

ZUMA CALLS FOR BALANCE IN ST LUCIA DEVELOPMENT

Park must be used 'wisely'

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DEPUTY President Zuma has called for the wise use of the Greater St Lucia Wetland Park for future generations, balancing conservation and development - development that brings new wealth and jobs to the people of Maputaland without destroying the great beauty of the region.

Opening the St Lucia Wetlands Festival of Living Treasures, he said the declaration of the park as a World Heritage Site marked a new beginning, the start of the exploration and conservation of the "intellectual property" of the people of the region and their economic empowerment.

World recognition of the Greater St Lucia Wetlands as a place of outstanding cultural and natural value stressed the grave responsibility South Africans had as custodians of this special place - to protect its heritage not only for the country's own people but for all humanity.

Mr Zuma said St Lucia's great beauty was contrasted with stark poverty and underdevelopment, where decades of neglect had stunted the great potential of its people.

More than 95% of homesteads earned less than R450 a month.

The great challenge to the region was to use its natural beauty to bring reconstruction and development to the people of Maputaland.

"Our duty is not just to conserve our special places but also to develop them for the benefit of our people."

At the heart of the government's spatial development initiative delivery programme was the development of the GSLWP Authority and tendering of lead investments.

While the park had the potential to offer a world-class combination of land, fresh water and marine activities, its fragmented ownership and management had meant it had remained severely underdeveloped.

This had been exacerbated by commercial afforestation on the eastern and western shores, the

impact of land claims on investor confidence and the SANDF's Hell's Gate military base.

"What could be one of the world's great destinations, combining the Big Five with beaches, lakes, forests and coral reefs, has remained an under-performing patchwork suffering from a lack of infrastructure and co-ordinated development."

The government, he said, was setting up a dedicated authority for the park to accelerate development and create sustainable jobs, and the conditions for an internationally competitive tourism destination in line with the best international practice.

Sixteen parcels of land would be consolidated under a certificate of uniform title. The GSLWP Authority would be a separate legal entity enabled by the new World Heritage Act of 1999. Its structure was designed to balance responsible environmental management with optimal tourism and local economic development.

Empowered

And for the first time local government and local structures would be empowered in a meaningful way by participating in policy and decision-making in the park, Mr Zuma said.

One of the key potential development areas was cultural tourism, which would attract the sort of investment that created work without spoiling the natural beauty and resources of the region.

Increasingly, tourists and travellers were searching for a unique "cultural experience".

The people of Maputaland, he said, knew they had an abundance of untapped natural resources to share that provided endless possibilities for them.

Mr Zuma challenged visitors and residents of KwaZulu-Natal to "discover the spirit that stirs the soul of Africa in the vast and majestic kingdom of the Zulu at the start of the new millennium".

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PICTURE: STEVEN HILTON-BARBER
RICKSHA RIDER: Deputy President Zuma joins in the fun at the St Lucia Wetlands dance and music festival, arriving in fine style at the estuary mouth.