



ENDANGERED
WILDLIFE TRUST

A Mountain of hope for the biodiversity and people of the Western Soutpansberg

6 December 2021

Start

A brand-new Nature Reserve is on its way to being declared in South Africa, a landmark moment for securing the future of the unique biodiversity and cultural heritage of the Soutpansberg Mountain Range.

Friday 3 December 2021 marked a pivotal moment for a visionary group of conservation-minded landowners, as a provincial Gazette Notice of Intent to Declare a Nature Reserve was published for the new Western Soutpansberg Nature Reserve. This is a critical step towards formally securing the Soutpansberg Mountain Range as a Nature Reserve under the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act, 57 of 2003 (NEM: PAA), the highest level of protection under the Act.

The Soutpansberg, situated in the north of Limpopo Province, contains many habitats, species diversity with high endemism (species that occur nowhere else), cultural heritage, water production, and communities that rely on the mountain. Despite being recognised as a Critical Biodiversity Area (CBA) Category 1 (highest conservation priority) by the Limpopo Conservation Authority, a priority area for conservation by the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), and an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area by BirdLife South Africa, less than 2% of this mountain is currently formally conserved. However, this is now changing.

The Endangered Wildlife Trust's (EWT) Soutpansberg Protected Area Programme (SPA) was established to kickstart the process of acquiring formal protection for a significant size of this mountainous landscape and has been working with Conservation Outcomes and ZZZ to guide landowners in the Soutpansberg through the process of conserving their properties through biodiversity stewardship. During this process, properties are assessed to determine their biodiversity value and conservation potential, which informs the suitable category of protection for their property. Formal assessments showed that all of the properties included have sufficient biodiversity and ecosystem services value to qualify as Nature Reserves under the NEM: PAA, and through signing the Notice of Intent to Declare a Nature Reserve, this has now been supported by the MEC of the Limpopo Department of Economic Development, Environment, and Tourism (LEDET). The publication of the Notice to Declare initiates a 60 day Public Participation process, where interested and affected parties are invited to comment.

The Soutpansberg landowners, including the EWT as the owner of Medike Mountain Reserve (within the proposed new Nature Reserve), decided to declare their properties, under one large Nature Reserve spanning the entire Western Soutpansberg, with one collective vision: to create a ***connected landscape under formal conservation, including priority species, habitats, hydrologically important areas, and cultural heritage, for the benefit of biodiversity, ecosystems, and people in perpetuity.***

The proposed Nature Reserve consists of 31 properties spanning over 22,000 ha of pristine mountain and valley bushveld. The reserve will become a new icon for Limpopo, attracting nature and cultural heritage enthusiasts who wish to enjoy the spectacular environment, and at the same time, contribute to local economic development through tourism and new opportunities in the green economy.



Figure 1 and 2: Rock art in the Soutpansberg and a Soutpansberg Flat Lizard (*Platysaurus relictus*), endemic to the Soutpansberg area

The Western Soutpansberg Nature Reserve is one of eight reserves included in the Limpopo Gazette notice, an important step forward for conservation in the province. Once declared, these new Nature Reserves will contribute to South Africa's Protected Area Estate and international protected area targets set by the Convention on Biological Diversity in the Post-2020 Biodiversity Framework.

The Gazette notice, published on 3 December 2021, is available on the Provincial Gazette web page: <http://www.gpwonline.co.za/Gazettes/Pages/Provincial-Gazettes-Limpopo.aspx>. Interested parties are invited to send letters of support directly to the LEDET Protected Area Manager as advertised on the Gazette notice.

The work of the project team was made possible by the funding and support of The Rainforest Trust, The Coca-Cola Foundation's Replenish Africa Initiative (RAIN), Fondation Franklinia, ZZ2, and Douglas Wilson.

End

About the Endangered Wildlife Trust

The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) has worked tirelessly for nearly 50 years to save wildlife and habitats, with a vision to promote a healthy planet and an equitable world that values and sustains the diversity of all life. The EWT's team of field-based specialists is spread across southern and East Africa, where committed conservation action is needed the most. Working with our partners, including businesses and governments, the EWT is at the forefront of conducting applied research, supporting community conservation and livelihoods, training and building capacity, addressing human-wildlife conflict, monitoring threatened species, and establishing safe spaces for wildlife range expansion. A beacon of hope for Africa's wildlife, landscapes, and communities, the EWT is protecting forever, together. Find out more at www.ewt.org.za

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Figure 3: Some of the landowners and project partners during one of their planning meetings in 2019. They have been working together since 2018 towards a common vision of protecting the Western Soutpansberg.



Figure 4: The Soutpansberg Mountains are a unique and magical place