

South Africa’s Rural Housing Revolution: What Does It Mean for Maruleng?



Bert Hofhuis
Hoedspruit Concerned Ratepayers Association

South Africa is experiencing a significant shift in its property market, one that is increasingly reshaping both rural areas and secondary towns. Two trends are driving this change: the growing movement of urban professionals investing in customary (communal) land, and the migration of middle-class families from major metropolitan areas to smaller regional centres in search of affordability, lifestyle benefits and greater flexibility.

Growth in Traditional Areas

Research led by Dr Phillan Zamchiya, a senior researcher at the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), working with the Nkuzi Development Association, has documented this trend in the Capricorn West district of Limpopo - where urban professionals from Polokwane are building large homes on customary land in villages such as Kwena Moloto and Ceres, often without formal title deeds, in part to avoid municipal rates.

Commentary on the broader pattern beyond Limpopo - including

Beautiful view of the Drakensberg Mountains

Image: Compuinfo Getty Images

in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape - has been raised by socio-economic commentator Zimasa Vabaza, though this remains observation rather than peer-reviewed research.

The research also points to the emergence of informal land brokers who facilitate access to land outside formal processes. While these arrangements may provide opportunities for development, they also raise concerns about governance, land administration and long-term planning.

Several factors make these areas attractive:

- Land can be acquired at relatively low cost compared with urban property.
- Many developments are located close to existing towns and infrastructure.
- Building and living costs are often lower than in formal urban areas.
- Residents may have access to municipal services without contributing proportionally to the rates base that funds those services.

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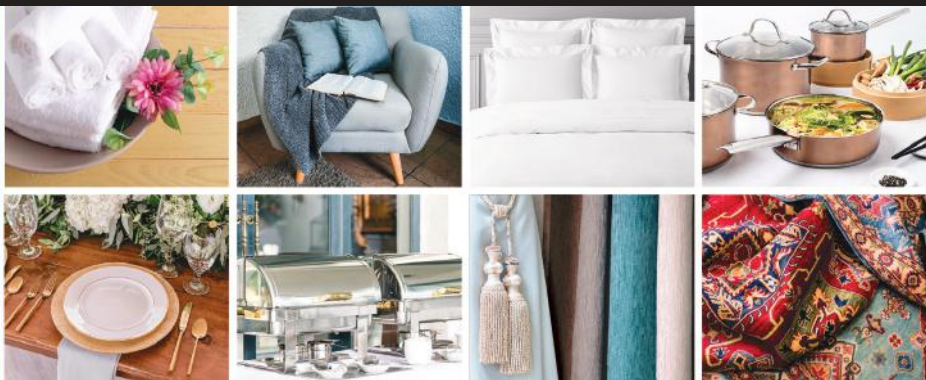
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From the Editor

Dear Editor,

This morning I ventured down Buffel Street and, for a moment, thought I'd stumbled onto the set of a post-apocalyptic movie. Sadly, there were no cameras - just another ordinary day.

Then, as if the universe has a wicked sense of humour, my phone pinged. It was a WhatsApp invitation to the monthly Hoedspruit Town Cleanup on Friday, 24 July. Residents were warmly invited to volunteer ... provided they brought their own gloves and refuse bags.

How wonderfully efficient.

It appears the self-proclaimed "Safari Capital of South Africa" has embraced a bold new service delivery model: ratepayers pay municipal rates, then volunteer to provide the municipal services themselves.

I was reminded of your excellent headline of 24 April: "Hoedspruit Ratepayers Are Funding a Municipality. What Is the Municipality

Funding?"

An excellent question. Certainly not street sweepers. Not refuse bags. Not gloves.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the municipality, capital projects worth almost R225 million continue to gather momentum. Apparently, money has mastered long-distance migration - just not in the direction of Hoedspruit.

Consider this: my R4.5 million home in Durbanville would attract municipal rates of about R2,000 per month. For that I would receive clean drinking water, reliable refuse collection, functioning roads, rapid repairs to leaks and potholes, and a municipality that actually performs the mundane miracle of being municipal.

My R4.5 million property outside Hoedspruit attracts municipal rates of more than R4,000 per month. Then I pay my Homeowners' Association another R5,000 every month to provide the roads, water, refuse removal and infrastructure that my municipal

pal rates apparently cannot.

It's a fascinating arrangement. We don't receive municipal services. We simply sponsor the municipality while privately buying the services elsewhere. The economists might describe this as an unsustainable fiscal model. The accountants may call it a structural imbalance. Around the braai, however, there's a much simpler expression.

We're paying champagne prices for an empty glass or extraction.

Perhaps next month's cleanup invitation should include another request: "Please also bring your own street sweeper, refuse truck and municipal manager."

At this rate, all we'll need from the municipality is somewhere to send the rates bill.

Yours faithfully,

ED: At the time of going to print it was too late to ask the Municipality for comment - but we will be following up.

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We have been operating for 17 years in Hoedspruit and are here because of our love for the bush and the lifestyle that living here allows.

What's the hardest part of operating here that businesses in larger centres don't face?

The challenges we have are long lead times from first contact with a client to the final completion of a sale or rental.

What does the Lowveld economy get right that the rest of South Africa could learn from?

There are multiple economic drivers for our region, strong agriculture, excellent tourism and a robust property sector, supported by a very safe environment.

What are you watching closely in your sector right now - locally or continentally?

I'm watching the global economy closely and fall out after the Iran conflict - and if it will be seen in Hoedspruit.

What's the one thing you wish your customers understood better about what you do?

The amount of knowledge and cost that is required in order to offer a professional service.

What does your business contribute to the Lowveld beyond the transaction?

Hoedspruit brand building, ambassadorship and anonymous sponsorships.

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Sheri-Lee at hoedspruit@century21.co.za or call 015 793 1534.



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COMING SOON

South Africa’s Rural Housing Revolution: What Does It Mean for Maruleng?

Cont. from page 1

As more economically active residents settle outside formal municipal rating areas, local governments may struggle to grow their revenue base sufficiently to maintain and expand infrastructure and services.

Ironically, many of these residents continue to work, shop, attend schools and conduct business in nearby towns, meaning they remain closely connected to urban economies despite living outside them.

The Rise of Secondary Towns

At the same time, South Africa’s secondary towns are experiencing unprecedented growth.

Remote and hybrid working arrangements have reduced the need for many professionals to live close to major economic centres. As a result, buyers are increasingly choosing smaller towns that offer a better quality of life, lower living costs and access to natural amenities.

This trend has driven strong demand for housing in many regional centres, pushing up property values and placing increasing pressure on local infrastructure.

Has the Trend Reached Maruleng?

The evidence suggests that it has. Satellite imagery and local observation reveal substantial high standard residential development in communal areas surrounding Hoedspruit and Kampersrus. The Scotia Communal Property Association area, for example, has seen a noticeable increase in large residential properties over recent years.

At the same time, Hoedspruit has become one of South Africa’s most sought-after lifestyle destinations. The growth of wildlife and residential estates around the town has attracted retirees, remote workers, tourism entrepreneurs and international investors seeking a unique combination of bushveld living and modern convenience.

This influx of residents has contributed to a dramatic increase in property values. Residential prop-

erty prices in many parts of Hoedspruit have effectively doubled over the past five years, supported in part by international demand and favourable exchange rates.

For the municipality, rising property values have translated into increased rates revenue. For homeowners, however, the cost of living has risen significantly, particularly when municipal rates are combined with homeowners’ association levies and other service costs.

A Growing Regional Challenge

Hoedspruit has evolved from a small agricultural and tourism town into a regional economic hub. Yet much of the surrounding population continues to face limited economic opportunities, high unemployment and inconsistent municipal service delivery.

This creates competing expectations within the municipality.

Residents and property owners in Hoedspruit and Kampersrus often prioritise:

- Effective governance and accountability.
- Reliable infrastructure and service delivery.
- Environmental protection.
- Value for the rates and charges they pay.

Residents in surrounding rural communities often seek:

- Greater access to employment opportunities.
- Improved housing and public services.
- Increased public investment in their areas.
- Faster delivery of long-promised development projects.

Balancing these priorities is one of the most important challenges facing the Maruleng Local Municipality.

Following the Money

The financial realities facing Maruleng Local Municipality are becoming increasingly significant. According to the approved 2026/27 municipal budget, property rates now account for approximately 46% of municipal revenue, with government grants contributing a further 47%. If the R34 million

in grant funding - currently under review - must be repaid this financial year, government’s effective contribution drops to roughly 33% - pushing the municipality’s dependence on its own rates base even higher.

Ratepayers in Wards 1 and 2 - Hoedspruit and Kampersrus - carry a disproportionate share of this burden relative to their numbers, though the precise share is difficult to pin down: population-based estimates suggest ratepaying households in these wards may represent somewhere close to 3% of Maruleng’s total population, though this excludes commercial and lodge properties rated separately, and isn’t a substitute for the actual count of rateable accounts on the valuation roll. Despite this contribution, no capital expenditure has been allocated to these wards in the approved budget.

Ratepayers have also seen their municipal rates effectively double over the past five years, driven by rapidly increasing property valuations and a cents-in-the-Rand tariff that is significantly higher than those charged by many of South Africa’s best-performing municipalities. As a result, Maruleng’s reliance on property rates is substantially above the national average of 16% to 18%, according to Stats SA.

Concerns have also been raised about the quality of the municipality’s planning processes. Critics argue that the 2026/27 Integrated Development Plan (IDP) contains outdated information, numerous errors and little evidence of a coherent strategy to stimulate economic growth or broaden the municipal revenue base. This is particularly concerning given that the municipality holds accumulated reserves, reported by the mayor, at more than R176 million at a recent public meeting.

Among the issues frequently raised by ratepayers are the lack of infrastructure investment in the municipality’s primary revenue-generating areas, ongoing water and sanitation failures, uncertainty surrounding the supply of potable water to Hoedspruit, and the absence of meaningful economic development initiatives. There are

also legal constraints that prevent municipal funds from being spent on infrastructure within the Scotia/Moletele CPA area despite growing development there.

As government funding declines, the long-term sustainability of Maruleng will increasingly depend on protecting and growing the economic areas that generate its revenue. The central question is whether municipal planning and spending priorities adequately recognise this reality.

Lessons from Local History

Maruleng has faced this kind of strain before. The 2015 conflict at The Oaks showed how quickly local grievances escalate when communities feel shut out of decisions and communication between stakeholders’ collapses.

A study in the Journal of Public Administration (Vol. 52, No. 2, June 2017) found that governance failures and weak stakeholder engagement drove that escalation - and that legitimate community concerns can be inflamed further once political interests get involved. The lesson hasn’t gone away: budgets and infrastructure plans don’t hold if the people funding them, and the people needing them, don’t trust the process.

Maruleng’s finances depend on a small ratepayer base in Hoedspruit and Kampersrus; weaken that base and everyone loses, including the rural communities the municipality is trying to serve. A municipality cannot redistribute wealth that has not first been created.

That leaves a direct question for Maruleng’s council and municipal manager: with reserves reported at more than R176 million, and property rates from Wards 1 and 2 carrying the bulk of the budget, why does the approved 2026/27 IDP allocate no capital expenditure to those wards? Ratepayers deserve an answer.

Note: The Maruleng Municipality has made it quite clear that it will not correspond or interact with the HCRPA



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We Asked AI What Hoedspruit Will Look Like in 10 Years. The Answer Was Uncomfortable.

The AI Perspective

We asked an artificial intelligence system a simple question: What will Hoedspruit look like in 10 years? The answer was not dramatic in the Hollywood sense. There were no flying taxis, no robot rangers marching through the bush, no chrome-plated future city rising between the Drakensberg and Kruger. In fact, that was the uncomfortable part. The answer felt far too believable.

AI did not describe a destroyed town. It described something more subtle: a town that had grown, gained, expanded, attracted investment, welcomed new people, built more roads, opened more businesses, added more estates, pushed further into the bush - and, in the process, quietly lost some of the very things that made people come here in the first place.

That is the strange danger of growth. It does not always arrive as a disaster. Sometimes it arrives as convenience. More shops. More traffic. More security gates. More delivery vehicles. More roofs where there used to be trees. More light at night. More noise. More "lifestyle developments" using the language of nature while steadily replacing nature with infrastructure.

AI's imagined Hoedspruit of 2036 was still beautiful. That almost made it worse. The mountains were still there. The bushveld still framed the town. Tourists still came. Lodges still sold wilderness. Wildlife still appeared in marketing photographs. But the balance had shifted.

The place had become less wild and more branded as wild.

That is a sentence worth sitting with. Hoedspruit has always carried an unusual tension. It is not just a town.

It is a meeting point between conservation, tourism, farming, aviation, development, private reserves, community life, and ordinary survival. It is not a museum. It cannot be frozen in time. People need houses, work, schools, medical care, reliable infrastructure, and opportunity.

So, this is not an argument against growth. That would be lazy.

The real question is whether growth is being led by a clear idea of what Hoedspruit is, or whether Hoedspruit is simply being pulled along by whoever has land, money, pressure, or a plan.

AI was blunt about this. It predicted that if development continues without a strong shared identity, Hoedspruit could become another attractive semi-rural town with a wildlife theme. Not ruined. Not failed. Just diluted.

And dilution is harder to fight than destruction, because people often only notice it once it has already happened.

Nobody wakes up one morning and says, "Today the character of the town disappeared." It happens one small approval, one cleared stand, one bright sign, one badly placed building, one widened road, one short-term decision at a time.

The uncomfortable part of the AI answer was not that it predicted doom. It predicted mediocrity. A busier Hoedspruit. A wealthier Hoedspruit. A more developed Hoedspruit. A more convenient Hoedspruit. But not necessarily a better Hoedspruit. That distinction matters.

AI also pointed to a second pressure: the gap between the story Hoedspruit tells about itself and the reality it may be building. We market the region through wilderness, open space, biodiversity, views, wildlife, and an escape from urban noise. But if every piece of land is treated

mainly as a development opportunity, that story begins to collapse under its own contradiction.

You cannot sell peace while manufacturing noise. You cannot market wilderness while removing habitat. You cannot claim uniqueness while copying the same development patterns found everywhere else.

The future AI described was not inevitable. It was conditional. That is the useful part. AI is not a prophet. It does not know what will happen. It works by recognising patterns and extending them forward. In other words, it does not reveal fate. It reveals trajectory. And trajectories can be changed.

A better Hoedspruit in 10 years is possible. But it will require a more adult conversation than "development is good" versus "development is bad." That debate is too shallow for a place this important.

The better question is: what kind of development belongs here?

Not every idea that brings money is good for the town. Not every project that uses the words "eco", "wild", "bush", or "sustainable" is automatically aligned with the character of the place. Not every investor understands the responsibility that comes with building in a sensitive region. Not every objection to development is anti-progress either.

Sometimes objection is memory. Sometimes caution is wisdom. Sometimes the person asking difficult questions is the only one paying attention.

AI suggested that the towns and regions that survive growth best are those that decide what must not be lost before it is gone. That is a powerful point. Hoedspruit needs to know its non-negotiables.

Dark skies should be one. Sense of place should be one. Ecological corridors should be one. Architectural restraint should be one. Water aware-

ness should be one. The relationship between town and wilderness should be one. The idea that this is not simply land to be consumed should be one.

Because once the bushveld becomes a backdrop instead of a living system, something essential has already been surrendered. There is another possibility, though.

AI also imagined a Hoedspruit that grows with discipline. A town that becomes a model for how conservation regions can develop without becoming theme parks of themselves. A town where better planning protects both economic opportunity and ecological identity. A town where tourism, local business, landowners, conservationists, and residents stop behaving as separate islands and start defending the same long-term value.

That version of Hoedspruit is not romantic. It is practical. Because the wildness of this place is not just sentimental. It is economic infrastructure. It is why people visit, invest, retire, relocate, open businesses, and bring their families here. Damage that, and you do not merely lose beauty. You weaken the foundation of the local economy.

The AI answer was uncomfortable because it placed responsibility back where it belongs: with people. Not technology. Not algorithms. Not some distant future. Us.

The next 10 years will not be shaped by AI predictions. They will be shaped by council decisions, development approvals, landowner choices, business pressure, public silence, public courage, and whether the people who live here can agree that growth without identity is not progress.

AI can show us a possible future. It cannot care about that future. That part is still our job.

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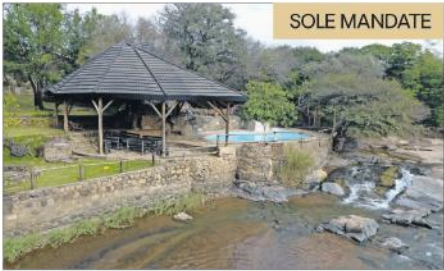
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Elevated stone cottage with thatched roof features open-plan living, loft area, and two bedrooms. Front covered patio leads to a rock pool with panoramic mountain views. Includes a luxurious bathroom, outdoor shower, air conditioning, garage with storage, and private walking trails.
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ZANDSPRUIT BUSH & AERO ESTATE
Beds 3 | Baths 2 | Floor: 422 m²

Stylish home in a secure estate with open-plan living, high-end finishes and mountain views. Living area flows to a covered patio, pool, braai and boma. Modern kitchen with separate scullery and double garage (2.6m clearance). Features include solar system, security cameras & fibre connectivity.
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Brand new home overlooking a seasonal river features an open-plan living area, high ceilings, and premium SMEG kitchen. Patio leads to a raised pool, deck, and boma with pizza oven. Includes three air-conditioned bedrooms, outdoor showers, double carport, and solar backup.
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Beds 3 | Baths 4 | Floor: 380m²

Exceptional riverfront home offering luxury living with mountain views. All bedrooms en-suite, separate master suite, open-plan living, and a study. Expansive entertainment deck with a pool overlooks the riverbed. Features full solar power, air conditioning, and four-vehicle covered parking.
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ESCARPIA ECO ESTATE, KAMPERSRUS
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Available 1 August 2026 - Charming unfurnished home features 2 en-suite bedrooms with ceiling fans. Open-plan living space flows to a covered patio & private bushveld garden. Secure estate living with walking distance to the communal pool. Water and wifi excluded. Prepaid electricity.
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My 5 Sent

Oupa Bobbili

Kom ons wees eerlik AI – “Artificial Intelligence” of Kunsmatige Intelligensie, maak ons lewens darem baie makliker. Kom ons wees eerlik teenoor die negatiewe kant ook, dit maak ons lekker lui. Dink mos glad nie meer vir ons self nie. En ons beweeg nie, ons plak voor die tegnologie. Jare terug het ons van alles and almal geweet. Jy het geweet wat in die gemeenskap aangaan, Vandag ken ons skaars ons bure. Ek lees vanoggend op FB dat daar is ‘n vrou wat wil weet waarheen kan sy gaan om legkaarte uit te ruil. Ek sê so ewe vir myself, wie doen nog sulke goed vandag? En waaragtig daar was ‘n reaksie en dit gebeur nog.

Ek kan onthou jy het nie sommer

vet mense gekry so dertig jaar terug nie, ons het beweeg, ons het na mense in die gemeenskap toe gestap en gaan kuier. Kerk toe en terug gestap. Net die mense wat ver gebly het gery. Nou kerk ons sommer van YouTube af. Ons lees van almal en alles op FB. Liedjies word nou sommer gemaak op die foon, en die arme kunstenaars kry swaar.

Al neem alles oor. Skool take, huis werk en sommer net n mooi gedig vir mamma as jy in die moeilikheid is. Ek kan die hele 5 Sent ding van AI afkry, maar dan is my opinie ook maar net kunsmatig. Ek wil dit darem nog so na aan eg as moontlik hou. Ons het nodig om bietjie die hart te hoor en van te lees. So bietjie ons stem dik maak oor iets, en om goeie opregte komplimente te

gee waar dit nodig is. Die Skepper het ons die dink vermoë gegee en ons moet dit gebruik. Ons moet redeneer en tot kompromie kan kom sonder AI.

Stel jou voor, jy en vrouliet het ‘n lekker argument en jy sê vir haar wag net gou, en jy vra AI “How to win an argument with a red-headed wife”! Jou begrafnis sal tragies wees, glo my. Ons moet ons breins aan die gang hou, en ons kan AI en sosiale media gebruik tot ons voordele vir dit. Hou op lui wees, en skryf daai gedig en lied jouself. Laat die vrou van AI jou net help met spelling dit is al.

Ek het in my lewe baie liederes en gedigte geskryf. Ink het gedrup van my hart en siel wat vandag nog op papier vas geopen is. Ek sit by my dogter hulle vir haar

verjaardag en reken sy my, dat hulle AI musiek maak. Drie van my liederes is reeds op die rekenaar gedoen en gesing deur ‘n elektroniese stem. So maklik soos val uit ‘n boom. Maar die oorsprong is nog eg en dit maak die hart so ‘n bietjie bly.

Ons het al die goed tot ons voordeel, ons moet dit net nie misbruik tot ons nadeel nie. Ek reken ons het meer tyd vir familie en persoonlike dinge, noudat die komper meeste van ons werk kan doen en dan sommer vir ons dink ook. Eintlik raak ons verskonings minder om met mense te kuier en mekaar met vertrouwe in die oë te kan kyk.

Groete

When is Tax Planning “Too Clever”? A New Court Case Sheds Some Light

Suzanne Smit

If you’ve ever wondered whether it is legal to arrange your affairs to pay less tax, the tax court has just given us new insight, and it’s more nuanced than a simple “yes” or “no”. *Company AF (Pty) Ltd v the Commissioner of SARS (“the case”)* has taken another look at our General Anti-Avoidance Rules in terms of the Income Tax Act, or “GAAR”.

GAAR is the law allowing SARS to look into transactions it believes were designed purely to avoid tax. The case involved a taxpayer who restructured a shareholding using a dividend, followed by a share subscription, instead of simply selling the shares outright, resulting in much less tax payable as a result. SARS argued that this was an artificial scheme to avoid tax and the taxpayer argued it was simply a smart way to do a genuine, commercial deal.

Who Won?

The court accepted SARS’s arguments on the main issue, but the taxpayer walked away with some wins too. The court agreed with SARS that the arrangement fell within the realm of the GAAR, but it also confirmed something important that taxpayers have relied on for years: the “choice principle” in terms of the *Conhage* case. *Conhage* confirmed that if the law gives you two ways to reach the same result, you may pick the most efficient tax route. The tax court did not discard this principle, and confirmed that it is still valid.

But Here’s The Catch

The judgment draws a sharper line than before and in effect held that it



is not enough that the *end result* of your restructuring makes commercial sense. Every individual step, especially any step that exists mainly to save tax, needs to be part of a genuine commercial journey and is not just interposed for its tax effect. In this case, the court found that while the eventual sale had a genuine, commercial purpose, the dividend-and-subscription mechanism used to get there, served no purpose other than to save tax. This distinction sank the taxpayer’s case.

For taxpayers, business owners, and anyone doing estate or investment planning, this is the headline lesson: tax efficiency is still allowed, but each step in a plan needs its own honest commercial justification.

A Silver Lining on Penalties

Losing the GAAR argument did not mean that the taxpayer lost everything. SARS had also initially imposed a hefty understatement penalty, arguing the arrangement was deliberately abusive. The court disagreed and remitted the penalty entirely. The reason was based on the correct

application of understatement penalties in terms of our Tax Administration Act considering the taxpayer’s behaviour, and not the tax avoided. The court drew a clear distinction between getting the tax law wrong and the taxpayer’s behaviour.

In this instance, the taxpayers had:

1. fully disclosed the transaction to SARS as a reportable arrangement;
2. not misrepresented any facts; and
3. relied on specific and professional advice given at a time when this area of law was genuinely unsettled.

The court’s reasoning is a useful reminder for everyone: being wrong about a legal question is different from being dishonest or careless. If you’ve taken proper advice, been transparent with SARS and the law later turns out not to be in your favour, that shouldn’t automatically cost you a penalty on top of the tax bill (i.e. additional assessment).

Why This Matters Beyond One Court Case

The judgment also grapples with the relationship between the GAAR and more specific “dividend-stripping” rules introduced in our tax law. The court found that even before those specific “dividend-stripping” rules existed, the GAAR was already wide enough to catch this type of arrangement (or transaction). This means that newer, stricter rules in the law did not create a brand-new risk, they simply reinforced protections that, in the court’s view, already existed.

The Takeaway For The Rest of Us

You are still allowed to structure your affairs sensibly to reduce tax, but this case is a reminder that SARS and the courts are looking more closely at why each step in a transaction exists, not just whether the overall outcome looks legitimate. If you’re planning a significant transaction, restructuring a business, or doing estate planning, it’s worth getting advice that can show the commercial rationale for every moving part, not just the arrangement or transaction as a whole. It is important to note that Tax Court judgments are not binding and do not create formal precedent, but that they do carry persuasive value and help set the tone for the broader tax landscape.

We will be watching closely to see whether this matter proceeds on appeal to the High Court, i.e. a court of record whose rulings are binding.

This article is a general summary for informational purposes and does not constitute tax or legal advice. Anyone considering a transaction of this nature should consult a qualified tax advisor.

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Building a better waste system for Bushbuckridge



Not just a once-off clean-up, this element of the event gave context to the broader picture and need for better waste management solutions in BLM (far left).

Kenielwe Mmushi, K2C Catchment Monitoring & Evaluation Officer presented information on the impact of waste on the catchments and community health (middle).

Representatives from the Innovative Solutions for Waste Team who coordinated the Mandela Day event and are driving the broader waste management work in Bushbuckridge.

Images supplied: K2C Biosphere

Lauren Booth
Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Communications Manager

Waste management remains a significant challenge in parts of Bushbuckridge, where limited formal waste collection, inadequate recycling infrastructure and a history of illegal dumping place pressure not only on communities, but also on rivers and water sources in the area.

Changing that picture will take more than once-off clean-ups - it requires better systems, stronger infrastructure, local participation and opportunities for waste to be recovered and reused, rather than discarded.

This is the direction of work currently being supported through the Innovative Solutions for Waste (ISOW) partnership in Bushbuckridge Local Municipality, with the Kruger to Canyons Biosphere (K2C) and Plastics SA among the local implementation partners.

Earlier baseline and feasibility work in Thulamahashe and Acornhoek examined existing waste-management systems and infrastructure through engagement with municipal representatives, waste reclaimers, landfill operations, local businesses and a buy-back centre. The

studies are helping partners to build a better understanding of existing waste flows, collection systems and infrastructure, while exploring practical opportunities for waste beneficiation and local enterprise development.

A proposed Waste Beneficiation Centre is in the feasibility and planning stage, while wider efforts are also looking at how Separation at Source practices can be strengthened in the area. For K2C, part of this work includes exploring opportunities together with the community, for local SMMEs in areas such as waste sorting, baling and recycling.

On 17th July, around 200 people gathered in Thulamahashe Section B for a Mandela Day clean-up and recycling awareness campaign. Participants worked along the Sand River and surrounding community areas, removing litter and waste while raising awareness of the impacts of illegal dumping.

The location of the clean-up highlighted an important connection between waste management, water quality and community health. Where waste enters rivers and waterways, the consequences extend beyond untidy surroundings and become part of a broader challenge around healthy environments and access to clean water.

The day also provided an opportunity to introduce practical waste-separation systems at Eric Nxumalo High School and to launch a School Recycling Programme. Thirty-eight waste reclaimers took part in dedicated training, while indigenous trees were planted and shared with neighbouring schools and community members.

These activities support wider efforts to encourage Separation at Source in the Municipality and to involve communities directly in both understanding the waste challenge and to be part of conceptualising and implementing solutions. The event also emphasised the role of recycling, waste beneficiation and enterprise development in turning recovered materials into useful products and creating business opportunities.

The event brought together Plastics SA, K2C, Bushbuckridge Local Municipality, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH, the Mpumalanga Department of Health and participating Producer Responsibility Organisations. The attendance of Mpumalanga MEC for Health Ms S.J. Manzini and the Executive Mayor of Bushbuckridge Local Municipality, Cllr M.L. Moroane, also reflected growing recognition at senior municipal and provincial government

level of the need to address waste-management challenges in the region.

While the Mandela Day campaign offered visible action, the longer-term work lies in building systems that make responsible waste management possible on a day-to-day basis. "A collaborative approach to waste management can help us build cleaner communities while creating sustainable green opportunities for local communities," said Hope Morema, K2C / Plastics SA ISOW On-site Project Manager.

For Bushbuckridge, the path towards better waste management is still being built. But the combination of baseline and feasibility work, growing attention to Separation at Source, support for waste reclaimers, exploration of local SMME opportunities and greater engagement from government indicates a more coordinated response.

The challenge now is to keep that momentum moving, from cleaning up waste after it has been dumped, to building the systems, infrastructure and local opportunities that prevent it from becoming waste in the first place.

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Klaserie Drift Amani: An exciting new chapter in the

Klaserie Drift Amani at a glance

- 7 luxury Riverbed Suites with private plunge pools
- 3 well-appointed lodge suites
- Accommodates up to 20 guests for exclusive use
- Outdoor dining, bar, and boma areas
- Spacious gardens and swimming pools
- Twice daily game drives
- Fully inclusive safari experience

Why South Africans love it

- Just one hour from Hoedspruit
- Big Five Greater Kruger
- All-inclusive luxury
- Family-friendly
- Romantic escapes
- Group celebrations
- Fully off grid (no load-shedding)
- South African resident specials available!



Local Correspondent

Lions calling at first light. Elephants crossing the dry riverbed as you swim. A leopard draped over a marula branch, in no hurry to move. This is the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve - one of the Greater Kruger's wildest, least-discovered corners - and it's where Klaserie Drift Amani, the newest chapter in the Klaserie Drift collection, has made its home.

Low car density means sightings unfold at their own pace here, not on anyone else's schedule. A stay might mean a couple escaping the city for a few days, a family introducing their children to the bush for the first time, or a wedding party gathering under one of South Africa's most spectacular skies. Whatever brings guests to Amani, the bush has a way of pulling them closer together - around the boma fire, over breakfast on the deck, in the pause between drives when nobody reaches for their phone.

A Lodge Built For Every Occasion

Seven Riverbed Suites, each with a private plunge pool and uninterrupted views across the riverbed, offer the privacy serious escapes

call for. Three beautifully renovated lodge suites add flexibility for bigger groups and families who want the full safari experience without the price tag of exclusivity. Together they sleep up to 20 - enough for a private buyout, or just enough for two.

Every Drive Writes Its Own Story

The Big Five draw people to the Greater Kruger. What keeps them coming back is that no two drives are ever the same. One morning it's a breeding herd of elephants splashing in the river; the next, endangered wild dogs setting out to hunt at first light. There's an Amarula coffee and a rusk in your hand as giraffes catch the gold of early sun. There's a guide crouched at a track, reading a story in the sand most people would walk straight past. And there's simply the stillness of watching a kudu bull browse while a fish eagle calls somewhere overhead.

The People Who Make It

Family-owned and independently run day to day, Amani carries the warmth of a small operation with the polish Klaserie Drift is known for. Guests are known by name here,

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SAFARI CAMPS
GREATER KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

Untouched Luxury

KLASERIE DRIFT AMANI
KLASERIE DRIFT MISAVA

More Than a Safari heart of the Greater Kruger



What guests are saying

"Experience of a lifetime! Coming from New Zealand I had no idea what to expect. And what an experience it was! I loved everything about it. We were so fortunate with the diverse number of animals that we were able to get an up-close encounter with. Eight game drives over four days - I thought this would be a bit much. Absolutely not! I was excited for every one and each delivered something different. This of course was aided by our wonderfully friendly and knowledgeable guide, Lola.

Then back to the lodge where everything was relaxing and delicious and nothing was a problem. Klaserie Drift Amani was the absolute best part of my trip, was worth every dollar and will stay with me for a very long time - hopefully until I can go back again." - *Tripadvisor, stayed June 2026*

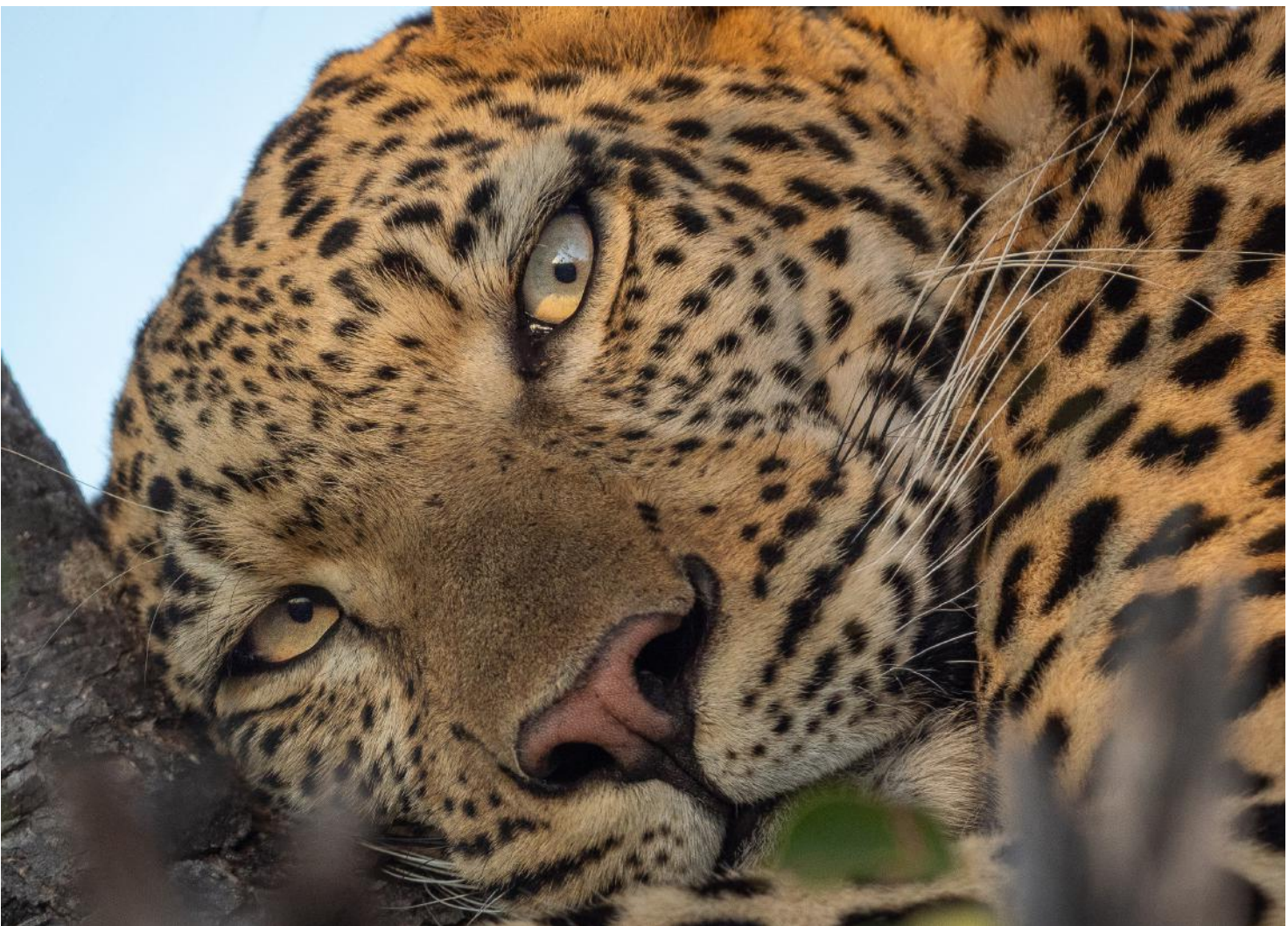
All images supplied @deanproductions.nl and @Michael_rads_ and Armadillo Media.

not room number - and it shows, from experienced guides who read the bush like a second language to the team who has breakfast waiting after an early drive, and dinner laid under the stars come evening.

That same care extends past the guest experience. The camp runs fully on solar power. Neighbouring communities benefit from sponsored feeding schemes and education support. It's a model built for the reserve to still be wild in fifty years, not just this season.

Time, Well Spent

The wildlife brings people to Amani. What they remember is everything around it - the fire, the first leopard sighting, the quiet coffee stop as the bush wakes up. Because the real luxury was never only seeing the wild. It's having the time to be in it, together.





SAFARI GUIDE OF THE YEAR 2026

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Spots on the Line: The R40's Cost to Wildlife



Since January 2025, the Ingwe Research Program has been running a road ecology project on the R40, the 47km route that cuts through the Greater Hoedspruit area. In 84 survey days, the team has recorded 198 animal mortalities across 38 confirmed species, though the actual figure is likely significantly higher. Some carcasses have not yet been identified with certainty and appear to represent other species, potentially bringing the total to 56. Seven leopards were also killed on the R40 and one more on Argyle Road, all reported by residents.

The project runs three workstreams. Roadkill patrols map every mortality along the route. Culvert monitoring tracks which species use the underpasses beneath the road. Hotspot analysis, conducted by a conservation detection dog and his handler, identifies where leopards cross.

Africa Geographic joined the team

in the field and has produced a 40-minute documentary about the project. The documentary, Spots on the Line, will premiere at Southern Cross Schools in Hoedspruit on Wednesday 19 August.

"The R40 is a road people in this area know well," says Marine Servonnat, Executive Director of the Ingwe Research Program. "What the documentary does is make visible what happens on the road after dark, or early in the morning, when most people are not watching."

Ingwe has been monitoring leopards in the Greater Hoedspruit area since 2022. The organisation currently covers 3,200 square kilometres across 31 reserves and 45 partners and lodges, with 265 individual leopards identified through its citizen-science mobile app and AI-assisted coat-pattern recognition.

The premiere is hosted in partnership with safari company Africa

Geographic. Through its mix of tailor-made luxury African safaris, conservation journalism and bespoke donations, Africa Geographic shines a spotlight on authentic Africa to foster celebration and understanding.

Three original prints from the Ingwe project will be available for purchase on the night, alongside Ingwe's road-awareness merchandise.

To Book Your Place

In-person premiere - Southern Cross Schools - Wednesday, 19 August - Doors open at 18:00. Tickets are limited to 200 guests and include light catering.

Tickets will be available from: www.ingweresearchprogram.org/shop

Ticket options: R155 - Entry plus

Ingwe bracelet, R135 - Entry plus bumper sticker, R100 - General entry

Online screening: R50 - Access to the documentary through a private YouTube link (check website)



The Envelope, Reopened – Football World Cup



The three men, one table, one sealed prediction - and now, one final whistle later, the reckoning. Start with the one that matters: we called Spain to beat Argentina in the final. Final score - Spain 1-0, Ferran Torres burying it deep into extra time. Nailed it. We even called the semis in order: Spain past France, Argentina past England. Both happened exactly as scripted. Three grown men, a long evening, and somehow the two biggest calls of the whole tournament landed

clean.

Bafana did us proud too. We said: scrap to one of the eight best third-place finishes, and sneak into the Round of 32. That's precisely what happened - before Canada broke our hearts with a late winner. We take zero credit for the heartbreak. We take full credit for the call.

Now the bad news, because a wager with no losses isn't a wager. Morocco to reach the final was the bet of the tournament - long odds, big talk, "stake only what

you'd happily set alight." They set it alight. Quarter-final exit to France, 2-0. Bold call, wrong call. That's football.

The individual honours were a mixed bag. Mbappé for Golden Boot - spot on, he finished the World Cup's all-time leading scorer. Everything else we got wrong with real conviction. Golden Ball went to Rodri, not our pick Yamal. Golden Glove went to Unai Simon, not Emiliano Martínez. Best Young Player: Pau Cubarsi, not the Yamal-

Endrick shootout we predicted.

So: two headline calls dead right, one big swing dead wrong, and an awards ceremony that humbled us completely.

Three grown men, one bar tab, no crystal ball - and somehow that's still a better strike rate than most so-called experts managed.

Called blind by Bra Pelé, Bra Lucas and Bra Thierry. Marked, this time, by the World Cup itself.

Meet Likweli - The Newly Named Monkey That Hints at Congo's Hidden Secrets



THIS IS AFRICA

Amanda Korstjens
Professor Of Behavioural Ecology,
Bournemouth University

Hearing that a new primate species has been named is exciting news for scientists because primates across the world are in decline. According to the IUCN Red list, a global inventory of animal extinction risk, 44.4% of primate species are classed as endangered or critically endangered (versus 13.2% of all mammals).

In most cases when the number of primate species increases, it is because a known species has been upgraded from the status of subspecies to species, or two populations that were previously considered the same species are re-classified into two separate ones. The African monkey Likweli (*Colobus congoensis*), however, is a completely new addition to the primate family tree, which makes this news particularly interesting.

Likweli is a colobus monkey. The word colobus stems from the ancient Greek word *κολοβός*, meaning truncated, because they don't have much of a thumb. It has an orange mouth, lives in the Democratic Republic of Congo and is part of the large subfamily colobines. Colobines are found in both Asia and Africa, but not in the Americas.

Three colobine genera are found in Africa. The olive colobus genus, has one species (a small monkey with drab olive-brown fur and a grey-black face). The red colobus genus and the black-and-white colobus genus, that Likweli belongs to. What is interesting about Likweli is that its closest relative is the black colobus (*Colobus satanas*), which has two subspecies – the critically endangered Bioko black colobus on the island Bioko (20 miles off the coast of Cameroon) and the Gabon black colobus on the nearby mainland. Their nearest range is 1,200km away from the range of Likweli monkeys.

Colobines have specialist digestive adaptations, including multi-chambered stomachs, that allow them to digest high fibre leaves and toxic seeds. To accommodate their large gut, many colobines are relatively large for monkeys. Likweli is smaller than the other colobus species though, and more comparable to some Asian colobines (like langurs and leaf monkeys). African colobines depend on forests and rarely come to the ground, but they can survive in small forest fragments and mangroves.

Likweli's orange tinted mouth resembles that of some Asian langurs. But members of the *Colobus* genus have all black faces, making it almost impossible for human observers to recognise individuals based on their facial features. This also makes it hard to see their facial expressions. Scientists believe these monkeys' more subtle facial expressions are related to the relatively low levels of competition within groups and less stringent social hierarchies.

Relationships between groups, however, can involve threats, loud roars and sometimes fights. Colobus males produce a loud roar to warn group members of danger, scare off predators, or during encounters with other groups of the same species. Likweli monkeys produce a similar roar although the researchers were unable to determine the sex of the callers. Likweli's roar resembles that of the black colobus, but is distinctly different from that of other nearby colobus species.

It is not surprising that the central African region is providing new scientific discoveries. The area has been politically unstable for decades and a difficult place to conduct scientific work in. Working in these forests as a scientist means a risk of running into rebels, soldiers and professional poachers.

But the area is not only under-studied, it also represents a birthplace for many new species because the region has diverse soil including one of the largest peatlands on the globe. Plus, the landscape has been shaped and reshaped over centuries by a combination of tectonic plate movement, climatic changes, human influences and changes in its wetlands and rivers. Current climate change forecasts suggest that the

Colobus congoensis, known locally as 'likweli', has a dramatic black face with pinkish-orange lips. Junior Amboko, CC BY-NC

area will remain suitable for colobus species in the future.

Some forests in this region contain around 20 species of primate, a value only matched by some Amazonian regions.

Most of those species are cercopithecids, the sister sub-family of the colobines. Likweli also shares its range with the striking Angola colobus, *Colobus angolensis* and the Lomami red colobus (*Piliocolobus parmentieri*). Likweli, like many red colobus species, has often been found mingled in with groups of other primates (up to six species), like guenons and sometimes Angola colobus or Lomami red colobus.

There are also apes (gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos) in the region. Chimpanzees in other regions are well known to hunt red and black-and-white colobus monkeys for meat.

Likweli lives in small groups (a mean of six but this can range from one to 20). All *Colobus* species typically live in units of multiple females together with one male and their offspring. Multi-male groups are rare. Some *Colobus* species, like the Angola colobus, can form large aggregations of over 200 monkeys, consisting of multiple smaller one-male units travelling together.

The Likweli is only the fifth new African monkey species to have been described since 1975, one of which was a local guenon, the Lesula (*Cercopithecus lomamiensis*). Meanwhile, Miss Waldron's red colobus has probably gone extinct as there have been no conclusive sightings since 1978, despite intense searching after some unconfirmed sightings in 2000 and 2001.

The Likweli is already considered endangered and protection of this hotspot for biodiversity is urgently needed.

There may well be more undescribed primates (although another monkey species is unlikely) hiding in these forests. It is nice to imagine that these African forests still contain hidden secrets.

This article was previously published in The Conversation



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The Perseid Meteor Shower

(Peak: 11th and 12th August)

Ben Coley
Celestial Events SA

Every August, the night sky puts on one of its most reliable and spectacular performances: the Perseid meteor shower. Peaking around the second week of the month, and coinciding with New Moon, observers may see dozens of meteors per hour streaking across the heavens, leaving brief trails of silver, green, or gold.

The Perseids appear every year because Earth passes through a stream of dust left behind by Comet Swift-Tuttle. This comet takes about 133 years to orbit the Sun. Each time it swings through the inner Solar System, sunlight warms its icy surface and releases particles ranging from grains of sand to small pebbles. Over centuries, these particles spread out along the comet's orbital path, forming a vast river of debris.

In August, Earth ploughs through that river. The meteoroids strike our atmosphere at roughly 60 kilometres per second, compressing the air in front of them and heating it to thousands of degrees. The glowing streak we see is not the rock itself on fire,

but superheated air and vaporised material creating a brief trail of light.

The best time to view the shower in South Africa is the early hours of the morning, when Perseus reaches its highest point in the sky. Due to the constellation's northerly position in the celestial sphere, it never climbs very high for us (which is why the shower is more prominent in the northern hemisphere), but thanks to the New Moon phase there is still an excellent chance to view multiple meteors, perhaps more than 50 per hour!

There are no known, direct cultural associations with this specific meteor shower, but meteors in general are usually seen as portents of doom. They represent the anger, or warnings, from the godly realm and are often believed to predict the death of important tribal figures; the direction of the meteor signifying the dwelling of those afflicted. Some tribes consider shooting stars to be the hearts of evil spirits falling back down to Earth, with their long hair streaming behind them. Sangomas are said to be in constant battle with the spirit realm, and meteors represent the successful defeat of one of the celestial enemies.

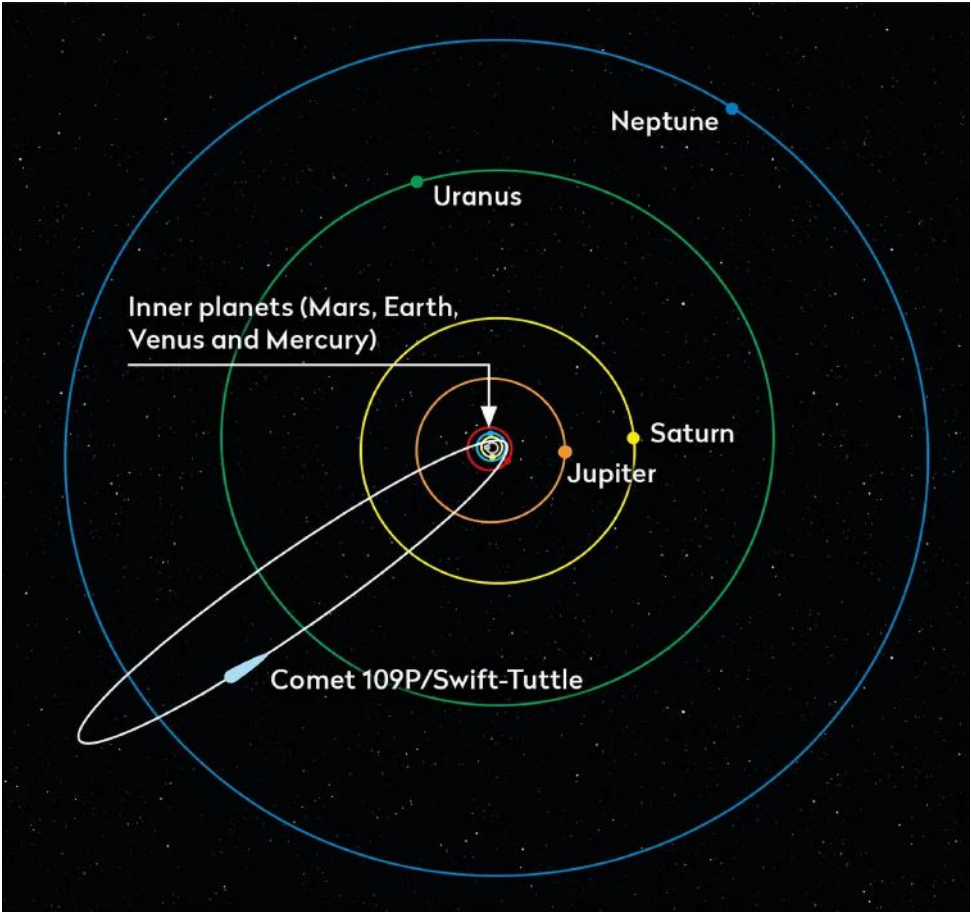
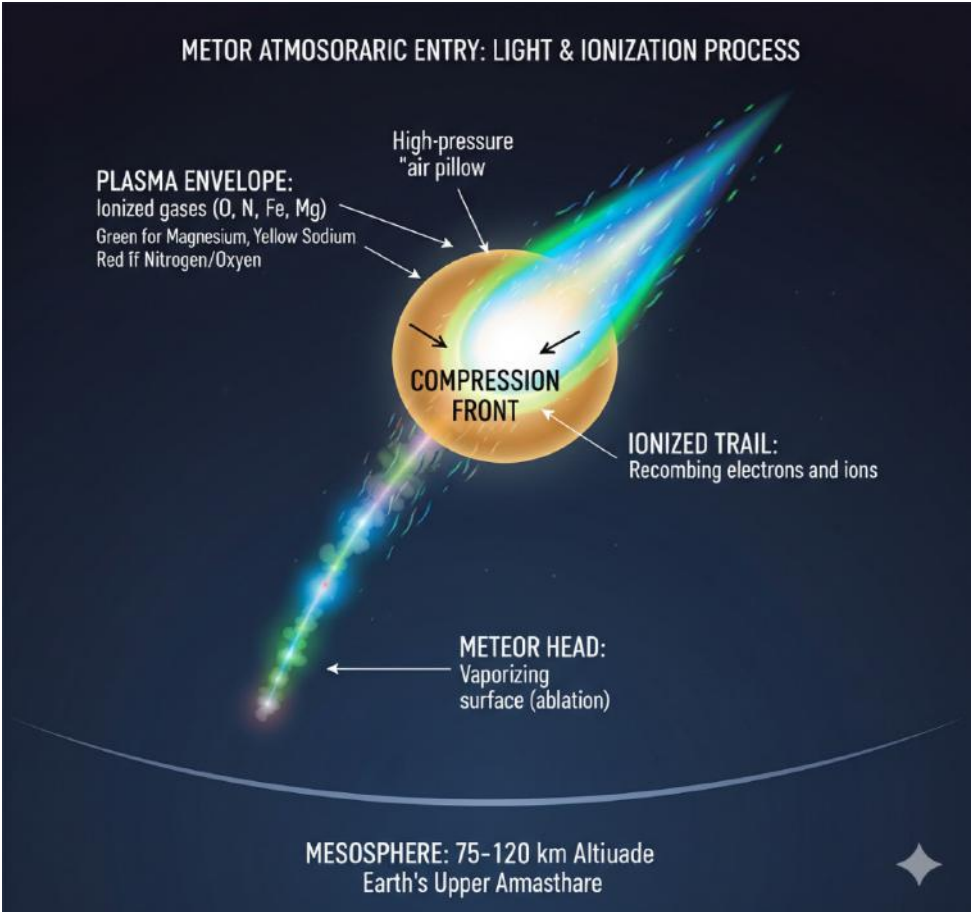
In China, the annual Qixi Festival tells the story of forbidden love between a sky princess (represented by the star Vega in Lyra) and a mortal shepherd (depicted by Altair in Aquila). The sky queen, unhappy that her daughter was associating with a lowly mortal, separated the lovers with the river of the Milky Way. But her father saw her sorrow and took pity on them. He arranged that on the 7th day of the 7th lunar month, all the magpies on Earth would fly into the heavens, their wings creating a celestial bridge spanning the Milky Way (the constellation of Cygnus), so that they may share 1 night a year together. The Perseids were said to be their tears spilling from the sky when their special night was over.

With clear, crisp, and thanks to the New Moon phase, dark skies expected, the 2026 Perseids promises to be a magnificent spectacle. For those of you with cameras, this year offers the perfect opportunity to capture the event. For the best results, mount your camera on to a tripod and use an intervalometer to take multiple long exposure images of the sky. The resulting images can then be merged to either create a multi-meteor nightscape, or a

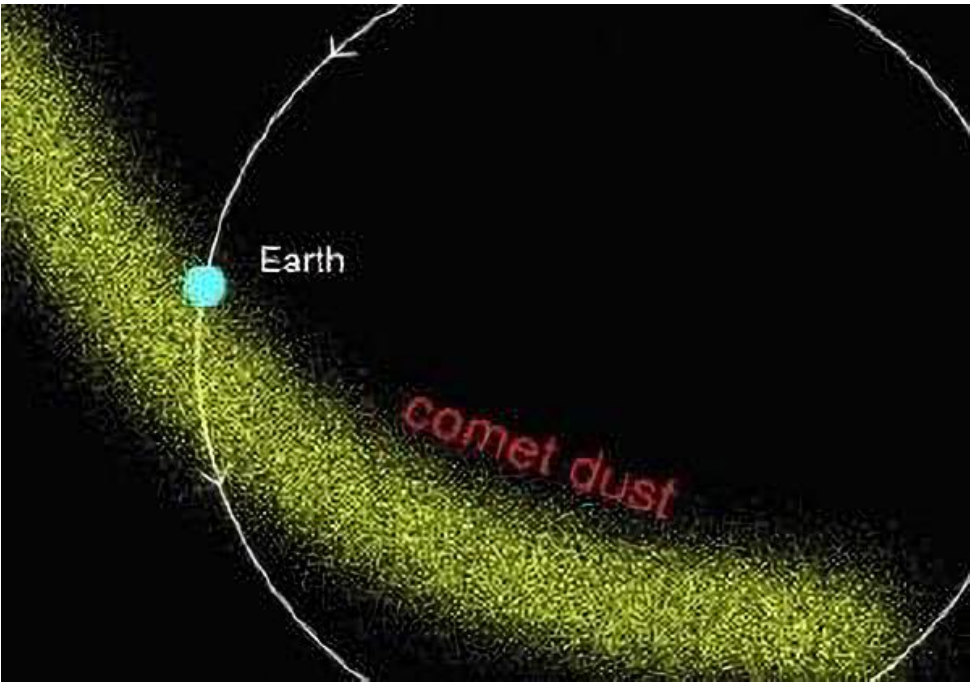
timelapse video.

You are not simply photographing "shooting stars." Each brilliant streak is a fragment of Comet Swift-Tuttle, a relic that has travelled through space for centuries - and whose material was forged 4.5 billion years ago, when the planets themselves were still taking shape. In the instant it flashes across the sky, an ancient piece of the Solar System collides with Earth's atmosphere at tremendous speed, creating a fleeting burst of light that has journeyed across time to reach your camera sensor. Every image becomes more than a photograph; it becomes a frozen moment in a cosmic story that began before Earth was fully formed, a spark from the dawn of the Solar System captured in a single heartbeat of light.

Ben Coley / Celestial Events SA can be contacted on 079 575 0900.



Meteors (above), Swift Tuttle - Space.com (above right), Qixi Festival (below) and Meteor Showers - AstroBob (below right).



More Than Just a Pretty Feather: The Hidden Rituals of Feather Maintenance

John Kinghorn
Avitourism Project Manager: Bird-
Life South Africa

There is something almost magical about watching a bird meticulously preen itself. A White-browed Robin-Chat pauses between bursts of its melodic song to carefully draw each feather through its bill. A Hamerkop stretches a wing impossibly wide, inspecting every feather with deliberate precision. Even the most energetic swifts and swallows, seemingly forever on the wing, somehow find time to maintain their plumage. To the casual observer, it might seem like little more than avian vanity, when in reality, it is far more; in fact, it is a matter of survival.

Unlike our hair, feathers are remarkable structures that cannot repair themselves once damaged, until such time as they are physically replaced. Every feather must remain in peak condition for as long as possible until it is eventually replaced during a process known as "moult". A single frayed flight feather can create extra drag, making flight less efficient and burning crucial energy reserves. A breach in insulation can allow precious body heat to escape on a cold winter's morning. Damaged plumage may even compromise camouflage and make a bird more visible to predators or even less attractive to a potential mate.

In short, a bird is only as good as its feathers.

That is why feather maintenance occupies such a significant portion of a bird's daily routine. Some species spend more than 10% of their waking hours caring for their plumage, and once you begin noticing these behaviours, you'll realise how frequently they occur, and how meticulous birds are about their feather-care regime.

Preening: Feather Care Regime 101 For Birds

A term most may be familiar with is known as "preening". Using its bill like a finely crafted comb, a bird painstakingly realigns the tiny hooks that hold each feather together. These microscopic barbs function rather like the teeth of a zipper; if they become separated, the feather loses much of its strength and aerodynamic shape. By gently drawing each feather through the bill, the bird effectively "zips" it back together, realigning everything back to where it should be.

Most birds also visit a small gland situated just above the base of the tail, known as the uropygial, or preen, gland. This gland secretes a waxy, oil-like substance that birds collect with their bills before spreading throughout their plumage. The oil helps keep feathers supple, inhibits the growth of any bacteria and feather-degrading fungi, and, in many species, may even improve water resistance. I suppose one can think of it as an "all-in-one" conditioner, waterproofing treatment, and protective polish for feathers.

The Roll of Water And Dust

Water itself also plays an important



Hooded Vulture
Image: Mark D. Anderson

role. Whether splashing enthusiastically in a garden bird bath, diving into a stream, flittering among wet foliage, or shaking off the morning dew, it all constitutes a form of bathing that helps remove dust, dirt, and parasites while loosening debris trapped among the feathers. The vigorous shaking and subsequent preening that follow are every bit as important as the bath itself.

Perhaps more surprising is the sight of birds enthusiastically throwing dust over themselves. Dust bathing, common among many terrestrial species such as francolins, spurfowls, and guinea fowl, helps absorb excess oils and may help reduce parasites hidden within the plumage.

Specialised Feather Maintenance

An alternative to dust and water bathing is "anting", a rather unusual practice. There are two main types: passive and active. During the latter, rather curiously, birds will deliberately rub ants through their feathers or sit amongst swarms of them. The belief is that the ants' defensive chemicals (formic acids) may help control feather-eating parasites, such as lice and mites. There have been certain instances in which some birds have been observed utilising millipedes in place of ants, which secrete cyanoic acid when threatened, a substance that, in hindsight, likely serves the same purpose.

Some birds have evolved even more specialised tools for feather

care. In certain species of waterbirds, which lack a preening gland, they have evolved a substitute in the form of powder down. Here, the barb tips of the feathers continually crumble into an exceptionally fine, non-wettable powder, which is then spread across the plumage to absorb oils, remove grime, and help maintain feather condition and waterproofing efficiency. It is nature's equivalent of a dry shampoo.

Other species, which may have too short, compact, or long, narrow bills, have even gone so far as developing a literal comb-like structure on their feet, known as a "pectinate-claw". They are then able to use this to vigorously scratch themselves, dislodging any unwanted foreign objects from their feathers, and allowing the claw to serve the purpose that their bill otherwise would have.

The Importance of Moul

Of course, even the most diligent maintenance cannot prevent feathers from eventually wearing out. Exposure to sunlight, weather, constant flight, and general everyday use slowly takes its toll. This is where the moult process becomes essential. Feathers are sequentially replaced, ensuring that birds retain their ability to fly while gradually renewing their entire "wardrobe" over weeks or potentially months.

More Than Meets The Eye

The next time you find yourself out

birding, do your best to resist the temptation to focus solely on the obvious: their colours or prominent identification features. Instead, spend a few moments observing what they are doing.

That Laughing Dove carefully rearranging its wing feathers, the Lesser Masked Weaver fluffing itself after a bath, or the Lanner Falcon methodically grooming after a dramatic hunt, they're all performing one of the most important routines in their lives.

For birds, feather maintenance is not simply about looking immaculate. It is about staying warm, ensuring efficient flight, avoiding predators, attracting mates, foraging for food, and, ultimately, surviving another day. Every careful stroke of the bill through their feathers tells a story of millions of years of evolution, and is a testament that sometimes the smallest, quietest behaviours are among the most remarkable spectacles that nature has to offer.

Tight Feedbacks

When the System Speaks, Are You Listening?

Andrew Paterson
Philosafaris.com

We were treading a game trail parallel to the N'watindlopfu River in southern Kruger Park, mid-morning on a sweltering March day and we were nearing the Bushman rock paintings the river was named for. My mind was on finding a shady spot there for a short "tea break," before heading back to our vehicle some 4km to the south behind us.

Suddenly, the churring alarm calls of several red-billed oxpecker birds erupted some thirty metres ahead. I froze, raising my left fist above my head in the signal for the group to stop just where they were. The bird calls tapered off and I dropped my arm, making the universal finger-to-lips signal for quiet, before moving my left hand to steady the rifle's foregrip. Slowly I walked on and hadn't got further than about six meters before a commotion in the bushes just off the path to my right alerted me to a large male African Buffalo rising to his feet just some five meters from me. Spinning right to face him and stepping sharply back while chambering a round in my rifle, I indicated for the group to get off the path and move away from the lone "dagga boy" now facing us at close quarters. All was quiet but for the loud buzzing of his disturbed flies. He was glaring at me in that inimitable way of theirs with his nose raised in manner that the author Robert Ruark described as "they look at you as though you owe them money!"

Quietly, I told my second rifle to hold his fire until I did, telling the group - now well off the trail - to stand fast. After a several second stand-off the big bull decided on flight rather than fight, and I was relieved to watch him spin around and crash off through the bush. Those oxpeckers weren't off *this* buffalo, but the open ground ahead was now also clear of whatever was there before.

After unchambering and making our weapons safe the wide-eyed group released their tension with excited exclamations and nervous chuckles. A close encounter indeed.

This is an extreme example of a tight feedback loop in action: the capacity of a system to detect changes quickly and respond before those changes compound into crises.

What Tight Feedbacks Actually Are

Brian Walker identifies tight feedbacks as the fifth attribute of Social-Ecological Resilience, and it is perhaps the most immediately practical of all eleven. Where slow variables describe the background conditions that govern thresholds, tight feedbacks describe the speed and clarity of the signals that tell a system how close to those thresholds it is drifting - and whether its responses are working.

In a well-functioning savannah, somewhat longer feedbacks operate at multiple scales simultaneously. When a grazing area is being overstocked, grasses respond quickly: palatable species retreat, bare patches appear, and soil compaction begins. If those signals reach the herder promptly - and if the herder acts on them - overgrazing is corrected before it crosses into the self-reinforcing degradation that becomes almost

impossible to reverse. The feedback is tight: short time between signal and response, clear connection between cause and effect.

Loosen that feedback - through distance, distraction, or doctrine - and the system loses its capacity to self-correct. The degradation continues. By the time the signal becomes unmistakable, the threshold may already have been crossed.

Walker is careful to note that feedbacks can also be too tight: a system that overcorrects to every minor fluctuation exhausts itself in constant adjustment and never settles into productive rhythms. The goal is not hypersensitivity but appropriate sensitivity - calibrated enough to catch genuine drift, stable enough not to be panicked by normal variation.

The Hippo Pool and The Telegraph Line

There is a hippo pool on the Olifants River that I have visited across several years of dry season walks. In years of healthy catchment management upstream, the pool maintains itself through the dry season - the hippos, the terrapins, the kingfishers, the crocodiles, all cycling through a predictable ecology. The system gives constant feedback about its own health: water clarity, the condition of the bank vegetation, the behaviour of the hippos themselves. A healthy pool is immediately legible.

In the years following poor catchment management upstream - accelerated erosion, uncontrolled agricultural runoff, altered flow regimes - the feedback from the pool becomes garbled. The water runs turbid where it should run clear. Bank vegetation collapses under the silt load. The ecological signals that would normally guide management decisions are drowned out by noise. By the time the degradation is unmistakable to even a casual observer, the corrective interventions required have grown enormously more costly.

This is what happens when the feedback telegraph between a system's condition and those managing it is severed. The signals still exist. But they arrive too late, too muffled, or to people who no longer know how to read them. Management decisions get made on outdated information, on assumption, on doctrine, on what worked last decade. And the gap between the system's actual state and the managers' model of it widens, invisibly, until disturbance arrives and exposes the discrepancy catastrophically.

The Stoics and The Examined Life

Epictetus (50 - 135 AD/CE), born into slavery and familiar with his reality, built his philosophy around a kind of internal tight feedback: the discipline of examining one's own judgements and responses with unflinching regularity. Not once a year in crisis, but daily, as practice.

The Socratic tradition from which he drew was equally insistent on this. Socrates' famous claim that the unexamined life is not worth living was not an aesthetic preference - it was a systems observation. A life without tight feedback between one's stated values and one's actual behaviour will drift, imperceptibly, until the divergence becomes unmistakable in ways that are costly to correct.

Marcus Aurelius practised this with

unusual rigour. His *Meditations* - written not for publication but as personal daily self-examination - are structured around exactly this principle. Each entry is, in essence, a feedback loop: here is what I encountered today; here is how I responded; here is how that response measured against my values; here is the adjustment required. He was not cataloguing his successes. He was closing the loop between intention and action, daily, before drift accumulated.

The Stoic practice of the evening review - reflecting each night on the day's actions - was a formally prescribed tight feedback mechanism. Seneca describes it in his letters: what have I corrected today? What have I resisted? What improved? The questions are not punitive. They are calibrating. The interval is short - a day - precisely so that drift is caught before it compounds.

Tight Feedbacks in The Special Forces Soldier

In special operations, tight feedbacks are both a tactical and a psychological necessity - and the failure modes are instructive in both domains.

Tactically, the most resilient small teams are those that have developed what is sometimes called situational awareness, but which is more precisely a tight feedback loop between observation and interpretation. The operator who reads the environment continuously - the dog that stopped barking, the civilian who changed their route, the pattern of village activity that shifted since yesterday - and who updates their working model of the situation in near-real time, is operating with tight feedback. The soldier who has committed to a mental model and is filtering incoming signals through it - confirming rather than calibrating - is operating with loose feedback. In a VUCA environment (of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity), the consequences of the latter can be swift and irreversible - even fatal.

Psychologically, the failure of tight feedback in operations is one of the least discussed but most consequential contributors to long-term breakdown. Military culture trains operators to suppress internal signals - fear, doubt, moral discomfort, physical pain - as a matter of operational necessity. In the short term, this has genuine utility. In the long term, it risks producing operators who have systematically loosened their own internal feedback loops, and who are therefore flying increasingly blind with respect to their own psychological state.

The soldier who has trained themselves not to register fear cannot use fear as information. The one who has suppressed doubt cannot use doubt as a navigational tool. The one who has learned to push through moral discomfort without processing it accumulates what researchers now call moral injury - the psychological residue of actions or witness that violate deeply held values, unaddressed until it reaches a threshold that suddenly overwhelms the system's capacity to contain it.

Tight feedback, in this context, means restoring the immediate signal: developing the interoceptive awareness to notice what the body

and the emotional system are actually reporting, and building the reflective practice to process those signals before they compound. The after-action review, applied not only to tactical outcomes but to psychological experience, is a tight feedback mechanism. The structured debrief that includes the question "how did that affect you", not just "what did you do" is a tight feedback mechanism. The evening review that Seneca prescribed two thousand years ago is a tight feedback methodology. None of these are overly cautious. They are the functional equivalent of the herder checking the grass condition before moving the herd - basic system monitoring that keeps the operator within the range where calculated response pre-empts surprised reaction.

When The Feedback Losens

Walker emphasises that feedback loosening is rarely dramatic. It doesn't announce itself. It happens when the distance between signal and decision-maker widens - through bureaucratic layers, through the suppression of inconvenient information, through the substitution of ideology for observation. In pastoral systems, it happens when government policymakers in distant offices make stocking decisions for rangelands they have never walked. In military systems, it happens when operational realities in the field are filtered through reporting structures that reward only positive framing. In individual psychology, it happens when a person becomes too busy, too defended, or too committed to a self-image to register what their own nervous system is telling them.

The consequences in all three domains follow the same pattern: by the time the signal becomes unmistakable, the system has drifted further from its sustainable range than anyone realised. The correction required is now not a minor adjustment but a major intervention - and major interventions have costs that minor adjustments would never have incurred.

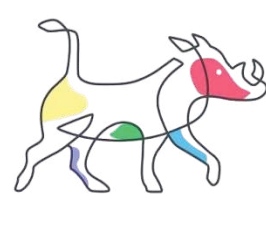
Walk-On

Watching that old buffalo crash away from us, I was reminded of something a Bushman tracker first taught me in the army: the bush is always talking. The question is whether you're attentive enough to hear it, respectful enough to listen to it, and humble enough to learn from it.

Tight feedbacks don't require perfect information. They require the habit of checking - genuinely checking, not confirming - and the discipline to act on what you find before the signal requires you to shout.

If you want to get hold of Andrew email: ecostoic@philosafaris.com - Safaris to the Wisdom of Nature - Philosophy means "love of wisdom" in ancient Greek, Safari means "journey" in Swahili.





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K2C Challenge 2026: Runners, Rangers and a Race Stitched Into The Landscape



Lauren Booth
K2C Challenge Organiser

The 2026 Kruger2Canyon Challenge brought 266 participants to Kamperus for a weekend of trails, mountain views and conservation connection, with a revised Day 1 route taking long-course runners to the summit of Mariepskop Mountain for the first time.

Hosted from Laerskool Mariepskop, the event once again offered runners and hikers the rare opportunity to experience this UNESCO-recognised Biosphere Region over two days on foot, with 70km, 44km, 30km and 20km two-day stage-race distances available.

A New Summit Experience on Day 1
Road conditions on Mariepskop Mountain led to a late decision to adjust the Day 1 route of the 70km Stage Race. Instead of dropping down into the Blyde Picnic Site, runners completed an out-and-back section to the summit.

While slightly shorter and less technical than the previous climb out of the canyon, the revised route gave runners an extraordinary reward: panoramic views across the Lowveld and the chance to move through the unique fynbos grasslands on top of the mountain. The change added a distinctive summit experience to an already demanding day on the trails.

2026 Stage Race Results
While the K2C Challenge is about far more than times and placings, results remain part of the story. For many runners this event is a personal test against terrain, distance, altitude and the raw challenge of the mountain.

Overall Winners:
70km Stage Race: Tyler Rance (7:40:01) and Shannon Parker-Dennison (9:07:59)
44km Stage Race: Jason Kipling (4:44:08) and Libby Page (5:12:33)
30km Stage Race: Dorothy Morgan (3:42:41) and Albrecht Scheepers (3:51:46)
20km Stage Race: Trust Ngomane (2:16:33) and Beate Smit (2:32:23)

Rangers on the Start Line
One of the most meaningful elements of the 2026 event was the Ranger Challenge, which saw more rangers than ever taking part. Team Timbavati Foundation were the fastest Ranger Challenge Team throughout the weekend, finishing 1st and 3rd in the 20km Stage Race. There were also impressive performances from Team Siyafunda, GKEPF, Colbec K9 and the Black Mambas.

Their participation reinforced one of the event's central messages: that the routes experienced by runners are part of a greater living landscape, protected by people whose daily work is often difficult and demanding.

A Race Connected to the Biosphere
The K2C Challenge raises funds for the Kruger to Canyons Biosphere NPC, which aims to connect people and the landscape in ways that support both conservation and sustainable livelihoods. The organisation coordinates work within the Biosphere Region that stretches from the Blyde River Canyon to the Kruger National Park, and from the Olifants River to the Sabie River. As event co-hosts, the K2C Biosphere was present throughout the weekend, with presentations through the weekend, a stand at the

race village, team members assisting at aid stations, and invaluable logistical support. "Thank you for supporting an event like this," said Marie-Tinka Uys, CEO of the K2C Biosphere NPC. "You have challenged yourselves in such a rich landscape, but more than that, you are all leaving the event as ambassadors for the region!"

A Comfortable Race Village and Local Support
The 2026 event was also marked by the warmth of the race village and the many people working behind the scenes.

Participants also noted the way the Biosphere story was woven through the event, from abundant local fruits, biscuits, biltong and homemade iced teas to farm-to-fork meals provided by local community members. Ranger Team Colbec K9 also gave a demonstration of the incredible abilities of their tracking dogs and how they contribute to local conservation, which was a highlight of the event.

Together, these details helped give the race village a local character closely connected to the region's unique identity.

Local farmers, businesses and community members put their hands up to support the runner experience through aid station supplies, hydration and podium prizes. One ankle injury required assistance on the mountain, with SARZA Limpopo evacuating the participant from the route, and the medical team providing on-site treatment and transferring them for further medical assessment.

A Race That Continues to Grow into its Purpose
As participants took on a demanding route, the Biosphere story ran



All photos credited to Phonix Capture

through the weekend like a golden thread. For organisers Andrew and Lauren Booth, who live in Kamperus and have hosted the event for the past 11 years, seeing all of these elements come together was hugely rewarding. "I get emotional at events like this, when I see how deep participants have dug each day," said Lauren. "Every kilometre out there has to be hard earned. Thank you for having the courage to discover what this event and this landscape would ask of you!"

Described by several returning participants as the "best edition yet", the 2026 Kruger2Canyon Challenge showed how the event continues to grow into its purpose: forging a connection between people taking on a personal challenge and the Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Region.

Full results are available at www.kruger2canyonchallenge.co.za/results/

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Rhino Man - Justice for Anton Mzimba:

Four Years After a Ranger's Murder, His Son Takes Up His Work

As the world marks the 20th World Ranger Day in Kruger's Centenary Year, a global campaign renews its call for justice.

Four years ago this week, on July 26, 2022, Anton Mzimba, the decorated Head of Ranger Services at the Timbavati Nature Reserve, was assassinated at his home after months of death threats connected to his stand against rhino poaching. On Friday, the world observes the 20th annual World Ranger Day. It arrives in the year Kruger National Park celebrates its centenary, a hundred years of protecting the landscape Anton gave his life defending. No one has yet been brought to justice for his murder.

But this year, his story turns forward. Anton's son is training for a career in conservation, walking the path his father cleared.

"Saving the rhino, for me, it's like saving myself, my life, and the life of my children's children."
Anton Mzimba, in RHINO MAN

Anton Mzimba served 25 years at Timbavati, rising from field ranger to one of the most respected conservation leaders in Africa. His courage was recognized around the world: Best Field Ranger at the 2016 Rhino Conservation Awards, the posthumous Best Game Ranger honor at the 2022 African Conservation Awards, and the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas International Ranger Award, presented in 2023 in recognition of an exemplary career and inspirational leadership.

"I'm deeply saddened to learn of the killing of Anton Mzimba, whom I spoke with in November," wrote The Prince of Wales after Anton's murder. "Committed and brave, rangers like Anton are central to the conservation of Africa's fantastic wildlife. Those responsible must swiftly be brought to justice. My thoughts are with his family."

A Pattern, Not an Isolated Tragedy

Anton's murder was an attack on a man, but it was also part of a pattern. The International Ranger Federation's 2026 Roll of Honour, released on World Ranger Day, records 147 rangers from 40 countries who died in the line of duty in the past year. Homicide was the single largest cause of death, claiming 43 of them, and the Federation acknowledges the true number of ranger deaths is likely significantly higher. World Ranger Day, observed every July 31, honours the fallen and the rangers who carry on.

"Anton Mzimba's murder was not an isolated tragedy. Rangers across Africa face threats, intimidation and violence simply for doing their jobs," said Louise de Bruin, CEO of the Game Rangers Association of Africa, which has placed ranger safety and wel-

fare at the centre of its mission. "Every ranger we lose is a blow to conservation and to the communities who depend on these wild places. Ranger safety and welfare cannot be an afterthought. It must be central to how the world protects nature."

At Timbavati, the work Anton led has never stopped. The man who now holds his post carries both the responsibility and the risk. "I carry Anton's standard with me every day. We continue his work knowing the same dangers exist," said Orlat Ndlovu, Head of Ranger Services at Timbavati Nature Reserve. "We owe it to him, and to every ranger still on the front line, to see this through."

The Son Who Came Home to The Bush

When Anton came home from the bush, he would take his son Jafet with him back into it, teaching him the trees, the tracks, and the reasons behind the work. Today, Jafet Mzimba is enrolled in a bridging course at the Southern African Wildlife College, the first step toward a career continuing what his father began.

"People knew my father as a ranger. I knew him as the man who came home, the one who would take me into the bush and teach me. I still know more than forty trees because of him," said Jafet Mzimba, Anton's son. "When I told him I wanted to follow his career, he froze. He said the job was too dangerous. But in the end he told me, 'Maybe you are the one who will follow my steps. I am proud of you, son.' I'm training as a conservationist now to continue his work. He was not just a father. He was my guide, and he lives in me."

Jafet is not walking that path alone. Anton's belief that conservation would be won by the next generation inspired the Global Conservation Corps to create its Future Rangers Program, which brings conservation education and pathways to careers in conservation to young people in the communities bordering Kruger National Park.

"Anton is the reason the Future Rangers Program exists. He believed this fight would be won by children who grow up seeing wildlife as theirs," said Matt Lindenberg, Founder of Global Conservation Corps. "Today that program reaches thousands of young people across the Greater Kruger, and it is supporting Anton's own children. The next generation of conservationists he dreamed of is already here. That is not a consolation. That is a result."

The Pursuit of Justice Continues

The Justice for Anton Mzimba campaign, launched in November 2024 by the creators of RHINO MAN, continues its work to sustain a reward for information leading to the conviction of Anton's killers, support the investi-



gation and the organizations assisting South African law enforcement, and keep Anton's case a national priority while raising global awareness of the threats facing rangers.

The campaign's work is continuing and slowly making progress. While details of the ongoing investigation cannot be disclosed, the team remains constructively engaged with South African authorities. Funds raised to date have fuelled substantial investigative work through the U.S. nonprofit Focused Conservation. Further funds are being raised in support of the pursuit of justice in Anton's case.

Anyone with information about Anton's murder is encouraged to come forward to the South African Police Service. "Anton was my friend. I spent years alongside him and his team, and I watched him do one of the most dangerous jobs on Earth without ever losing his humanity," said John Jurko II, Director of RHINO MAN. "Four years after he was murdered at his own front door, no one has answered for it. Honouring rangers on World Ranger Day has to mean more than gratitude. It has to mean justice. We will not let Anton's name fade."

This World Ranger Day, the campaign invites the public to honour Anton Mzimba and rangers everywhere: watch RHINO MAN, share Anton's story, and support the pursuit of justice. Together, we can ensure Anton's voice echoes far beyond his loss. To donate and learn more visit www.justiceforanton.org; www.rhinomanthemovie.org.

Queries regarding the status of the investigation should be directed to the South African Police Service / Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation (Hawks).



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Lady Godiva's August Forecast: Opportunity Favours the Prepared



Lady Godiva

By August, the picture becomes clearer. The uncertainty of earlier months starts to lift, replaced by opportunities that seemed distant only a short while ago. The interesting thing is that these opportunities aren't appearing by accident - they're showing up because of the decisions, adjustments and commitments made along the way.

This is a month of momentum. Doors begin to open, conversations gain substance, and projects that felt slow suddenly gather pace. Don't mistake this for luck. Momentum has a habit of looking effortless from the outside, even though it's usually built on months of quiet persistence.

Stay alert, though. Opportunity has an awkward habit of arriving disguised as extra work, uncomfortable conversations or decisions that need to be made quickly. Those who recognise it will move ahead. Those waiting for perfect conditions may watch it pass by. August rewards preparation far more than potential.

Leo (23 July – 22 August)
This is your season to shine, but remember that true influence isn't measured by attention alone. People are drawn to leaders who remain grounded when success arrives. Celebrate your progress without believing you've reached the finish line. Humility keeps doors open long after applause fades.

Virgo (23 August – 22 September)
Your careful planning finally meets favourable timing. Something you've been refining quietly is ready to be shared with confidence. Don't wait for another round of improvements that nobody else will notice. Your work deserves to be seen exactly as it is.

Libra (23 September – 22 October)
Relationships continue to evolve, revealing who genuinely supports your journey. Some connections deepen naturally while others quietly drift away. Accept both without resentment because each serves a purpose. Making space often invites better people into your life.

Scorpio (23 October – 21 November)
Your instincts remain one of your greatest advantages this month. If something feels right, don't overcomplicate it with unnecessary doubt. Others may hesitate while you quietly move ahead. Confidence grows strongest when it's backed by preparation.

Sagittarius (22 November – 21 December)
Adventure finds you through responsibility rather than escape. An opportunity connected to work, travel or learning deserves serious consideration. Say yes because you're ready, not because you're restless. Purpose gives freedom far greater meaning.

The pace begins to quicken, and you'll feel the urge to chase every opportunity that appears. Resist the temptation to spread yourself too thin because not every open door deserves your attention. When you focus your energy on what truly matters, progress comes surprisingly quickly. The biggest win this month comes from choosing wisely rather than acting quickly.

Taurus (20 April – 20 May)
The patience you've shown begins to deliver tangible rewards. People are noticing your reliability, and that trust creates new possibilities. Don't underestimate the value of simply continuing to do what you do well. Quiet consistency is becoming one of your greatest assets.

Gemini (21 May – 20 June)
Conversations carry more weight than usual this month. A casual discussion could develop into something far more significant than you expect. Listen carefully before responding, because opportunities often reveal themselves between the lines. The right words, spoken at the right time, open remarkable doors.

Cancer (21 June – 22 July)
Life begins to feel lighter as decisions you've made start settling into place. The confidence you've been searching for comes from experience rather than reassurance. Trust the direction you're already moving in instead of constantly looking over your shoulder. The future has more room for you than the past ever did.

Hot Tips for August
Opportunity rarely arrives wearing a name badge. Momentum grows through consistency, not bursts of effort. Stay ready - timing favours the prepared. Say yes with purpose, not impulse. Progress is easier to recognise when you stop looking backwards.



Aquarius (20 January – 18 February)
Fresh ideas attract fresh interest this month. People are more willing to support innovative thinking than they've been in the past. Present your vision with confidence, but remember to explain how it works. Great ideas deserve practical foundations.

Pisces (19 February – 20 March)
The uncertainty that's lingered around one important area begins to clear. Trust your intuition, but support it with action and practical decisions. You don't need every answer before taking the next step. Progress belongs to those willing to begin.

Aries (21 March – 19 April)

BUSINESS DIRECTORY

BUSINESS / SHOPS / SERVICES		EMERGENCY – HELP LINES	
Celestial Events	079 575 0900	After Hours Emergency Doctors	084 770 1741
FGASA	011 886 8245	Air Force Base Hoedspruit	015 799 2911
Fruitful Living	015 793 3703	Africa Safe -T	087 095 8911
Hoedies Fish Market	082 771 3173	HSP Ambulance	015 383 0650/
Kruger2Canyon News	082 330 6060	Med OSH Consulting	078 672 0215
Koti Services	064 078 8408	Alcoholics Narcotics Anonymous	082 258 4602
Suzuki Hoedspruit	010 825 9927	Ambulance Airforce Base	015 799 2065
SPAR Hoedspruit	015 793 2305	Ambulance Services Limpopo	015 793 1581
Tops @ SPAR	015 793 2069	Ambulance Tintswalo Hospital	101 77
Vehicle License Department	015 793 0838	Ambulance Services Swift	060 528 2784
Vision Fitness	082 040 1137	Farm watch/ Plaaswag	072 310 0032
SCHOOLS & EDUCATION		Fire Brigade AFB	015 799 2172
Drakensig Laerskool	015 793 3756	Fire Brigade Maruleng	015 793 0536
Drakensig Pre-primer	015 793 2401	Fire Dpt Hoedspruit	015 793 0728
Hoedspruit Christian School	015 793 2067	GKEPF Greater Kruger Enviro	
Lowveld Academy	015 793 3750	Protection Foundation	065 743 2224
Mariepiskop Laerskool	079 529 6071	Hoedspruit Clinic	015 793 2342
Mariepiskop Pre-primer	082 880 7069	Hoedspruit Medical Rescue	072 170 0864
Perspective Training College	082 787 4471	Hoedspruit Paws	078 431 3161
Southern Cross Schools	015 793 0590	Hoedspruit Town Watc	072 812 2172
REAL ESTATE & PROPERTY			082 683 2835
Century 21	015 793 1534	Hoedspruit Farm Watch	072 310 0032
MEDICAL & VETERINARY SERVICES		Hospital Hoedspruit Pvt Hospital	012 000 1111/2/3
Ronelle Joubert	082 787 4471	Hospital Emergency	012 000 1254
Dr J Blignaut	083 410 0190	Hospital Nelspruit Mediclinic	013 759 0645
Dr Ndlolo	015 793 1257	Hospital Tintswalo	013 795 5000
Dr A Polley	015 793 0606	Hospital Sekororo Gvt-The Oaks	015 383 9400
Dr Shivambu	082 465 8114	Hospital Tzaneen Mediclinic	015 305 8536
Dr van Berge	079 531 6582	Maruleng Municipality	015 793 2409
Dr Dubrowski	081 061 0313	Medical Rescue	072 170 0864
Dr Kirstein	071 746 1059	Med Centre Emergency No	084 770 1743
Dr D. Coertzen (Orthodontist)	072 490 7869	Protrack	015 793 2585
Ophthalmologists:		SAPS Station Commander	082 565 8253
Dr Jacques Potgieter & Dr Charl Meyer		SAPS General	101 111
	012 644 5000	SAPS	015 799 4000
Dr du Toit (Pediatrician)	082 655 4738	SPCA Phalaborwa	071 519 7044
Lowveld Dental (Dentist)	073 597 5174	Victim Support Unit	082 940 0651
Dr L van Vuren (Dentist)	015 793 0845	CONSTRUCTION & INDUSTRIAL	
Hlokomela	087 550 0387	Coastal Hire	015 793 0971
Hoedspruit Clinic	015 793 9000	Mopane Group	015 781 1571
Hoeds Wildlife Est Pharmacy	015 793 1427	On Tap Plumbing & Bathrooms	065 559 0157
Lowveld Pharmacy	072 404 6142	Discon	083 415 3186
HSP Pharmacy	015 793 2318	TOURISM & THINGS TO DO	
Kyk Oogkundiges (Optometrist)	060 548 5387	Eastgate Airport	015 793 3681
Hoedspruit Animal Hospital	015 793 0797	Graskop Gorge Company	066 305 1572/3
Wildlife Safety Solutions	073 934 6156	K2C Biosphere Region	015 817 1838
		Skyway Trails	013 737 8374

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THIS IS S.A.

Kevin Naidoo
Professor of Scientific Computing
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University of Cape Town

In the intricate biology of the human body, organs such as the breast, the colon and the lungs are lined with a defensive barrier known as the epithelium. At the heart of this barrier sits a remarkable protein called Mucin-1 (MUC1). In a healthy body, MUC1 is like a sentinel.

It stands on the cell wall, draped in a complex "armour" of long chains of sugar molecules (carbohydrates), where it serves as a physical shield against bacteria, viruses and toxins. Crucially, it communicates with the immune system, telling our natural defences when the body is under threat.

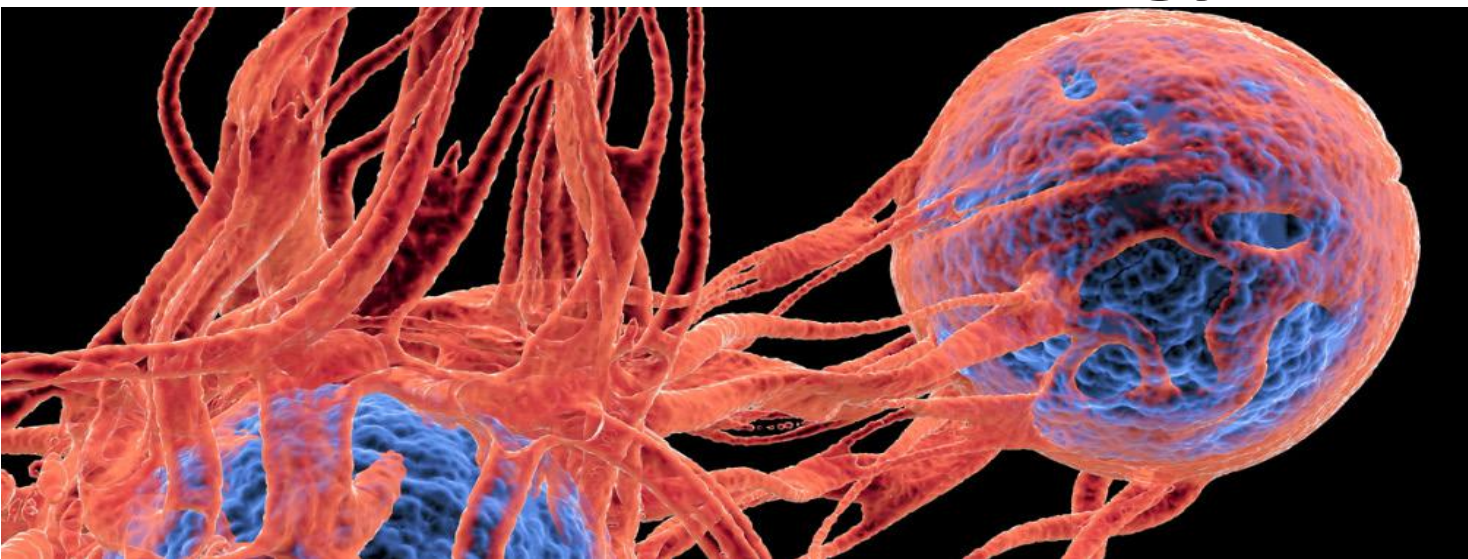
But in the case of cancer, this guardian exchanges its sugar coat armour for shorter sugar chains and so turns into a traitor. It stops sending danger signals to the immune system and instead binds to the immune cells, creating an anti-inflammatory microenvironment that promotes tumours.

The team I lead at the Scientific Computing Research Unit at the University of Cape Town is home to computer modelling experts and experimental chemical biology research scientists. The molecular details of this MUC1 alteration, which contributes to the transformation of normal cells into tumour cells, were recently published in Nature Communications, and provide a new look at exactly how this process happens.

By developing a novel "test-tube" synthetic biology approach, we modelled and decoded the molecular assembly line reorganisation that allows cancer to "redecorate" MUC1, turning it from a protective shield into a cloak of invisibility. We used our own computational chemistry algorithms to map the exact sugar-coating positions that create a tumour-promoting environment.

Understanding the location and nature of the MUC1 sugars that prevent the immune system from detecting tumours provides the foundation for our laboratory and others in the field to develop cancer vaccines, bio-

South African Scientists Make Breakthrough in Decoding Cancer's Most Effective Survival Strategy



Computer generated image of a cancer cell, showing blood vessel formation supplying the cell with oxygen and nutrients

markers and therapeutics. This South African-led discovery represents a major leap forward in our ability to decode one of cancer's most effective survival strategies.

The Problem: A Malignant Makeover

In a normal cell, the sugar molecules attached to MUC1 are long and complex. The process of attaching sugars is called glycosylation. In cancer cells, however, this process goes haywire. The sugar molecules are often cut short or altered, creating "aberrant" structures like the Tn and sialyl-Tn (sTn) antigens. These are specific types of sugar-protein combinations that are tags for tumour cells.

These altered sugars do two dangerous things: they allow the tumour to evade detection by the immune system, and they actively trigger the process of turning a normal cell into a cancerous one.

Because MUC1 is found in so many different types of cancer, the US National Cancer Institute has ranked it as the most accessible target.

To stop the cascading effect of the MUC1 changes from normal to tumour cells, scientists first had to understand exactly how the "assembly line" breaks down.

The Discovery: Relocating the Factory

Our research team set out to do something ambitious: recreate the transition from a healthy sugar coat-

ing to a cancerous one in a laboratory setting.

In normal cells, the enzymes that build these sugar chains (long molecules) live in a part of the cell called the Golgi apparatus, the cell's "packaging and delivery centre". We built an in vitro (test-tube) model to simulate what happens when these conditions change. We discovered that in tumour cells, the enzymes responsible for starting the sugar chains are relocated to another part of the cell, the endoplasmic reticulum, essentially the cell's "factory floor".

This relocation changes everything. Here, the enzymes are no longer inhibited by the usual cellular checks and balances. They take over the sugar sites on the MUC1 protein, creating the foundation for the cancerous Tn antigen.

To take the study even further, we used quantum chemistry. We simulated the behaviour of atoms and molecules at the most fundamental level to find out where these changes are most likely to happen. We identified a specific location on the MUC1 protein, known as the T13 site, which cancer enzymes prefer. This specific interaction is what drives the massive increase in the sTn antigen seen in malignant tumours.

Why This Matters: From Lab to Patient

Understanding the "how" and the "where" of these sugar changes is the first step towards stopping them.

The research didn't stop at the test tube; the team is already looking at what this means for patients.

The next phase of the research, as detailed in a recent paper in Glycobiology, involves building a sophisticated "systems biology" computational model. A model can connect the changes in the MUC1 sugar coating to the behaviour of immune cells. For example, scientists found that when these cancerous sugars interact with macrophages (a type of white blood cell), they trigger the release of specific signals that tell the tumour to grow and spread.

We are refining these details for various types of cancer. We are comparing common forms of breast cancer with more aggressive, currently untreatable types to see if the "sugar code" differs between them.

By using this accurate, atomic-level data to build computer models of the entire biological system, we hope to identify new drugs that can block these signals. The goal is to move towards precision medicine: treatments that can strip away cancer's sugar shield, allowing the patient's own immune system to finally see and destroy the tumour.

This article was previously published in The Conversation.

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