

AN AFRICAN SOLUTION

CO-FOUNDER OF AFRICAN PARKS, VICE-CHAIR & BOARD MEMBER 2003 – 2020 | MAVUSO MSIMANG

My love for nature goes back to my early years as a boy, when I used to walk beside my grandfather on morning walks on his farm outside Newcastle in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It did not happen during visits to national parks, which were somewhere else, and for others who were favoured by the apartheid government, and who did not look like me. But my interest was ignited then, and became the reason I earned a Bachelor of Science in Entomology, when my contemporaries were registering for politics, law and economics.

After living in exile for 30 years, I became the CEO of South African National Parks (SANParks) in 1997. That was when I truly experienced the wonder of nature, of wildlife living freely, in vast open spaces, for the first time. It changed my life. I spent my time there using the skills I had learned over the years in the political, development and public sectors to position SANParks for sustainability, and to ensure that the parks in my country were for all people.

While it is a more commonly held belief that people need parks – and they do – parks also need people. They need people to protect them, they need people to manage and to fund them, and they need people to value them. Without this, they will be lost, as many are being now.

During my time at SANParks, I also saw the need and the power of partnering with the private sector for more flexibility, to enhance accountability and for the ability to focus limited financial resources on transforming conservation. It was there that I met my co-founders of African Parks: Peter Fearnhead (current CEO of African Parks), Dr Anthony Hall Martin, Michael Eustace and Paul Fentener van Vlissingen, where, together, we came up with the greatest idea of our careers — to revolutionise protected area management.

In 2000, we founded African Parks, creating a new paradigm for conservation, which we envisioned would play a major role across the continent in helping African Governments turn their failing parks into ecological, socio-political, and economic strongholds for their countries. It was an African solution to one of Africa's

most pressing challenges, where little or no money existed, and few skills could be found.

In 2003, Malawi was the first country to entrust in us the management, and subsequently the resurrection, of Majete Wildlife Reserve. Seventeen years later, African Parks is managing four of Malawi's parks. African Parks is now responsible for 90% of the country's elephants, 100% of its rhinos and has brought back lions and cheetahs.

The parks are the largest employers in their respective regions and have remained so during the pandemic. Malawi even agreed to re-arrange its fiscal system to allow park revenues to be retained at the park level, an important political statement about the Government's commitment to the sustainability of the parks.

This was our vision: to effectively manage Africa's protected areas and national parks on behalf of Governments for the benefit of wildlife and for Africans. In fact, four of the parks under management have more than 90,000 people legally living within those landscapes, surviving thanks to the existence and vibrancy of those parks. African Parks is today managing 19 parks in 11 countries at the invitation of African Governments determined to realise their vision of securing their protected areas and saving their wildlife, creating value for their people.

There is a quiet and demonstrable transformation under way across the continent for protected areas, and that is because of the Governments that are gaining confidence and trust in the African Parks model, and for progressive funders who are investing in nature's capital. We are not stopping. This is a journey I helped create, and it will continue long after me, and all of us. But in the meantime, we will continue to do what we have always done. We will be persistent, we will be patient, and we will be polite, but with a ferocity knowing that this is the surest solution for any park in peril in Africa, and therefore for Africa's wildlife, and always for Africa's people. And that is a legacy of which I am most deeply proud.

Sincerely,
Mavuso Msimang

