, Kudu, Ostrich, Red hartebeest, Sable, Springbuck, Tsessebe, Warthog, Black Wildebeest, and Zebra. Additionally, 525 animals (including 8 White rhinos) were listed for live capture.

North West

2024: 873 animals auctioned for hunting, 2,660 for culling
2025: 1,081 animals auctioned for hunting, 2,262 for culling

Species hunted included Blesbuck, Buffalo, Duiker, Reedbuck, Eland, Gemsbuck, Giraffe, Impala, Kudu, Ostrich, Red hartebeest, Sable, Springbuck, Tsessebe, Warthog, Wildebeest (Black and Blue), and Zebra.

KwaZulu-Natal

Hunting permitted in four reserves

2024: 287 animals hunted
2025: 113 animals hunted

Species: Blue wildebeest, Buffalo, Impala, Nyala, Waterbuck, Zebra.

Mpumalanga

2022–2024: Hunting occurred in Loskop Dam NR, Mahushe Shongwe NR, Nooitgedacht Dam NR, Ohrigstad Dam NR, Songimvelo NR, and Verlorenvlei NR. Species included Black wildebeest, Blesbuck, Blue wildebeest, Impala, Giraffe, Kudu, Waterbuck. No culling reported.

Other Provinces

- **Limpopo:** Hunting permitted in 12 reserves, limited transparency
- **Gauteng:** Hunting permitted in Leeuwfontein

9 Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (2024). Draft National Biodiversity Economy Strategy. Available at: https://www.dffe.gov.za/sites/default/files/legislations/nemba_draftbiodiversityeconomystrategy_g50279gon4492.pdf

10 Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (2023). Game Meat Strategy for South Africa. Available at: https://www.dffe.gov.za/sites/default/files/legislations/gamemeatstrategyofsouthafrica_g49620gon4042.pdf

Collaborative NR, with plans to expand community-run hunting
– **Western Cape:** Hunting prohibited in all provincial reserves

Key Issues and Challenges

1. Transparency Deficit – Wildlife and hunting data is not consistently published; PAIA requests often ignored.
2. Policy Disconnection – National biodiversity policy promotes utilisation but ignores large-scale hunting already taking place.
3. Fragmented Provincial Practices – Some provinces report, others remain silent or inconsistent.
4. Ethical and Conservation Risks – Secretive practices undermine public trust and biodiversity integrity.
5. Socio-economic Inequalities – Benefits of hunting revenue are unclear, with no framework for fair distribution.

Conclusion

Hunting and culling in provincial reserves are entrenched but poorly managed aspects of wildlife governance. Weak oversight, inconsistent transparency, lack of scientific justification, and ethical concerns present serious risks to conservation and eco-tourism reputation. Strengthened public disclosure, independent oversight, and science-based management are essential to align practices with conservation and sustainable development goals.

4.3. Gauteng Province

The Gauteng Department of Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment (GDARDE) is responsible for agriculture, environmental protection, nature conservation, rural development, land administration, and veterinary services in Gauteng. Its key mandate: ensure sustainable environmental management, foster agri-food value chains, support integrated urban and rural development, and promote food security¹¹

Generally, GDARDE faces issues of corruption, wastage of funds and poor supplier management, and billing and revenue leakage.

4.3.1. Leeuwnfontein Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Unknown. Closed to the public
- **Infrastructure:** Unknown. Permission was not granted to enter.
- **Wildlife:** Unknown.
- **Management:** Unknown
- **Accessibility:** Well signposted. Good tar road.

4.4. KwaZulu-Natal Province

Ezemvelo-KZN Wildlife is the provincial body responsible for biodiversity conservation, protected-area management, and eco-tourism development in KwaZuluNatal.

Findings show that Ezemvelo-KZN Wildlife is facing numerous challenges including financial mismanagement, fraud, governance lapses, revenue shortfalls, staffing shortages, and limited operational capacity as well as community conflict, high levels of poaching – particularly rhino, and snaring and illegal land use.

4.4.1. Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Game Reserve

- **Status:** Poor. Open to the public
- **Infrastructure:** Maintenance issues are persistent, including water shortages. Fences are poor condition. Extensive mining operations on most sides of the reserve.
- **Wildlife:** Rhino poaching is extremely high and snaring of other species is high.
- **Management:** Booking systems are unreliable.

- Lack of funding and financial management issues persist.
- **Accessibility:** Well-sign-posted. Poorly maintained tar roads.

4.4.2. Ithala Game Reserve

- **Status:** Poor. Open to the public
- **Infrastructure:** Fairly good, though many chalets are scheduled for maintenance and are unuseable

¹¹ gauteng.gov.za

(February 2025). Main restaurant roof is in disrepair. Lack of funding.

- **Wildlife:** Includes elephants and rhinos. Snaring is common. Fences are largely intact but elephant breaches are common. Elephants frequently break out into neighbouring farms.
- **Management:** Staff present, friendly and efficient. Lack of funding.
- **Accessibility:** Well-signposted. Approach gravel road into reserve poor. Not recommended if vehicle does not have high-clearance

4.4.3. Mkuze Game Reserve

- **Status:** Poor. Open to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** Chalets require renovation. Many in an advanced state of disrepair.
- **Wildlife:** Snaring and poaching is widespread. Honorary rangers contribute significantly to surveillance.
- **Management:** Visitor numbers are generally low. Staff present. Lack of funding.
- **Accessibility:** Well-signposted. Gravel road out of Ophansi Gate in poor state. Gravel road into eMshopi Gate requires high clearance vehicle.

4.4.4. Ndumo Game Reserve (Case Study)



Modjadji Nature Reserve, Limpopo

Status: Very Poor

Ndumo Game Reserve, located in northern KwaZulu-Natal near the Mozambique border, is a biodiverse haven renowned for its exceptional birdlife, with over 430 recorded species—the highest in South Africa. Covering about 10,000 hectares of wetlands, pans, riverine forests, and sandveld, it offers a unique mosaic of habitats fed by the Usuthu and Pongola rivers. Though it lacks large predators, the reserve supports rich wildlife including hippos, crocodiles, nyala, giraffe, and (before 2017) rhinos. Designated a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance.

However, Ndumo Game Reserve faces a multitude of interconnected problems, including community disputes, poaching, habitat degradation, and the impact of the Pongolapoort Dam. These issues are severely impacting the reserve's ecological integrity and threatening its long-term viability as a protected area. Ndumo Game Reserve represents most that is wrong with the status of provincial reserves across the country.

Here's a more detailed breakdown:

Community Disputes and Illegal Activities:

- **Historical Evictions:**

Past evictions of local communities for conservation efforts have created lasting resentment and strained relationships with the reserve.

- **Invasive Farming and Grazing:**

Communities have encroached on the reserve,

particularly its eastern section, engaging in illegal farming, grazing, and tree-felling.

- **Poaching:**

Rhino poaching has led to their extinction within the reserve, and other forms of poaching, including gillnetting for fish, are prevalent.

- **Fence Cutting:**

The eastern boundary fence was cut 17 years ago,

allowing for easy access and contributing to the ongoing issues. On other boundaries the fences are in poor condition and require maintenance.

Ecological Degradation:

- **Altered Floodplain Dynamics:**

The Pongolapoort Dam disrupts the natural flooding patterns of the Phongolo River, affecting the floodplain and wetlands crucial for the reserve's ecosystem.

- **Invasive Alien Plants:**

Invasive species like *Chromolaena odorata* and water hyacinth are prevalent, impacting both woodland and wetland areas.

- **Crayfish Invasion:**

An introduced species of freshwater crayfish (*Cherax quadricarinatus*) poses a potential threat to the ecosystem.

- **Declining Hippo and Crocodile Populations:**

The reserve has experienced a significant decline in hippo and crocodile populations due to poaching and habitat changes.



Ndumo Game Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal

Management and Governance Challenges:

- **Resource Allocation Neglect:**

There are concerns that the organization responsible for the reserve, Ezemvelo-KZN Wildlife, is neglecting Ndumo. Bookings are not being accepted by Ezemvelo-KZN central reservations – only walk-ins (as of May 2025) are taken. Staff have been reduced to 50% of the capacity and key members (such as guides) are not being replaced. Some chalets in need of refurbishment – although some have been renovated.

- **Governance Gaps:**

The apparent inability of relevant government departments to address the ongoing issues raises concerns about the reserve's future. There is hope that a private NGO will take up the operation and maintenance of the reserve.

- **Unclear Land Claims:**

A land claim settled in 2000 has created confusion and potential for further conflict over access to reserve resources.

- **Lack of Enforcement:**

The inability to control illegal activities within the reserve, like farming and poaching, highlights the need for improved enforcement and management.

Other Issues:

- **Limited Access:**

While some areas are accessible by vehicle, much of the reserve requires guided tours or walks to explore.

- **Water Quality Concerns:**

The streams entering the reserve from the southwest can be saline, and eutrophication from agriculture may also be a problem.

To address the challenges facing Ndumo, a multifaceted approach is needed, combining stronger law enforcement to prevent illegal activities with community-based conservation programs that provide education, alternative livelihoods, and incentives for sustainable land use. Restoration of invaded areas through alien plant removal and wetland rehabilitation is crucial, alongside improved water management agreements with upstream stakeholders to protect



Ndumo Game Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal

river flow and water quality. Strengthening partnerships with NGOs, government agencies, and ecotourism operators can boost funding, capacity, and awareness, while involving local communities in co-management structures can foster stewardship and long-term ecological sustainability.

4.4.5. Pongola Game Reserve

- **Status:** Poor. Open to public.
- **Infrastructure:** No accommodation, poorly maintained ablutions and picnic site.
- **Wildlife:** High levels of poaching, including elephants. Snaring is rife.
- **Management:** Primarily a fishing venue for day visitors. Staff present at entrance gate to take fees. Lack of funding.
- **Accessibility:** Poorly sign-posted. Gravel road in good condition.

4.5. Limpopo Province

The Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism (LEDET) is the provincial government department in Limpopo that oversees the provincial reserves. Its mission is to create and facilitate the development of a competitive economy, sustainable environmental management, and tourism development towards an improved quality of life for all. In terms of Environmental Management, its mission is to ensure sustainable environmental management, utilisation, and regulation of natural resources; overseeing biodiversity and natural resource management; and providing environmental empowerment services.¹²

Findings show that LEDET has encountered several challenges that have severely impacted its effectiveness in fulfilling its mandate. These challenges span financial mismanagement, poor strategic planning, environmental concerns, and lack of tourism development.

Common findings across the reserves visited were lack of staff presence and security, poaching and illegal grazing, crumbling infrastructure and no maintenance, weak tourism marketing and community benefit sharing, and poor signage and access making it difficult for visitors to locate.

4.5.1. Hans Merensky Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Very poor. Closed to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** Unknown. Permission to enter was not granted.
- **Wildlife:** Reports that very little wildlife remains.
- **Management:** Closed since 2020. Locals report significant poaching and farmed animals grazing within the reserve. No LEDET staff present. Effectively abandoned.
- **Accessibility:** Reasonably signposted. Good tar road.

4.5.2. Lekgalameetse Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Good. Open to public.
- **Infrastructure:** Hiking trails and accommodation are functional but require maintenance.
- **Wildlife:** Includes eland, giraffe, and impala.
- **Management:** Staff are helpful, though funding is sporadic. The Development Bank in conjunction with LEDET refurbished the pool and state they are implementing a maintenance plan. Very few visitors
- **Accessibility:** Well sign posted. Good gravel road.

¹² ledet.gov.za

4.5.3. Letaba Ranch (Case Study)



Status: Very Poor

Letaba Ranch, Limpopo

Letaba Ranch is a 42,000-hectare nature reserve located just north of Phalaborwa in South Africa's Limpopo Province. Sharing an unfenced 55 km border with the Kruger National Park, the reserve forms part of the Greater Kruger and broader Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA) shared with Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

Managed by the Limpopo Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism (LEDET), Letaba Ranch boasts rich riverine habitats sustained by the Great Letaba River and supports iconic wildlife including elephants, buffalo, lions, and wild dogs.

Despite its ecological value, the reserve faces persistent and complex challenges—ranging from chronic mismanagement, weak infrastructure, and widespread poaching, to strained community relations, unresolved land claims, and near-total neglect of tourism development.

The reserve's northern boundary is formed by the Letaba River. The community-run Mthimkhulu Nature Reserve also borders on the Letaba River. Letaba Ranch is comprised of state-owned land and land owned by neighbouring communities.

LEDET manages Letaba Ranch and Mthimkhulu Nature Reserve as a single environmental entity.

Wildlife & Ecology

The reserve is home to Big Five species, with especially large herds of elephant and buffalo, plus giraffe, hippo, crocodile, wild dog, kudu, zebra, rhino, leopard, lion, cheetah and many more browsers and antelope.

Vegetation is dominated by mopane veld in the south, transitioning along the river to denser riparian and woodland species such as tamboti, leadwood, knobthorn and clusterleaf shrubs—ideal for biodiversity.

Tourism and Accommodation

Mtomeni Camp is the sole safari camp within Letaba Ranch, situated right on the banks of the Great Letaba River in an unfenced environment.

It comprises half a dozen rustic safari tents, each featuring two beds, a bucket shower (hot water via boiling kettle), and a private or shared braai/kitchen area. The communal dining deck overlooks the river. Some of the tents and buildings were (February 2025) in very poor condition.

There's little electricity supply—with exposed wiring at the time of visiting.

A private entity manages the only camp which is poorly funded and maintained. There is no means of booking accommodation. Management of the camp has changed hands several times in recent years.

Very few tourists visit the reserve due to decades of poor management and an almost complete lack of promotion. In April 2025, the Phalaborwa Tourism Association 25 km away did not have any telephone numbers for booking facilities in Letaba Ranch. Calls to LEDET Head Office in Polokwane also remained unanswered.

The reserve is difficult to locate due to lack of signage. The main tourism gate has no signs indicating that it is the access point to the reserve and it is sometimes locked.

Safari Activities

The ranch offers guided wildlife drives, but strictly no self-drive ostensibly because of anti-poaching measures and rhino protection. One individual, who also served as camp manager and without uniform, served as our guide. Since the reserve vehicle had been broken for a number of years, he accompanied us in our own vehicle.

Poaching & Hunting

Letaba Ranch has become a poaching conduit into Kruger National Park, rather than a buffer. Poachers target elephants and rhinos that move freely across the unfenced boundary, taking advantage of lax enforcement. Snaring is also reported to be widespread.

Illegal fishing and garbage dumping—particularly across fence lines or via riverine transport—pose threats to water quality and wildlife health within the reserve.

Letaba Ranch has been used by hunters since its formation during the apartheid era. Although a provincial government gazette (no. 3477) published in April 2024 stated that hunting quotas have been issued to the Majeje Traditional Authority and Mabunda Traditional Authority, staff at the reserve say that no hunting has taken place in recent years.

Weak Management & Institutional Capacity

All provincial reserves in Limpopo, including Letaba Ranch, suffer from chronic underfunding, staff shortages, political appointments, and insufficient operational budgets. Many positions remain vacant, and existing staff are often undertrained or unmotivated.

Invasive Species & Environmental Pressures

Alien invasive plants (notably along the Letaba River) have expanded significantly due to lack of regular clearing. Although, a team from the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), a South African government initiative aimed at creating temporary work opportunities for unemployed or underemployed individuals, were spotted clearing alien vegetation. Staff shortages and resource constraints, however, hamper effective management.

Fencing, Human–Wildlife Conflict & Infrastructure Damage

The western boundary's electric fence has been routinely damaged by elephants, who break through to access the communal farms on the western boundary. The fences were in a poor state at the time of visiting.

The broken fences also allow predators (like lions) into communal areas. Villagers have reported farmed animals predation, inability to recover lost farmed animals, and structural damage to community fencing—eroding trust between communities and reserve authorities.

Community Tensions & Land Disputes

Land claim disputes persist in the area, particularly involving communities such as the Majeje and Selwane Clans. These unresolved traditional authority conflicts negatively affect land restitution and benefit-sharing arrangements.

It is reported that many local residents feel excluded from potential tourism operations—despite bearing the costs of living alongside dangerous wildlife—leading to resentment and diminished incentives to support conservation.

Conclusion & Outlook

Letaba Ranch holds high conservation value, forming part of the Greater Kruger ecosystem—but faces serious challenges in management, security, and equitable community integration. Addressing these issues would require:

- Strengthening law enforcement and anti-poaching capacity
- Empowering local participation and fair benefit-sharing

- Securing funding for ecological maintenance and infrastructure
- Building trust between authorities and adjacent communities

Letaba Ranch is a clear example of the systemic problems in other provincial reserves within Limpopo Province.

4.5.4. Makuya Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Poor. Open to public
- **Infrastructure:** Roads are severely eroded, requiring extreme 4x4 vehicles. Heavy rains make most roads impassable. Accommodation is in disrepair; Mutale Falls Camp has been closed for three years, and the Singo Safari Camp is in poor condition with leaking tents and rotting decks. There are some chalets that are in reasonable condition but in February they were being used to store furniture.
- **Wildlife:** Wildlife crosses into the reserve due to its unfenced border with Kruger National Park. Signs of elephant and buffalo.
- **Management:** LEDET oversees the reserve, but disputes with traditional authorities over benefits persist. Trophy hunting was permitted historically but was discontinued three years ago. Nearby mine closure has left locals without meaningful employment.
- **Accessibility:** Well-signposted. Difficult gravel access roads especially in the rainy season.

4.5.5. Ma'nombe Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Very poor. Closed to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** Entrance gate is dilapidated, and the reserve is subject to land claims.
- **Wildlife:** Hunting quotas were issued by LEDET in 2024 despite the reserve being closed.
- **Management:** Closed to the public due to community disputes. Effectively abandoned.
- **Accessibility:** Difficult to locate due to lack of signage and accurate mapping.

4.5.6. Modjadji Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Very poor. Closed to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** Visitor centre burned down in 2019 and was never rebuilt. Roads rutted and overgrown.
- **Wildlife:** Home to a variety of rare cycads. Very little fauna.
- **Management:** Closed since the 2019 fire. Poaching and removal of cycads is widespread. No LEDET staff present. Effectively abandoned.
- **Accessibility:** Difficult to locate due to lack of signage and accurate mapping.



Modjadji Nature Reserve, Limpopo

4.6. Mpumalanga Province



Songimvelo Nature Reserve, Mpumalanga

The Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MTPA) is a provincial government entity in South Africa tasked with promoting tourism and conserving biodiversity within Mpumalanga.¹³

The MTPA has encountered several challenges that have impacted its operations and the broader tourism sector in the province. These include labour disputes, governance and management issues. Instances of inadequate conservation efforts and unchecked development activities have raised concerns about the degradation of natural resources and biodiversity within the province.

Common findings across the reserves visited were: infrastructure neglect (no maintenance or upgrades), poaching and farmed animals intrusions, community conflict and lack of stakeholder trust, poor accessibility, signage, and tourism services.

4.6.1. Andover Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Very poor. Open.
- **Infrastructure:** Chalets mostly rundown.
- **Wildlife:** Heavy poaching and snaring.
- **Management:** Entry gate staffed by security guards from a private company. Very few visitors. Bookings not taken. Wildlife drives not permitted. Manager, who was contacted telephonically, suggested that it was better to visit neighbouring reserves.
- **Accessibility:** Reasonably sign-posted. Good tar road.

4.6.2. Barberton Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Good. Open to public.
- **Infrastructure:** Small reserve with limited road coverage. Ablution blocks are clean but run-down.
- **Wildlife:** Limited wildlife and snaring is prevalent.
- **Management:** Entrance and service staff present.
- **Accessibility:** Well-sign-posted. Good tar road.

4.6.3. Mthethomusha Game Reserve

- **Status:** Very poor. Closed to public since 2021. Owned by community but managed by MTPA.
- **Infrastructure:** Main lodge burned down in 2021 due to community disputes, with no signs of renovation. No entry permitted to the reserve.
- **Wildlife:** Rhinos removed during the violence that ensued and never replaced.
- **Management:** The reserve has been closed since the 2021 violence. Rangers and MTPA officials present at the gate.
- **Accessibility:** Difficult to locate due to lack of signage and accurate mapping.

¹³ MTPA Annual report (2022/23) https://provincialgovernment.co.za/entity_annual/886/2023-mpumalanga-mpumalanga-tourism-and-parks-agency-annual-report.pdf

4.6.4. Songimvelo Game Reserve (Case Study)

Status: Very Poor

Songimvelo Nature Reserve, nestled along the Drakensberg escarpment south of Barberton and forming part of the Songimvelo–Malolotja Transfrontier Park (with eSwatini), is South Africa's largest provincial nature reserve, spanning approximately 49,000 hectares. Renowned for its extraordinary biodiversity, ancient geological formations, and scenic landscapes, the reserve is both a conservation stronghold and a cultural heritage site.

However, despite its ecological significance, Songimvelo faces mounting conservation and management challenges. These include escalating human–wildlife conflict, persistent poaching, widespread infrastructure decay, illegal farmed animals grazing, invasive alien vegetation, and community tensions. The Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MTPA), tasked with managing the reserve, has struggled to maintain operations amidst limited capacity, public distrust, and frequent disruptions—culminating in the reserve's closure to the public in April 2025. This report outlines the current ecological value, operational shortcomings, and urgent interventions required to safeguard the future of this critical conservation area.

Biodiversity & Habitat

- Home to over 1,440 plant species, including endangered and recently discovered ones, and the last wild woolly cycad population.
- At least 20 large herbivore species reintroduced since 1983, including elephant, white rhino (which have since been poached or removed), and a significant buffalo population.
- A wide range of mammal species such as zebra, giraffe, kudu, impala, eland, ostrich, aardwolf, serval, bushbuck, and more—total mammal richness exceeds 70 species.
- Over 300 bird species recorded, including martial eagle, African finfoot, Knysna turaco, Shelley's francolin, blue swallow, raptors, and various forest-dwelling and lowveld species.

Landscape & Habitats

Dramatic terrain of mountains, rolling hills, hidden valleys, ravines, and gorges carved by the Komati, Msoli, and Lomati rivers.

Habitat types include mountain sourveld, lowveld sour bushveld, and Afromontane forests in steeper kloofs and river lines, with rare *proteoid* woodlands on escarpment slopes.

Accommodation & (lack of) Access

Kromdraai Camp on the south-eastern side of the park has 50 self-catering log cabins which are all in a bad state of disrepair. At the time of visiting the entire camp in April 2025 was closed due to a lack of electricity and water supply.

The main entrance to the reserve was closed due to recent disputes with surrounding communities caused by repeated elephant break-outs due to poor fencing.

Conservation & Threats

Challenges include poaching and snaring, farmed animals grazing, invasive alien plant infestations (*eucalyptus*, pines), frequent burns, and illegal settlements or crop encroachment especially near Kromdraai and Josefsdal.

The reserve is co-managed by Mpumalanga Parks Board and the Songimvelo Communal Property Association after successful local land claims, integrating local community rights with conservation efforts.

Farmed animals Grazing & Human Land Use

Illegal farmed animals grazing is widespread. Settlements and subsistence farming persist within reserve boundaries. Some families live within the reserve under land claims, and households plant crops (mostly maize) or thatching grass, altering habitat integrity.

Invasive Alien Plants

Riparian zones and kloofs—especially around the Lomati and Komati rivers—are invaded by *Eucalyptus* and *Pinus* species from downstream plantations, compromising native forest and aquatic ecosystems.

Overgrazed grassland accelerates their spread. This also threatens vulnerable native plants such as *Protea comptonii*, which suffers habitat degradation from farmed animals and invasive competition.

Human–Wildlife Conflict & Infrastructure Decline

Wildlife such as elephants regularly break through dilapidated fencing, roaming into surrounding communities. This has caused crop damage, farmed animals losses, and retaliatory killings. The latest incidences at the time of visiting in April 2025 resulted in the reserve being closed to the public. Communities threatened violent retribution should anyone be allowed to enter.

Aging infrastructure—broken vehicles, poor visitor facilities, and fence neglect—further compromises effective patrols and tourism revenue, perpetuating a negative cycle that undermines reserve maintenance.

Poaching & Capacity Constraints

Poaching has impacted rhinos (which have all been removed from the reserve) and potentially other key species. With fragmented management capacity, staffing shortages, and limited scientific support roles, the reserve struggles to monitor and combat wildlife crime effectively.

Broader constraints include low budgets, loss of skilled staff, outdated management plans, and poor operational implementation—hindering both enforcement and proactive conservation action.

Recommendations & Needed Actions

- Alien plant control—especially in river corridors—with possible biological controls and mechanical clearing.
- Strengthen boundary security, finalise fencing, and invest in transport and ranger capacity.
- Curb farmed animals grazing and illegal settlements via engagement with communities and land claimants.
- Improve scientific capability and staffing, including veterinary and ecological monitoring roles.
- Engage local communities via meaningful co-management, livelihood linkages, and shared stewardship.

In short, Songimvelo's rich biodiversity heritage remain under intense pressure from overlapping humandriven threats. Addressing them necessitates stronger management, sustainable funding, local engagement, and ecosystem-based restoration.

4.7. Northern Cape Province



Akkerendam Nature Reserve, Northern Cape

The Northern Cape Department of Agriculture, Environmental Affairs, Rural Development and Land Reform (DAERDLR) is the authority that oversees the province's reserves. The Department serves as a multisectoral entity, handling agrarian transformation, sustainable agriculture, rural development, land reform, and environmental stewardship¹⁴. Reserves are managed by the Northern Cape Department of Environment and Nature Conservation (NCDENC), a sub-division or directorate under the broader umbrella of DAERDLR. NCDENC handles the park's ecological management, policy implementation, community engagement, and infrastructure within the reserve's boundaries.

DAERDLR/NCDENC face similar challenges to other provinces such as financial mismanagement, budget constraints, capacity and environmental pressures.

Common findings across the reserves visited were that a few are well-managed and ecologically significant, but most are facing abandonment and total lack of management. Poor accessibility and signage reduce visitor engagement across the province.

¹⁴ MTPA Annual report (2022/23) https://provincialgovernment.co.za/entity_annual/886/2023-mpumalanga-mpumalanga-tourism-and-parks-agency-annual-report.pdf

4.7.1. Akkerendam Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Very poor. Seemingly abandoned.
- **Infrastructure:** No fences or staff present. No signage and dilapidated entrance.
- **Wildlife:** None discernible. Locals collect firewood.
- **Management:** None discernible.
- **Accessibility:** Well signposted. Good tar road.

4.7.2. Goegap Nature Reserve (Case Study)



Goegap Nature Reserve, Northern Cape

Status: Very Good

Goegap Nature Reserve is one of only two provincially managed parks surveyed that have shown notable success without relying on private partnerships for accommodation, or from hunting. However, Goegap does generate revenue through external sources such as close collaboration with NGOs, stakeholders, and business entities. The reserve also benefits from being a prime and affordable destination during the wild flower season (August–September) as well as a convenient stop-over for motorists on the Cape–Namibia Route. Revenue allocation, as an exception to the rule, seems to be well directed into the reserve's infrastructure and management.

Goegap Nature Reserve

Situated approximately 15 km east of Springbok, the reserve spans about 150 km² (15,000 ha) after successive expansions and renamings—it was originally called the Hester Malan Nature Reserve. Established in 1966 on previously grazed farmland, it was fenced in 1969 and later stocked with diverse wildlife. The name “Goegap” derives from the Khoekhoe word for “watering hole”.

Managed by the Northern Cape Department of Environment and Nature Conservation (NCDENC), which is a sub-division or directorate under the broader umbrella of the Northern Cape Department of Agriculture, Environmental Affairs, Rural Development and Land Reform (DAERDLR). NCDENC handles the park's ecological management, policy implementation,

community engagement, and infrastructure within the reserve's boundaries.

Goegap Nature Reserve stands out as a significant conservation success story in comparison to most other reserves in this survey, particularly in reviving and protecting fragile arid ecosystems.

Vegetation Recovery & Habitat Restoration

- After fencing and removing farmed animals in 1969, researchers began long-term vegetation monitoring—with annual surveys along transects extending over 30 years.
- A 2018 study of vegetation changes in the plains habitat revealed directional improvement—especially among perennial plant species—despite natural variability in rainfall.
- Overall, veld condition improved, suggesting that removing grazing pressure and protecting habitat helped native flora rebound—an essential foundation for broader ecosystem recovery.

Wildlife Recovery: Hartmann's Mountain Zebra

- The endangered Hartmann's mountain zebra population in the reserve grew from 6 individuals in 1980 to 69 by 2015, representing ~6.2% annual growth—a clear sign of successful species recovery through protected area management and tailored interventions.

- This growth aligns with broader recovery trends in the region, though conservation-dependent translocations and management remain essential for long-term viability.

Rediscovery of Native Species

- In 2009, camera trap surveys conducted by the Cape Leopard Trust documented honey badger presence in Goegap—a species thought absent from the reserve for decades. Their reappearance highlights effective habitat protection and biodiversity resilience.

Biodiversity and Ecosystem Value

- Today, Goegap supports around 600 indigenous plant species, ~45 mammal species, and 94 bird species, including rare and desert-adapted fauna such as aardwolf and Cape eagleowl.
- By preserving this exceptionally biodiverse Succulent Karoo ecosystem, the reserve maintains one of the world's richest semidesert floras and supports full ecological intricacy. Faunal diversity—including top predators like leopards—is gradually being documented with technology-enabled detection
- Goegap Nature Reserve demonstrates tangible conservation success, with evidence of restored vegetation, recovered wildlife populations, and preserved high biodiversity in a fragile arid ecosystem. Its trajectory—from degraded grazing land to thriving reserve—is a model of effective long-term monitoring, habitat restoration, and species-focused interventions.

Collaboration with NGOs & Research Institutions

- NCDENC is a partner in the AZEF (AfriMontane-Zonation Environment Forum) network, alongside organizations like WWF South Africa, South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), the Wilderness Foundation, and academic institutions such as Sol Plaatje University and the University of Cape Town—working collectively on research, biodiversity monitoring, and conservation of Succulent Karoo landscapes.
- In the land-acquisition and stewardship planning for Goegap, NC DENC received support from the Leslie Hill Succulent Karoo Trust (LHST) and WWF South Africa to identify priority areas for expansion and to craft proposals for land consolidation in Namaqualand.
- NGO collaboration includes support from the Cape Leopard Trust, which has partnered with NCDENC and local landowners to deploy camera traps, monitor predator species (e.g. leopard presence),

and build conservancy agreements with nearby farmers.

Engagement with Farmers & Local Landowners

- Through the WWF Nedbank Green Trust and Indigo Development & Change, NC DENC supports climate-resilient agriculture and stewardship training for small-scale farmers in the Northern Cape—especially around the Suid Bokkeveld plateau. These efforts aim to strengthen local land-uses while conserving biodiversity and restoring veld health.
- Ongoing WWF programs are working with farmers in Kamieskroon, Soebatsfontein, Komaggas, and Hondeklipbaai—neighboring communities to Goegap—to explore opportunities in ecojob creation (e.g. trainee rangers, alien plant removal, trail maintenance), sustainable grazing and farming, and business development tied to protected area initiatives.
- A specific biodiversity offset agreement engaged the Kangnas Wind Farm, the regional NCDENC, and local enterprise JKL Consulting: the wind farm established protection and expansion of the Greater Goegap Reserve, funded ecological rehabilitation, community employment and enterprise development, and transferred land management to NCDENC scope across ~5,000 ha east of the original reserve boundary.

Overall Effectiveness & Strengths

- NCDENC takes advantage of multi-partner funding and expertise, particularly from NGOs like WWF and trusts like LHST, to enhance conservation capacity for biodiversity protection and reserve expansion.
- The close partnership with local communities and farmers ensures that conservation goals are co-beneficial—through jobs, training, stewardship, grazing support, and even enterprise opportunities.
- Collaborations with research institutions have enabled credible scientific monitoring and adaptive strategies based on empirical data.
- Despite financial and other challenges that have beset the department with other reserves in the Northern Cape, NCDENC's collaborative approach—working with NGOs, community groups, scientists, and even renewable energy developers—has significantly bolstered Goegap's reserve management, expansion, and local resilience. These partnerships enhance not only biodiversity protection but also local livelihoods and ecological stewardship in surrounding communities.

4.7.3. Nababiep Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Very poor. Open to the public. Entrance unmanned and therefore entrance fees are not collected and permits not issued.
- **Infrastructure:** Lacks facilities. Essentially a space for 4x4 driving. Unfenced.
- **Wildlife:** Barren desert landscape. Few wildlife viewing opportunities.
- **Management:** None discernible.
- **Accessibility:** Difficult to locate due to lack of signage and accurate mapping.

4.7.4. Oorlogskloof Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Poor. Open to the public. Permits required but can only be collected at Nieuwoudtville 20 kilometres away
- **Infrastructure:** Rudimentary chalets and campsite dilapidated and signs to hikes are old and fading.
- **Wildlife:** Alien vegetation is widespread.
- **Management:** None discernible.
- **Accessibility:** Fairly well-sign-posted. Poor dirt track.

4.7.5. Spitskop Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Non-existent. Closed to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** This has been decommissioned.
- **Wildlife:** Wildlife has been removed.
- **Management:** None.
- **Accessibility:** It is still mapped and signposted.



Spitskop, Northern Cape

4.7.6. Witsand Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Good. Open to the public
- **Infrastructure:** This is a remote reserve famous for its white 'roaring' dunes (brulsand). It is well-maintained and has a number of accommodation options from luxury chalets to camping. There is a swimming pool and a conference centre but both are not in use. Hiking and 4x4ing are the main activities and there is also dune surfing and quad biking.
- **Wildlife:** Some wildlife. Good birding. Kalahari biome.
- **Management:** Fairly well-managed but suffers from low visitor numbers due to its remote location and poor marketing. Limited funding.
- **Accessibility:** Difficult to locate due to lack of signage and accurate mapping

4.8. North West Province



Bloemhof Dam Nature Reserve, North West

The North West Department of Economic Development, Environment, Conservation and Tourism (DEDECT) is a provincial government department in South Africa responsible for promoting sustainable economic development and environmental management in the North West Province. The North West Parks and Tourism Board (NWPTB) operates under DEDECT.

Like many provincial departments, DEDECT/NWPTB faces budget constraints, environmental degradation, irregular expenditure and governance issues and capacity limitations.

4.8.1. Bloemhof Dam Nature Reserve

Status: Poor. Open to the public.

- **Infrastructure:** Open campsite. Chalets have been abandoned and vandalised.
- **Wildlife:** Surrounds a dam. Some wildlife. Hunting and fishing permitted.
- **Management:** Lack of staff capacity and funding.
- **Accessibility:** Well-signposted. Good tar roads.

4.8.2. Borakalalo National Park¹⁵

- **Status:** Very poor. Open to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** Accommodation burnt down and not rebuilt. Fences down. The ablution blocks at the main picnic site and at the main fishing site have all been vandalised – basins pulled of walls and toilets broken. Dilapidated thatch roof over the entrance gate. Surrounds Klipvoor Dam.
- **Wildlife:** Heavily poached – snaring for mammals and illegal fishing (without permits). Rhino were poached out about 15 years ago and never replaced.
- **Management:** Effectively abandoned.
- **Accessibility:** Fair approach road.

4.8.3. Boskop Dam Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Very poor. Open to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** Broken vehicles and a borehole that have not been repaired in a year. Ablutions require staff to leave barrels for visitors. No accommodation. Fencing dilapidated and poor roads.
- **Wildlife:** Very little. Surrounds a dam therefore fishing is the primary activity.
- **Management:** Staff disgruntled due to late payment of salaries.
- **Accessibility:** Well-signposted. Good tar road.

4.8.4. Botsalano Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Poor. Open to the public but unclear when hunting season occurs.
- **Infrastructure:** Roads reasonably maintained. Accommodation in tents in need of replacement. Ablutions at picnic site in poor condition.
- **Wildlife:** Described as a breeding farm for hunting and live sales of wildlife.
- **Management:** Limited staff. Lack of funding.
- **Accessibility:** Well-signposted. Access roads in good condition.

¹⁵ Called a national park as it fell within the old Boputhatswana National Parks system and the name never changed

4.8.5. Madikwe Game Reserve (Case Study)



Madikwe Game Reserve, North West Province

Status: Very Good

Madikwe Game Reserve is one of South Africa's most successful conservation and community-development models. Established in the early 1990s through "Operation Phoenix," it transformed degraded farmland into a thriving ecosystem by reintroducing over 8,000 animals, including elephants, rhinos, and predators. Unique in its tripartite model—combining government oversight, private tourism investment, and community partnership—Madikwe promotes high-end, low-impact tourism that directly supports local development.

Madikwe stands out for its emphasis on community ownership and inclusion. Several lodges are community-run, and the reserve has served as a benchmark for land restitution, job creation, and biodiversity recovery. Unlike many parks, it excludes day visitors to preserve ecological integrity and guest experience.

Despite its success, Madikwe now faces challenges from ecological management disputes, such as proposed elephant culling, trophy hunting and broader tensions between conservation and consumptive commercial exploitation. Nevertheless, its core values of inclusion, innovation, and conservation integrity continue to make it a model for sustainable wildlife protection in southern Africa.

Economic Impact Summary of Madikwe Game Reserve

Madikwe Game Reserve has delivered notable economic benefits through its innovative model of conservation-driven tourism:

- **High-End Photographic Tourism**
 - Madikwe focuses on low-density, high-value tourism with no day visitors allowed.

- It attracts both international and domestic tourists to luxury lodges, generating steady revenue while minimizing ecological disturbance.

- Tourism income funds park operations and supports local employment, from lodge staff to tour guides and conservation teams.

- **Community Development**

- Madikwe pioneered community-based conservation, involving local communities directly in revenue generation.
- Some lodges are community-owned and operated, with profits reinvested in education, healthcare, and infrastructure.
- Programs like the Madikwe Initiative (1990s) helped incubate local businesses and build skills.

- **Land Restitution and Equity**

- The 2007 land settlement with the Barokologadi ba ga Mootwe community established an important precedent for combining conservation with restorative justice.
- Although challenges like unresolved title deeds persist, the reserve remains a key example of linking land reform with conservation-based income.

- **Sustainable Alternative to Hunting**

- Unlike reserves that rely heavily on hunting or culling for income, Madikwe benefits entirely from non-consumptive tourism.

- This positions it as a long-term, ecologically and economically sustainable model, particularly as global sentiment shifts away from trophy hunting.

– **Estimated Economic Reach (While Specifics Are Limited):**

- Madikwe is a major contributor to the North West Province's tourism sector, supporting hundreds of jobs and generating millions in annual tourism revenue.
- Community involvement and conservation-focused tourism have enhanced resilience and income stability compared to reserves dependent on hunting or extractive activities.

Summary

Madikwe is currently grappling with debates over whether it has a severe elephant overpopulation crisis. With over 1,600 individuals there are claims this is leading to extreme vegetation loss, habitat degradation, and widespread starvation, resulting in the death of dozens of elephants during recent drought conditions. Controversy over proposed trophy hunting or selective culling to reduce the numbers has stirred conflict between photo-tourism interests, ethical concerns, and conservation goals, risking reputational damage and community mistrust.

Despite the controversy, Madikwe Game Reserve could exemplify how wildlife conservation can drive inclusive, sustainable economic development. Its model—linking eco-tourism, community benefit, and biodiversity protection—has so far delivered measurable impact and international recognition.

4.8.6. Mafikeng Nature Reserve ¹⁶

- **Status:** Good. Open to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** Only one campsite of several in use. There are various 'lodges' that are not in use. Campsite well-maintained. Fence under repair in parts but otherwise reasonable.
- **Wildlife:** Trophy hunts take place. Well-stocked with wildlife including buffalo and rhino.
- **Management:** Staff at entrance to accept entry fees and issue permits. Otherwise, limited presence.
- **Accessibility:** Not well-signposted but online mapping helpful. Access roads in good condition.

4.8.7. Molopo Nature Reserve (Case Study)

Status: Poor

Molopo Nature Reserve, situated in the far-flung Kalahari region of South Africa's North West Province, is a rugged yet ecologically vital landscape characterized by sweeping grasslands, thornveld, and red sand dunes. Located approximately 250 kilometres north of Vryburg and just west of the border town Vorstershoop, the reserve forms part of the arid frontier bordering Botswana.

Despite its remarkable biodiversity—including a wide variety of ungulates, elusive predators, and over 120 recorded bird species—Molopo remains underutilised and increasingly threatened. Infrastructure decay, underfunding, and administrative stagnation have left this remote gem vulnerable. This report explores the current condition of Molopo Nature Reserve, the multifaceted challenges it faces, and strategic interventions necessary to secure its ecological and tourism potential.

Wildlife

The reserve supports herds of eland, blue wildebeest, gemsbok, kudu, zebra, impala, waterbuck, springbok, steenbok, duiker and warthog. Predators occasionally seen: cheetah, brown hyena, caracal, blackbacked jackal, African wildcat, small spotted genet, and honey badger.

Over 120 species of birds recorded, with highlights like Bateleur, Tawny Eagle, Martial Eagle, Whitebacked and Lappetfaced Vultures breeding in the reserve. Specialty species include Southern Pied Babbler, Burchell's Sandgrouse, Monotonous Lark, Kori Bustard, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Namaqua Dove and Red-crested Korhaan.

¹⁶ Not changed to 'Mahikeng' after the nearby town name change



Molopo's fence in disrepair

Conservation Challenges

Molopo Nature Reserve, managed by the North West Parks and Tourism Board (NWPTB), grapples with multiple persistent challenges—ecological, infrastructural, administrative, economic, and social. These issues compromise conservation goals, wildlife welfare, and tourism potential.

Infrastructure Decay & Visitor Neglect

- Our visit in May 2025 revealed severely neglected facilities: overgrown roads, broken ablutions, bird-infested ceilings, and inability to accept electronic payments—only cash was allowed. The campsite was devoid of staff or other guests.
- The “reception office” – no signage – is based in a dilapidated building that was once a chalet for tourists. Former tourist chalets near the main road

are now used for staff accommodation. The staff who were formerly housed deeper in the reserve were relocated to the chalets to make it easier for them to travel to town, and also to access cellphone signal.

• Security

- A public road to the McCarthy's Rust border post with Botswana runs through the reserve but the gates are unstaffed, due to a lack of funding. Thus, there is no control over either entry or exit.
- Officials at the NWPTB Head Office report privately that finance for this reserve, and others in the province, “is a big problem.” “There is very little marketing, particularly for remote reserves like Molopo, so they have to make some money from hunting, but we are not sure how this money is spent,” one official said.

Administrative & Social Complexity

- The reserve operates with limited municipal revenue and capacity.
- Complex governance and slow permitting exacerbate delays for management actions, infrastructure projects, and wildlife movements.

Strategic Recommendations

1. **Rehabilitate core infrastructure:** upgrade access roads, ensure functional ablutions, install signage, and reintroduce staff presence.
2. **Re-evaluate co-management model:** consider renegotiating terms to balance conservation, regulated tourism, and community access.
3. **Expand and diversify tourism:** develop birding routes, research programs, basic lodging (chalets/camps), and targeted marketing to attract national/international visitors.
4. **Engage communities proactively:** align benefit-sharing—such as jobs and tourism income—with conservation outcomes.

Conclusion

Molopo Nature Reserve remains ecologically significant with potential for wildlife viewing, birding, and desert wilderness experiences. However, degraded infrastructure, controversial management practices, and limited tourism engagement hinder its viability. Reversing this trajectory requires coordinated investment, inclusive governance, and a strategic pivot toward sustainable eco-tourism and community partnership.



S.A. Lombard Nature Reserve, North West

4.8.8. S.A. Lombard Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Unknown. Closed to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** Unable to assess as entry was not permitted. Signboards at the entrance faded. Perimeter fence is good condition.
- **Wildlife:** Breeding of hunting-value wildlife. Hunting and auctions occur annually.
- **Management:** Unknown.
- **Accessibility:** Signposted. Access roads good.

4.9. Western Cape Province

Cape Nature is the public entity responsible for biodiversity conservation in the Western Cape, established in 1999. It operates under the Western Cape Biodiversity Act (2021) and reports to the provincial Department of Environment Affairs & Development Planning. The entity manages over 1-million hectares of public reserves, including 112 nature reserves and six marine protected areas¹⁷

Cape Nature faces challenges of financial irregularities, compliance gaps, environmental threats and capacity constraints. Common findings across the reserves visited were alien vegetation and illegal fishing in Marine Protected Areas that threaten the marine integrity of coastal reserves, while some reserves are permanently or partially closed to the public.

4.9.1. Anyenberg Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Good. Open to the public
- **Infrastructure:** Campsite, administration buildings, swimming pool and chalets well-maintained. Fences in disrepair in places, roads reasonable gravel.
- **Wildlife:** Home to unique flora habitat: fynbos, succulent Karoo and Albany thicket biomes. Fauna include mountain zebra, eland, kudu, aardvark, caracal hyena, jackal, leopards and the critically endangered riverine rabbit. One of the few sites in the country with riverine rabbit habitat. Alien vegetation along river systems is, however, a major concern that threatens the unique biome.
- **Management:** Staff present. Fairly well-managed. Lack of funding a concern.
- **Accessibility:** Well-signposted. Reasonable gravel roads.

¹⁷ <https://www.capenature.co.za/>

4.9.2. Assegaaibosch Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Poor. Open to the public
- **Infrastructure:** Neglected hiking trails and historical buildings.
- **Wildlife:** Alien vegetation is widespread.
- **Management:** No Cape Nature staff present. A volunteer intern accepted entrance fees and provided permits. A private security company guard manned the gate.
- **Accessibility:** Well-signposted and good tar road.

4.9.3. De Hoop Nature Reserve (Case Study)



De Hoop Nature Reserve, Western Cape

Status: Poor to Good

De Hoop Nature Reserve is a renowned biodiversity hotspot located in the Western Cape province of South Africa, approximately 260 km east of Cape Town. It forms part of the Cape Floral Region, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and is celebrated for its rich biodiversity, dramatic coastal landscapes, and exceptional marine ecosystems.

The reserve is widely regarded as a conservation success, generating significant revenue through private partnerships. Luxury accommodations such as De Hoop Collection, Lekkerwater, and Morukuru, along with an on-site restaurant, contribute to its financial sustainability. The ecological management of the reserve falls under the responsibility of CapeNature, the Western Cape's provincial conservation authority.

However, despite the income generated from these private initiatives, Cape Nature's ecological management has faced serious challenges. The reserve is increasingly affected by invasive alien plant species, particularly on the coastal dunes, and there are ongoing issues with poaching in the adjacent Marine Protected Area.

These problems are largely the result of insufficient funding, limited staff capacity, and inadequate implementation—issues not unique to De Hoop, but reflective of systemic constraints experienced by Cape Nature across its portfolio of reserves, as well as by provincial conservation authorities throughout South Africa.

Key Features

- **Biodiversity Hotspot**
 - Home to over 1,500 plant species, many of which are endemic to the Cape Floral Kingdom (fynbos).
 - Supports a variety of wildlife, including bontebok, eland, Cape mountain zebra, and baboon.
 - One of the best places to spot southern right whales from June to November — often close to shore.

- **Marine Protected Area**

- The adjacent De Hoop Marine Protected Area spans 5 km into the sea and is one of South Africa's largest.
- Vital breeding ground for whales, dolphins, and various fish species.
- No fishing or marine exploitation allowed.

- **Birdlife**

- Over 260 bird species, including the rare African black oystercatcher and blue crane.
- The vlei (wetland) within the reserve attracts waterfowl and waders, especially in the rainy season.

- **Geography and Environment**

- Encompasses coastal dunes, limestone cliffs, rocky shores, and wetlands.
- Covers an area of approximately 36,000 hectares.
- Its diverse landscapes support rich ecosystems and offer striking views and photography opportunities.

- **Activities**

- Hiking and mountain biking on various trails (e.g., Whale Trail, Vlei Trail).
- Guided nature drives and eco-tours.
- Whale watching, especially from the dunes at Koppie Alleen.
- Birdwatching, stargazing, and photography.

- **Accommodation**

- Offers a range of options from luxury lodges (e.g., Lekkerwater, De Hoop Collection and Morukuru Beach Lodge) to self-catering cottages (De Hoop Collection).

- **Conservation Importance**

- Plays a vital role in preserving fynbos vegetation, marine biodiversity, and endangered species.
- Part of a larger effort to maintain the ecological health of the Western Cape.

Challenges

De Hoop Nature Reserve, while protected and relatively remote, faces several environmental, ecological, and management challenges that impact its long-term sustainability and conservation goals. These challenges include:



Alien vegetation on the dunes

- Invasive Alien Species

- Problem: Invasive plants like rooikrans (*Acacia cyclops*) and Port Jackson wattle (*Acacia saligna*) outcompete native fynbos species, reducing biodiversity and altering fire regimes.
- Impact: Disrupts local ecosystems, increases fire risk, and demands continuous management efforts.

- Poaching and Illegal Harvesting

- Problem: While relatively rare compared to other regions, there have been incidents of illegal plant collection (especially of succulents) and poaching.
- Impact: Threatens rare and endangered species; undermines conservation efforts.

- Marine Ecosystem Threats

- Problem: Despite protection, the adjacent marine area is vulnerable to climate-driven changes, marine pollution, and illegal fishing beyond its borders.
- Impact: Disrupts fish populations, coral and kelp health, and whale breeding grounds.

- Funding and Resource Constraints

- Problem: Conservation and management efforts require sustained funding, staff, and infrastructure.
- Impact: Limited resources can hinder alien species removal, scientific monitoring, infrastructure maintenance, and education outreach.

In Summary:

While private partnerships are providing financial resources, these are not translated into adequate ecological management. De Hoop faces a complex mix of ecological threats, and resource limitations. Effective management depends on better resource allocation and providing capacity to deal with these challenges.



De Mond Nature Reserve, Western Cape

4.9.4. De Mond Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Good. Open to the public
- **Infrastructure:** Largely well-maintained although bridge to hiking trail connecting half of the reserve has been closed since 2023 due to disrepair. Funding problems have been the cause of delay. Day and multi-day hikes offered. No driving.
- **Wildlife:** Coastal estuary reserve. Illegal fishing (no permits) is a major concern.
- **Management:** Well-managed. Head ranger on hand to inform and assist. Regular patrols conducted.
- **Accessibility:** Well-signposted. Good gravel road.

4.9.5. Kogelberg Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Poor. Closed in parts (Koëel Bay closed; hiking trail from Rooi Els closed)
- **Infrastructure:** Well-maintained cabins but poorly maintained amenities at Koëel Bay (apparently closed for maintenance). Controversial razor-wire fence erected in Pringle Bay to prevent land invasion and squatting but to the detriment of wildlife such as the resident baboon troop.
- **Wildlife:** Baboon mismanagement complexities and permitting systems with surrounding towns of Betty's Bay, Pringle Bay and Rooi Els controversial. Alien vegetation widely present.
- **Management:** Very little management beyond staff at the public chalets.
- **Accessibility:** Well-signposted in parts. Good tar roads.

4.9.6. Riverlands Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Very poor. Closed to the public
- **Infrastructure:** Poor fencing, no access. Has an administrative building at the entrance. Hiking and cycling trails were evident. It is unclear if the reserve accepts any visitors.
- **Wildlife:** Signposted as an important conservation area as a "rare and endangered lowland fynbos hotspot" but in fact the whole reserve is completely overrun with alien vegetation, namely Port Jackson and eucalyptus. It is used as an illegal dumpsite from the nearby town of .
- **Management:** Appears abandoned.
- **Accessibility:** Difficult to locate due to lack of signage and accurate mapping. There is no advertising or marketing on the Cape Nature website.

4.9.7. Stony Point Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Good. Open to the public
- **Infrastructure:** Poorly maintained boardwalk despite recent 'repairs' in 2024.
- **Wildlife:** Important African penguin breeding colony facing threats from overfishing, pollution and anthropogenic factors in Betty's Bay such as predation from pets and fencing.
- **Management:** Staff present to take entrance fees. Poor funding and effective maintenance is lacking.
- **Accessibility:** Well-signposted. Good tar road.

4.9.8. Walker Bay (Uitkraalsmond) Nature Reserve

- **Status:** Very poor. Open to the public.
- **Infrastructure:** Popular fishing destination. Fishing permits required to be paid before arrival. 4x4 trail.
- **Wildlife:** Beach driving permitted despite presence of nesting African black oystercatchers. Alien vegetation is widespread. Fencing poor.
- **Management:** No Cape Nature staff present. Private security company accepts entrance fees. No evidence of alien vegetation clearing.
- **Accessibility:** Poorly and incorrectly signposted. Advertised on website and on maps as 'Walker Bay' but signposted as 'Uitkraalsmond'. Good tar road to entrance.



Walker Bay Nature Reserve, Western Cape

Case study: Closed Reserves

Overview

Of the 53 provincial nature reserves assessed, 16 were found to be either permanently or temporarily closed to the public. These closures threaten the potential for vital income needed to support conservation activities. This report categorises these reserves based on their current status: ‘paper parks,’ temporarily closed reserves, seasonally hunting-only reserves, and decommissioned reserves.

“Paper Parks” (Listed but Non-Operational)

- Borakalo National Park (North West)
- Leeuwfontein Nature Reserve (Gauteng)
- Hans Merensky Nature Reserve (Limpopo)
- Ma’nombe Nature Reserve (Limpopo)
- Modjadji Nature Reserve (Limpopo)
- Mthethomusha Nature Reserve (Mpumalanga)
- Akkerendam Nature Reserve (Northern Cape)
- Riverlands Nature Reserve (Western Cape)

Temporarily Closed Reserves (Refurbishment/Conflict Delays)

- Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve (Eastern Cape)
- Soetdoring Nature Reserve (Free State)
- Songimvelo Game Reserve (Mpumalanga)
- Parts of Kogelberg Nature Reserve (Western Cape)

Seasonal Hunting-Only Reserves

- Mpofu Nature Reserve (Eastern Cape)
- Tsolwana Nature Reserve (Eastern Cape)
- S.A. Lombard Nature Reserve (North-West)

Decommissioned Reserve

- Spitskop Nature Reserve (Northern Cape)

Conclusion

The closure of over a quarter of South Africa’s provincial reserves assessed—whether temporary, permanent, or for hunting—poses serious risks to biodiversity, community relations, and conservation funding. Many of these reserves

are in an advanced state of neglect or abandonment. A coordinated intervention strategy is urgently needed to restore functionality, ecological integrity, and public access across these protected areas.

5. Overview

This investigation into South Africa's provincial nature reserves reveals widespread challenges across all provinces, including financial mismanagement, poor infrastructure, lack of staff presence, poaching, and inadequate tourism development. While very few reserves are well-managed and remain ecologically significant, the majority face neglect, abandonment, or severe operational constraints. Common issues include:

- **Infrastructure Decay:** Many reserves suffer from crumbling infrastructure, poorly maintained roads and fences, and dilapidated accommodation, making them inaccessible or unappealing to visitors.
- **Wildlife and Conservation Concerns:** Poaching, snaring, and alien vegetation are rampant, threatening biodiversity. Some reserves have lost key species, such as rhinos, due to poaching and community disputes.
- **Management Failures:** Provincial departments and agencies often lack funding, capacity, and strategic planning, leading to ineffective management and disputes with local communities.
- **Tourism and Accessibility:** Weak marketing, poor signage, and limited community benefit-sharing hinder tourism potential. Many reserves are difficult to locate or require high-clearance vehicles for access.
- **Hunting Focus:** In several provinces, hunting and wildlife auctions take precedence over conservation and tourism, limiting public engagement.

Highlights:

- **Well-Managed Reserves:** A few reserves, such as Goegap (Northern Cape), Madikwe (North West), and De Mond (Western Cape), stand out for their good infrastructure, effective management, and ecological integrity.
- **Severely Neglected Reserves:** Reserves like Ma'nombe (Limpopo), Riverlands (Western Cape), and Akkerendam (Northern Cape) are effectively abandoned, with no staff presence or management.
- **Private Partnerships:** Reserves with private concessions, such as Madikwe (North West), De Hoop (Western Cape) and parts of Mkambati (Eastern Cape), show promise in maintaining infrastructure and wildlife, though conflicts with provincial policies persist.

Recommendations:

1. **Funding and Capacity:** Building: Increased funding and better resource allocation are critical to address infrastructure decay and management gaps.
2. **Community Involvement:** Strengthen partnerships with local communities to resolve disputes and ensure equitable benefit-sharing.
3. **Tourism Development:** Improve accessibility, signage, and marketing to attract visitors and generate revenue. Ditch the focus on hunting as this negatively impacts on photographic tourism potential.
4. **Conservation Prioritisation:** Focus on biodiversity protection and not intensive breeding in places, alien vegetation clearing, and effective anti-poaching measures to safeguard wildlife.

The findings underscore the urgent need for systemic reform and investment to restore South Africa's provincial reserves to their ecological and tourism potential.

6. Conclusion

The visible decay of South Africa's provincial reserves stands in stark contrast to its global conservation commitments. Addressing the administrative, infrastructural, and social roots of this crisis is urgent and essential—not only for biodiversity protection but also for community development and tourism.

This investigation into South Africa's Provincial Nature Reserves reveals a dire situation, with most reserves unable to fulfil their conservation objectives due to poor management, lack of funding, infrastructure decay, and strained community relations. Key issues include widespread poaching, invasive species, unresolved land claims, and inadequate staffing. Many reserves are effectively abandoned or exist only on paper, with some even repurposed for hunting or private ownership.

Despite their critical role in biodiversity conservation, ecological connectivity, and rural economic development, provincial reserves are severely underfunded and neglected. This undermines South Africa's ability to meet its international commitments, such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), and its national conservation goals.

Urgent intervention is needed to address these challenges, including improved funding, infrastructure refurbishment, skilled staffing, and better community engagement. Without immediate action, the decline of these reserves will continue, jeopardising South Africa's rich biodiversity and its potential for eco-tourism and community development. National and provincial governments must fulfil their legal obligations to ensure effective management and protection of these vital conservation areas.



Mkambati Nature Reserve, Eastern Cape