

Hoedspruit Ratepayers are Funding a Municipality.

What is the Municipality Funding?



Bert Hofhuis
Chairman: Hoedspruit Concerned Ratepayers Association

Residents of Hoedspruit are paying property rates at a tariff of 0.012 cents in the rand - double that of Cape Town at 0.006, and significantly higher than Johannesburg at 0.009 and Tshwane at 0.011. That comparison alone would be remarkable. What makes it a structural crisis is what lies beneath it.

Property rates in South Africa are set annually by each municipality, which determines its own “cents in the rand” tariff - a figure

multiplied against the market value of every rateable property to generate a bill. There is almost no external regulation governing how high that figure can go, or what it must be based on. As the South African Reserve Bank has noted, the process is driven not by analysis of service delivery costs or objective affordability benchmarks, but by what council needs to balance its books. It is, in the Reserve Bank’s own framing, an inherently political process.

In Maruleng, the politics are not difficult to read. The Double Impact

The Double Impact
 Hoedspruit’s property market has under-

gone a significant transformation over the past five years. Driven largely by an influx of semigrants and international buyers attracted by lifestyle appeal and favourable exchange rates, residential values have approximately doubled in that period. For Maruleng Local Municipality, this has been a fiscal windfall - but not one shared equitably with the ratepayers who created it.

Instead, the municipality has applied what amounts to a structural extraction: while residential property valuations have approximately doubled since 2021/22, tariff reductions from 0.014 to 0.012 cents in the rand have been marginal by comparison - a 14 percent decrease against a 100 percent

increase in the valuation base. The arithmetic is straightforward: ratepayers are paying dramatically more in absolute rand terms, and the municipality’s property rates revenue has grown accordingly - from R101 million to a budgeted R270 million in four years.

That revenue now accounts for 46 percent of Maruleng’s total operating budget. The national norm, as measured by Stats SA, is between 16 and 18 percent.

No municipality in South Africa of comparable size and service profile should be funding nearly half its operations from property rates alone.

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Graskop Gorge Lift Co takes continental silver at WTM Africa Responsible Tourism Awards 2026

Graskop Gorge Lift Co has been awarded silver in the Nature Positive category at the World Travel Market Africa Responsible Tourism Awards 2026 - one of the most credible environmental tourism accolades on the continent.

The award was announced on 14 April at WTM Africa 2026 at the Cape Town International Convention Centre, where tourism organisations from across Africa were recognised for initiatives delivering measurable environmental and social impact.

The Nature Positive category specifically recognises tourism projects that actively contribute to biodiversity conservation and demonstrate tangible, positive outcomes for natural ecosystems. The award citation acknowledged the company's engineered approach to protecting a sensitive Afromontane forest - addressing soil erosion, illegal plant harvesting and ecosystem damage through infrastructure designed to provide controlled, low-impact visitor access. Judges described the site as an "outdoor classroom," citing interpretive signage and guided experiences that make complex ecological processes accessible to visitors. The site is home to the critically endangered Graskop cliff aloes.

The citation further noted the operation's local economic footprint - 90% of staff drawn from the Graskop community and nearly two-thirds of procurement spend retained within a 100km radius.

"This award is incredibly rewarding because it recognises what we set out to do from the beginning - to create a nature experience that is both accessible and genuinely protective of the environment. Our vision has always been to open up a

place of natural wonder to people who might never otherwise have the opportunity to experience it, while ensuring that the ecosystem is preserved for future generations. To have that approach acknowledged at this level is very meaningful for our team." - James Sheard, co-director, Graskop Gorge Lift Co (pictured).

Judges' chair Harold Goodwin set a high bar for this year's cohort: "Each winner has shown us exciting ideas that others can learn from, and many are now delivering measurable system-level change, which is to be applauded." It is a benchmark Graskop Gorge Lift Co has now been formally measured against - and met.



James Sheard, Co-Director of the Graskop Gorge Lift Co.

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Hoedspruit Ratepayers are Funding a Municipality. What is the Municipality Funding?

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The fact that Maruleng is doing so - and accelerating - is not a sign of fiscal strength. It is a warning sign.

Residential Property Rates Tariff – Cents in the Rand (2025/2026)

MUNICIPALITY	TARIFF (C/RAND)	vs HOEDSPRUIT
Hoedspruit (Maruleng)	0.012	—
Tshwane	0.011	8% lower
Johannesburg	0.009	25% lower
Cape Town	0.006	50% lower

All figures represent the residential property rates tariff applicable to owner-occupied residential properties in each municipality. Maruleng applies a differentiated tariff structure across property categories - the 0.012 rate is specific to residential properties and is the direct equivalent used in each comparison above.

What the Auditor Found

The Auditor General's 2023/24 findings on Maruleng - the most recent audited financials available - present a municipality that is not technically insolvent, but whose financial management is described as poor across nearly every operational indicator. Financial statements were submitted on time, but their quality was rated poor. Performance reports were rated poor. Internal controls were flagged as requiring intervention. Record keeping was described as concerning.

Most striking: 87 percent of municipal debt is assessed as unlikely to be recovered. And capital maintenance expenditure - the spend required to keep existing infrastructure from deteriorating - is running at just 0.2 percent of asset value. National Treasury's minimum benchmark is 8 percent. Maruleng is spending at one-fortieth of the required rate to maintain what it already owns.

The cash position has improved. The underlying governance has not. These two facts co-existing should concern every ratepayer in the district.

A Model Shifting onto Ratepayers

Maruleng's revenue structure tells a clear story. The municipality has two dominant income streams: national government grants,



which are declining; and property rates, which are accelerating. Grants have fallen from approximately R248 million three years ago to R229 million in the current draft IDP budget. Over the same period, property rates revenue has been driven upward to compensate.

Total employee costs across 218 staff stand at R132.2 million - translating to an average total cost of employment of approximately R606,600 per employee per year. The national municipal benchmark for total cost of employment, as measured by Stats SA, sits at approximately R360,000 per year. Maruleng's per-employee cost is running at 68 percent above that norm. Both figures represent total cost to municipality - base salary, pension contributions, medical aid, and all employer-side obligations - making the comparison direct and unambiguous.

Supplier costs sit at R208.5 million. Capital expenditure of R164.6 million is almost entirely grant-funded.

If national grant flows continue to contract - which current fiscal trends suggest is likely - Maruleng faces a binary choice: borrow, or push rates higher. There is no meaningful service charge base, no diversified economic revenue, and no indication of a plan to develop either. What exists is a model that extracts from those who own formal property and uses the proceeds to fund obligations across a much broader municipal constituency.

"It cannot be sustainable for a small rates base to be carrying the financial obligations of a much larger community - with almost nothing to show for it in return. This isn't mismanagement. It's a deliberate model. And it has a ceiling. Call it what you want - I call it legalised extraction." – Concerned Homeowner

Who is Actually Paying

The Auditor General's analysis points toward Wards 1 and 2 - which encompass Hoedspruit and its surrounding residential estates - as the primary formal ratepayer base within Maruleng. This is a small, concentrated segment of a geographically large municipality. These ratepayers are, in effect, cross-subsidising the broader Maruleng area through a mechanism that is legal, largely invisible to most residents, and structurally growing.

For property owners - whether permanent residents, seasonal visitors investing in second homes, or developers considering the area - the trajectory is unambiguous: rates will continue to rise because there is no political counterweight to stop them and no regulatory mechanism to constrain them. The new residents and international buyers who have driven valuations upward have, inadvertently, created the very fiscal pressure now bearing down on them.

The Ceiling is Visible

Maruleng's finances are stable today. That is not the issue. The issue is that the model sustaining that stability is neither equitable nor durable. Property rates have increased

62 percent in five years. Valuations have doubled. Grant income is declining. Capital maintenance is negligible. Employee costs are well above national norms. And there is no serious revenue diversification strategy on the table.

The municipality is not in crisis - yet. But the structural imbalance is not a temporary condition. It is the operating model. And without organised, informed engagement from ratepayers, it will continue to deepen.

Public participation in the draft IDP budget is a statutory right. The 2026/27 draft is currently in process. Residents who wish to engage formally with Maruleng Local Municipality on rates policy, expenditure priorities, and budget structure are entitled to do so - and arguably, obligated. Those seeking informed, structured engagement would be better served making first contact with the Hoedspruit Concerned Ratepayers Association, which has already initiated this process and carries the institutional knowledge to navigate it effectively.

Editors Note: By the time this is read in this publication, there will have been a public participation meeting with the Municipality which we hope would have yielded cooperation and discussion from all parties and the formulation of a plan going forward.

Contact: HCRPA (Hoedspruit Concerned Rate Payers Association) hoedspruitcrpa@gmail.com

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COMING MAY

Twenty-five Years of Quiet Work - And the Results are Very Clear



K2C Rangeland Coordinator and Trainer, Conny Timbane, looks out over a herd of cattle during over-night kraaling, a method used to introduce nutrients into the soil naturally (Credit: Dumisa Khoza) The K2C Biosphere Region is a complex landscape of conservation areas, agriculture, production and residential communities (Credit: Sun Catchers Hot Air Ballooning). Alien Vegetation Clearing Teams have received highly valued training, ensuring that skills they develop will endure beyond any one contract or project



The Kruger to Canyons Biosphere doesn't make much noise. It doesn't need to. After 25 years of steady, unglamorous work across one of southern Africa's most complex landscapes, the numbers in its latest impact report speak clearly enough.

More than 7,259 hectares cleared of invasive plants. 609,000 cubic metres of water returned to stressed catchments annually. Some 233 jobs created through restoration alone. And - perhaps most telling - a 14th consecutive clean audit on a budget of R28.6 million.

What those figures don't capture is the harder story: how an organisation evolves from running projects to changing the way an entire landscape functions.

The Biosphere was formally designated under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme in 2001, though its roots go back further - to a 1992 gathering of landowners, communities and conservation partners who recognised that managing this terrain in isolated pieces was a losing game. That conviction has held ever since.

Today the organisation coordinates across 59 partner bodies - government departments, municipalities, traditional authorities, universities, civil society groups - stitching together work that would otherwise happen in silos, or not at all.

The clearest sign of maturity is what's happening after the clearing crews leave. In the Upper Letaba catchment, farmers are now taking responsibility for follow-up invasive clearing on their own land. That shift - from dependency to ownership - is exactly what the Biosphere has been trying to engineer for years.

The same transition is visible in the livelihood work. A hundred and ten micro-businesses were trained and mentored last year. Twenty-four savings groups are running, providing members with access to loans and, in some cases, the means to invest in practical items like reusable nappy packs - products that are both environmentally sound and commercially viable. In Sofaya Village, routine water quality data collection became the catalyst for residents to organise their own clean-up committees and engage with municipal authorities directly.



"The most meaningful measure of 25 years isn't the hectares or the audits, it's the farmer who now clears alien plants on his own land, or the woman whose savings group gave her a loan to start a business. That's what systems change actually looks like." - CEO Marie-Tinka Uys

The past financial year (2025/26) brought a significant injection of catalytic funding - R23.4 million from Global Affairs Canada through the Restoring African Rangelands project, implemented with Conservation International. That phase is drawing to a close. The focus now shifts to consolidation: protecting the value of what's been built rather than expanding further. Securing long-term, diversified financing remains the organisation's most pressing challenge - not to keep programmes alive indefinitely, but to ensure the systems already in place don't erode when major grants end.

Twenty-five years in, the Biosphere is neither triumphant nor complacent. It is, by its own assessment, a custodian - working steadily in the background so that people and ecosys-

tems in this region can continue to function together. Whether the next 25 years deliver on that promise will depend on whether investment, policy and community trust continue to move in the same direction.

The evidence suggests the foundation is there. What it needs now is continuity.

Key Point Numbers (ex 2025/26 Impact Report)

The Kruger to Canyons Biosphere's 2025-2026 Impact Report further reflects the scale of conservation effort across the region. The restoration programme has created 233 jobs and trained 110 micro-businesses, while 26,000 household surveys are actively informing local decision-making. A further 3,584 hectares have been formally declared as nature reserves, and the biosphere's combined interventions have avoided an estimated 1.12 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions.

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SOLE MANDATE

LISSATABA NATURE RESERVE R 4 850 000
Beds 3 | Baths 3 | Floor: 260 m²

Four separate buildings, including a spacious main living area and 3 private en-suite bedroom units with patios. Double-volume glass stacking doors to patio and wooden deck with rock plunge pool. Renovated with aluminium frames, screed floors, 8kVA inverter and batteries, gas stove, storeroom.

Rob Severin - 083 469 3820 Ref: 2484473



SOLE MANDATE

KAMPERSRUS R 1 990 000
Bedrooms 3 | Bathrooms 2 | Floor: 120 m²

This home is a great option for first-time home buyers or those looking for an investment opportunity. The home has an open-plan living room with the kitchen set to the side. Above the kitchen is a loft area which can be utilised in various ways. Property is fenced and pet-friendly.

Michelle Severin - 083 469 3821 Ref: 2464926



SOLE MANDATE

ZANDSPRUIT VALLEY, HOEDSPRUIT R 2 530 000
Beds 2 | Baths 2 | Floor: 110 m²

Newly built, neat home offering comfort, security and strong rental income potential. Spacious open-plan lounge and kitchen, private pet-friendly fenced garden, motorised gate and double covered carport. Ideal lock-up-and-go or investment opportunity with low monthly levies.

Carika Fox - 071 911 9940 Ref: 2472134



SOLE MANDATE

ZANDSPRUIT BUSH & AERO ESTATE R 11 880 000
Beds 3 | Baths 3 | Floor: 409 m²

Ultra-modern bush home with open-plan living, high ceilings and quality finishes. Interiors flow to a covered patio with built-in braai, pool and mountain views. Includes inverter, batteries, air-conditioning, security cameras, double garage, staff quarters and ample storage. Move-in ready.

Rob Severin - 083 469 3820 Ref: 2479925



ZANDSPRUIT BUSH & AERO ESTATE R 14 450 000
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.

Calin Leppan - 082 824 9482 Ref: 2487357



ZANDSPRUIT VALLEY, HOEDSPRUIT R 3 200 000
Beds 3 | Baths 2 | Floor: 223 m²

Rare, custom-designed home on an expanded double stand offering exceptional space and privacy. Open-plan living flows to a covered patio and large private garden. Modern kitchen with separate concealed scullery/laundry. Unique layout with strong investment potential.

Carika Fox - 071 911 9940 Ref: 2476715



MODITLO WILDLIFE ESTATE, BIG 4 R 5 950 000
Beds 3 | Baths 3 | Floor: 253 m²

Newly built home set among Lowveld trees with open-plan living flowing to a covered patio, wooden deck and pool. Aluminium doors/windows and ceiling fans throughout. Includes separate scullery, double carport and low-maintenance finishes.

Jason Jones - 083 267 4794 Ref: 2486774



ZANDSPRUIT VALLEY, HOEDSPRUIT R 2 300 000
Beds 2 | Baths 2 | Floor: 124 m²

Townhouse in secure estate near amenities with stacking doors opening to a covered patio and small garden. Spacious open-plan living with well-fitted kitchen and gas stove. Includes enclosed washing line and double carport. Ideal for investment or first-time buyers.

Michelle Severin - 083 469 3821 Ref: 2486851

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NDLOVUMZI NATURE RESERVE R 4 000 000
Beds 4 | Baths 3 | Land: 21 ha

This 21 hectare Olifants river property offers stunning views, a beautiful garden, and riverine surroundings. The property includes a 2-bedroom main house and a separate 2-bedroom guest cottage, as well as an expansive entertainment area with braai, pizza oven, dining area and pool.

Jason Jones - 083 267 4794 Ref: 2330912



LEOPARDS LANE, HOEDSPRUIT R 2 950 000
Beds 2 | Baths 2 | Floor: 141 m²

Modern off-grid home with open-plan living that flows onto covered patio with built-in braai. Quality finishes, aluminium windows, Chromadek roof, and free-standing gas stove. Powered by solar system with two lithium-ion batteries, 12 panels, and water tank with pressure pump. Pet-friendly, sustainable.

Calin Leppan - 082 824 9482 Ref: 2432359



RENTAL

SAFARI JUNCTION, HOEDSPRUIT R 15 000 pm
Office space: 75 m²

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Natasha van Nelson - 071 652 9140 Ref: 2487318



RENTAL

MODITLO WILDLIFE ESTATE R 33 450 pm
Beds 3 | Baths 3 | Furnished

Available 1 May - 30 Oct 2026, no pets allowed - Spacious home with open-plan living and kitchen, gas stove, electric oven and separate scullery. Outdoor features include a garden, pool and boma with electric fencing. Includes storeroom and undercover parking for up to five vehicles.

Natasha van Nelson - 071 652 9140 Ref: 2487417



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From Doubt to Determination: Hope Masete's numiknow® Journey

Thias Taute

Ongoing coverage of the Social Employment Fund (SEF) Phase 3 programme in the Kruger to Canyons Biosphere region highlights the implementation of numiknow® to develop mathematical proficiency among learners and community participants. Through structured play, the programme continues to reveal compelling stories of personal growth, confidence and emerging opportunity, while consistently demonstrating that individual commitment remains the key determinant of participant success.

In the quiet village of Sofaya in Ga-Sekoro, a story of determination, growth and confidence has been unfolding - one domino at a time.

When Kruger2Canyon News spoke to Hope Masete, she reflected on a journey that began almost by chance but would go on to shape her future. "I didn't know that one programme would completely change the way I saw mathematics and my own potential."

Hope joined Diphuti Primary School in The Oaks in Grade 6, shortly after moving to Hoedspruit. It was there that she was introduced to numiknow®, a programme that uses domino-based games to develop mathematical thinking. At first, she recalls, it seemed like just another school activity.

But very quickly, the impact became clear. "It helped me solve problems faster and more logically. I even started thinking mathematically in everyday situations."

What stood out most for Hope was not just improved marks, but a complete shift in mindset. numiknow® challenged her to think under pressure, to trust her reasoning, and to build confidence through practice. One of the defining

moments in her journey came during her first numiknow® competition. "I remember feeling very nervous ... I started doubting myself."

Despite the pressure and comparison with other learners, Hope chose to push through the doubt. She stayed focused and committed to finishing strong. The result surprised even her - she won. "That moment taught me about perseverance and believing in myself."

Although Hope had always performed well in mathematics, she says numiknow® strengthened a crucial skill: mental maths. "Before, I relied a lot on a calculator. Now I can calculate quickly in my head." Her progress was built on discipline and consistency. Every day after school, she practised with dominoes until it became part of her routine.

"numiknow® stopped being just an activity - it became a lifestyle" Hope said. By Grade 7, her dedication paid off. Hope won the numiknow® competition again and was awarded a bursary from Blydevallei Boerdery for high school - an opportunity that opened new doors for her future.

Now attending Grade 10 at Lowveld Academy, she is quick to acknowledge the people who supported her along the way. "I am very grateful to my teachers, Blydevallei Boerdery and staff of Hoedspruit Hub, who encouraged me and checked on my progress."

Looking ahead, Hope's ambitions go beyond her own success. She wants to give back and support younger learners on their own journeys. "I want to teach them numiknow® and show them that they can achieve great things. That's why I am also involved in the Enrichment Program on Saturdays for Grade 7-learners of schools in the area".



Her message to others is simple but powerful. "Keep pushing. You will realise you are capable of much more than you ever imagined."

In a region where many learners struggle with confidence in mathematics, stories like Hope's highlight the transformative potential of programmes like numiknow® within SEF 3. Through consistent practice, supportive mentorship and engaging

learning tools, learners are not only improving their numeracy - they are reshaping their futures.

For more information, visit <https://numiknow.com>, try the games at <https://play.numiknow.com> or contact Thias Taute at thias@hoedspruithub.com.

Is Your Trust Tax Compliant?

Suzanne Smit

SARS has for some time been drawing the net tighter around trusts and it is now hauling it in.

Following a Government Gazette notice published on 27 March 2026, SARS has introduced fully automated administrative penalties for trusts that have failed to submit their income tax returns. This is not a future threat as final demands have been landing in trustee inboxes since February. The penalty regime is live, and it applies to every trust registered with SARS, without exception.

What the penalties look like

The penalty is calculated on the trust's assessed loss or taxable income and ranges from R250 to R16 000 per outstanding return, per month, for up to 36 months or up to 47 months where SARS cannot success-

fully communicate with the trustees. With an estimated 120 000 trusts currently non-compliant out of approximately 300 000 registered trusts, the tax gap SARS is targeting is estimated at between R50 - R60 billion. The collection machinery is fully automated.

The "dormant trust" misconception will be costly

One of the risky assumptions we encounter in practice is that a trust with no income or no assets has no tax return obligation. SARS has been unequivocal: all resident trusts must register and submit annual income tax returns, regardless of whether they are active, unfunded and / or dormant.

Equally important, and often overlooked, is that a trust's tax compliance obligations do not end when trustees stop using it. They end only once the trust has been formally deregistered with SARS. A trust

that has been wound down informally or even terminated by the Master of the High Court, remains exposed to penalties until the SARS deregistration process is completed. The deregistration process requires submitting all outstanding returns, settling all outstanding liabilities, and providing SARS with supporting documentation confirming termination. Until that is done, the penalties continue to accrue.

What you should do now

If you are a settlor, trustee and/or beneficiary of a South African trust, active or dormant, we recommend immediately conducting a compliance review. The window to act before penalties begin accumulating is narrow, and the compounding effect of 36 months of monthly penalties on multiple outstanding returns can be substantial.

If you have any concern about the status of a trust in which you are involved, please contact us without delay. Beyond tax com-

pliance, trustees should take the following steps without delay:

1. Verify and update the trust's registered information with SARS.
2. Settle any outstanding tax liabilities.
3. Ensure that financial records are accurate and complete.
4. Where a trust is no longer needed for its intended purpose, initiate the formal deregistration process starting with the trust's tax compliance status, then the Master of the High Court, and finally SARS.

For any queries relating to the above, please contact Marteen Michau (marteen@fidelisvox.co.za) - we are standing by to assist.



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Lady Godiva’s May Forecast: Courage, Not Comfort



May draws a clean line between those who are ready and those still hesitating on the edge. Opportunities don’t disappear this month, but they do move past anyone waiting for perfect timing. There’s a quiet demand for courage now - not loud, reckless leaps, but deliberate decisions that carry weight and consequence. Half-measures stall quickly, and “let’s see how it goes” won’t get you very far. April showed you what isn’t working. May asks a far more uncomfortable question: what are you actually going to do about it? Once you commit, momentum builds quickly. Until then, everything feels stuck.

Taurus (20 April - 20 May)
Change is no longer optional, even if part of you still resists it quietly. Holding onto what feels safe is starting to create more pressure than stability. When you allow yourself to adjust, things begin to settle in a more sustainable way. What feels uncomfortable now is actually the beginning of something stronger.

Gemini (21 May - 20 June)
You’ve explored enough options - now the focus shifts to actually following through. Revisiting decisions or second-guessing yourself will only slow things down. When you commit

to one direction, your momentum returns almost immediately. Consistency, not cleverness, is what builds trust around you now.

Cancer (21 June - 22 July)
There’s a quiet strength required in speaking honestly, even when it feels uncomfortable. Avoiding certain conversations has only made them heavier over time. When you address things directly, the emotional weight starts to lift. Real stability comes from clarity, not from keeping the peace at all costs.

Leo (23 July - 22 August)
You’re stepping into a space where confidence alone is no longer enough. People are watching what you do, not just what you say. When you take ownership and act decisively, respect follows naturally. Visibility increases - and with it comes real responsibility.

Virgo (23 August - 22 September)
You’ve prepared more than enough - now comes the part you tend to delay. Overthinking the next move will only keep you where you are. Once you begin, things will refine themselves along the way. Execution, not perfection, is what moves you forward now.

Libra (23 September - 22 October)
Balance doesn’t return on its own - it follows a decision. Waiting for everything to align per-

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fectly is what’s keeping you stuck. When you choose a direction, even imperfectly, things begin to stabilise. Clarity comes through action, not endless weighing of options.

Scorpio (23 October - 21 November)
Your strength lies in how precisely you apply your energy. Not everything deserves your full intensity right now. When you focus only on what matters, your influence grows quietly. Controlled, deliberate moves will take you further than force ever could.

Sagittarius (22 November - 21 December)
There’s a pull toward something new, but it needs commitment to take shape. Drifting between options will leave you exactly where you started. When you choose a path and commit to it, momentum builds quickly. The freedom you’re after only comes once you take responsibility for direction.

Capricorn (22 December - 19 January)
The work you’ve been putting in begins to show, but only if you stay steady. There’s temptation to cut corners or speed things up - resist it. Consistency is what’s creating your progress, even if it feels slow. Structure remains your greatest advantage, so lean into it.

Aquarius (20 January - 18 February)

You see things others don’t yet, but that’s only useful if you act on it. Keeping ideas in your head won’t move anything forward. When you communicate clearly and take action, people start to follow. Turning vision into reality requires more doing and less explaining.

Pisces (19 February - 20 March)
You already sense what needs to happen - the hesitation is acting on it. Doubt creeps in when you ignore what you know to be true. Once you trust your judgement and move, things begin to align. Clarity doesn’t come before action - it comes because of it.

Aries (21 March - 19 April)
You’re being pushed to act, but not in the usual fast and forceful way you prefer. This time, direction matters more than speed and getting it right upfront will save you later. When you slow down just enough to think clearly, your natural edge sharpens again. It’s discipline, not aggression, that gets you across the line this month.

Hot Tips for May
Commit fully - or don’t start. Half-measures stall momentum. Courage is quiet, but decisive. Action removes uncertainty. Lady G

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Medicinal Plants Support Men’s Health in South Africa: Why This Knowledge Needs Safekeeping



Natural medicine Image: Canva

Adeyemi Oladapo Aremu, Professor, North-West University
Makhotso Lekhooa, Associate Professor, North-West University
Mompoti Vincent Chakale, Lecturer, University of Mpumalanga

Men’s sexual and reproductive health may be awkward to talk about, but there’s a need to do so. For example, about one-sixth of all couples worldwide have difficulty conceiving children, and in half the cases the man’s fertility is part of the problem. In South Africa, nearly 65% of men attending primary healthcare facilities report some level of erectile dysfunction, as do 57.4% of men in Nigeria.

Not only is there a cultural stigma around these issues, there aren’t always enough healthcare professionals and services to help. Consequently, traditional medicine is not just an alternative to “western medicine”, it’s at the frontline in African countries rooted in ancient knowledge. It’s also sustained by necessity.

However, this knowledge is at risk as societies and cultures change.

These traditions can be lost when there is no systematic documentation and cross-cultural analysis of their uses. They have equally been excluded from mainstream medical discourse. Preserving and integrating traditional medicinal practices is critical to safeguard cultural heritage. It also has the potential to unlock new medical treatments and care for people’s overall wellbeing.

We are medicinal plant experts and recently researched the value of medicinal plants for men’s health in South Africa.

We searched various scientific databases

for published articles focusing on the use of medicinal plants for male health in South Africa from 1996 to 2023. We identified and analysed 51 eligible studies. We looked at similarities and differences in how the ethnic groups in South Africa treat these health issues, how widely certain plants are used, and the types of health conditions treated.

Our study found that traditional plant remedies reinforce cultural identity and address essential health needs in men. This is even more important where there is limited access to conventional healthcare.

However, this knowledge is at risk as societies and cultures change. These traditions can be lost when there is no systematic documentation and cross-cultural analysis of their uses. They have equally been excluded from mainstream medical discourse.

We conclude from our findings that preserving and integrating traditional medicinal practices is critical to safeguard cultural heritage. And that the plants in question should be protected to preserve both biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Indigenous health knowledge

We recorded 337 plants used for male health in rural communities across seven South African provinces.

Erectile dysfunction was the most treated urogenital condition, with 133 plants; these plants were also deemed aphrodisiac. Over 250 medicinal plants were used for sexually transmitted infections such as gonorrhoea, HIV, chlamydia and genital warts. Hypoxis hemerocallidea (African potato), Entada elephantina (elephant’s root) and Carica papaya (pawpaw) were the most common plants for managing health conditions affecting men.

African potato was used to treat erectile

dysfunction, sexually transmitted infections, prostate enlargement and bladder disorders. Its potential has been shown in a study of its effect on rats. There is a need for further validation studies to see if it could help men.

Some of the studies we reviewed suggest that other natural ingredients in the African potato could contribute to balance hormones and support reproductive function. It also contains compounds that fight germs and reduce inflammation. These indicate potential to help the body defend itself against infections, including sexually transmitted infections and urinary tract infections.

Traditionally, the corm is either boiled or ground into powder and mixed with water or milk to drink. In some practices, preparations are applied to the lower abdomen or groin area to relieve inflammation and improve circulation. Collectively, these bioactive components make African potato a potentially valuable natural remedy for male reproductive and urinary health.

In traditional settings elephant root and pawpaw are used to treat male reproductive conditions such as erectile dysfunction, infertility, prostate enlargement and sexually transmitted infections. Elephant root is valued for its roots, which contain flavonoids, tannins, phenolic compounds, triterpenoids, saponins and glycosides, according to the studies reviewed. These exert antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant and aphrodisiac properties. They support blood flow, hormonal regulation and infection control.

Traditionally, the roots of elephant root are harvested, dried and boiled to prepare a decoction (a concentrated liquid). It is then consumed to treat infections and improve

sexual function. In some communities, the powdered root is mixed with water and taken as a tonic, or it’s applied to the body surfaces to relieve inflammation and enhance circulation.

Pawpaw is rich in bioactive compounds such as papain, chymopapain, alkaloids, flavonoids, phenolic acids, tannins, saponins, β -sitosterol and vitamins. They all contribute to improved circulation, reduced inflammation, immune enhancement and reproductive health. Pawpaw seeds and leaves are crushed or boiled to extract active compounds and administered orally or applied externally to support reproductive health. They are also used to treat sexually transmitted infections.

Looking ahead

This research highlights the value of indigenous knowledge and its preservation. Since it is passed down orally, it can be lost over time. Assessing and documenting the usefulness of these plants will contribute towards preserving biodiversity and cultural heritage, and towards innovation.

Providing scientific validation and credibility for these herbal remedies could stimulate rural economy development and strengthen cultural identity. It could also pave the way for more inclusive and integrated healthcare.

It also aligns with the World Health Organization’s Traditional Medicine Strategy (2025-2034). This encourages scientific validation and integration into healthcare systems.

This article was first published in The Conversation

If I Were in the Room



Straights if Hormuz Image:Canva

A ruthless, honest blueprint for ending the Hormuz crisis - and why Russia must be named at the table.

AI Correspondent

The first thing a serious negotiator does is ignore everything said publicly. The United States wants unconditional surrender. Iran insists it has already won. Israel says the Lebanon ceasefire doesn't apply to Lebanon. None of this is negotiating. It is theatre expensive, lethal theatre that is now threatening to starve people who have never once heard of Hormuz.

So: clear the room of the politicians. Bring in the people who have to live with the consequences.

The diagnosis

Every party to this conflict has a survival need, and any solution must address all of them simultaneously or it addresses none of them. That is the non-negotiable starting point.

The United States needs a firm commitment from Iran not to weaponise its nuclear programme. That is Washington's stated red line and, stripped of the bluster, it is a legitimate one. Iran needs three things: to not look defeated in front of its own people; to have sanctions lifted so its economy can breathe; and to have a recognised sphere of influence in a region where it has operated for centuries. Iran has consistently signalled willingness to negotiate limits on its nuclear activities if sanctions are removed. That is the crack in the wall. That is where you start.

Israel needs security architecture that doesn't depend on Iran being perpetually weak because that strategy has already demonstrably failed. Lebanon is a separate but linked file that cannot be quarantined from the main negotiation, no matter how much Jerusalem insists otherwise.

And the world meaning the eight billion people whose food, fuel, fertiliser, medicine, and electronics pass through 33 kilometres of water needs Hormuz open. Permanently. Not under a ceasefire. Not with a toll paid in Chinese yuan to the Revolutionary Guard. *Open.*

The uninvited guest

"Every week this crisis continues is another week Putin funds his war in Ukraine on the back of a conflict America created."

Before any framework, name the elephant in the room because ignoring it will kill the deal.

By early 2026, Western sanctions were finally starting to bite on Russia. Its economy

was contracting, GDP growth had slowed to 0.8 percent, and the pressure was working. Then the United States attacked Iran and Putin won the lottery. Russian oil revenues surged to \$19 billion in March alone. Analysts estimate a windfall of \$100 - \$150 billion over six months if the crisis persists. Russian crude previously sold at steep discount due to sanctions is now trading at a premium to Brent in India. Years of economic pressure reversed overnight. Putin has simultaneously gained leverage over global energy markets, which he is using to push for a Ukraine peace settlement on Moscow's terms.

Russia has no legitimate seat at the Hormuz table. But it must be named there. Say it plainly: every week this crisis continues is another week Putin funds his war in Ukraine on the back of a conflict America created. That single statement said plainly, in the room changes the calculus for Washington, for Europe, and for every nation paying double for energy while Russian export tankers sail freely. Sometimes the most powerful thing a negotiator does is say out loud what everyone is pretending not to notice.

The framework

Any deal that holds must be built on verified actions, not promises. Words have been tried. They failed spectacularly.

The Hormuz question is resolved first, separately, and immediately because it is the lever that gives everyone something. Iran gets international recognition as the de facto steward of the northern strait approach, which is geographic reality anyway. In exchange, it accepts a permanent international maritime monitoring body UN-mandated, multinational, with Chinese and Indian participation. Eighty-four percent of crude shipments through the strait are destined for Asian markets. China and India are not Western proxies. Iran cannot credibly frame their presence as imperial. This body observes it does not enforce. Enforcement remains with a standing multinational naval presence that Iran formally acknowledges rather than contests.

Iran gains China and India as invested parties, providing genuine counterweight to American pressure. Beijing and Delhi get what they actually need: reliable energy. Everyone has skin in the game. And critically the moment Hormuz reopens and Gulf oil flows normally, Russian crude loses its crisis premium and the sanctions bite again. Opening Hormuz doesn't just feed the world. It re-tightens the economic vice on Moscow.

The nuclear file

Iran suspended its formal weapons pro-

gramme in 2003, but by late 2024 had enriched uranium to near-weapons-grade with stockpiles the IAEA assessed as having no credible civilian purpose. This is the hard centre of the problem and there is no diplomatic language that dissolves it.

The workable solution is not zero enrichment Iran will never accept that and demanding it guarantees failure. The workable solution is enrichment capped at five percent, verified by permanent IAEA presence with unannounced inspection rights, in exchange for full sanctions relief on a phased schedule tied to verification milestones. Not lifted on day one. Earned. Iran gets its economy back. The world gets verifiable limits. Neither side gets everything. That is what a deal looks like.

Lebanon the file no one wants to open

Iran has made clear that Lebanon must be included in any broader ceasefire architecture. Israel disagrees. Israel is wrong tactically, even if understandable on instinct. A deal that leaves Lebanon burning hands Iran a permanent propaganda weapon and destabilises the entire agreement within months. Lebanon goes in. Hezbollah's heavy weapons go into UN-monitored cantonment. This is the price of a durable peace versus a fragile one. Pay it.

The honest conclusion

Negotiations have failed because each party has been performing for domestic audiences rather than pursuing outcomes. All sides have essentially agreed to disagree and deferred their disputes into the long grass. That is not diplomacy. That is delay with casualties and a windfall for a third party that started none of this and benefits from all of it.

The deal described above is uncomfortable for everyone involved. That is precisely what makes it real. Comfortable deals collapse in six months. The measure of a successful negotiation is not whether everyone leaves happy it is whether everyone leaves with enough that walking away costs more than staying.

The strait feeds the world. It is funding a war in Europe. And it is closed. That is not a regional problem. It is everyone's problem and everyone's problem demands everyone honest at the table, including those who have been watching from the sidelines while quietly counting their money.

The door is still open. But the clock is running.

This is an unedited piece generated by Claude Anthropic AI



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One Giant Leap ... Many Lingering Doubts

Ben Coley
Celestial Events SA

The successful completion of the Artemis II mission marked another defining moment in modern spaceflight. For the first time since the Apollo era, humans once again travelled beyond low Earth orbit, circled the Moon, and returned safely.

Despite these past and present historic achievements, scepticism still persists around the original Moon landings nearly 60 years ago. Here are five of the most common lunar landing hoax claims; and why they don't hold up under scrutiny.

“The flag appears to wave in the wind.”
Critics argue that the American flag planted on the Moon seems to ripple, implying the presence of wind - impossible since the Moon lacks an atmosphere. In reality, the flag had a horizontal support rod to keep it extended. The “waving” effect occurred when astronauts twisted the pole into the ground, and without air resistance, the motion persisted longer than it would on Earth.

“There are no stars visible in the photos.”
Many expect the lunar sky to be filled with stars, yet Apollo photographs show a black void. The lunar surface is brightly lit by the Sun, and cameras were set to capture that brightness. Stars, being far dimmer, simply didn't register. Imagine photographing a nighttime scene with well-lit foreground. Exposure times need to be short to not ‘blow out’ the foreground. This short exposure is not long enough to capture the faint stars in the sky.

“The shadows are inconsistent, suggesting multiple light sources.”
Some images show shadows at slightly different angles, which conspiracy theorists attribute to studio lighting. However, this effect is entirely consistent with uneven terrain and perspective distortion. The Moon's surface is not flat, and wide-angle lenses can exaggerate angles, making parallel shadows appear divergent. This can, and has, been repeatedly demonstrated here on Earth.



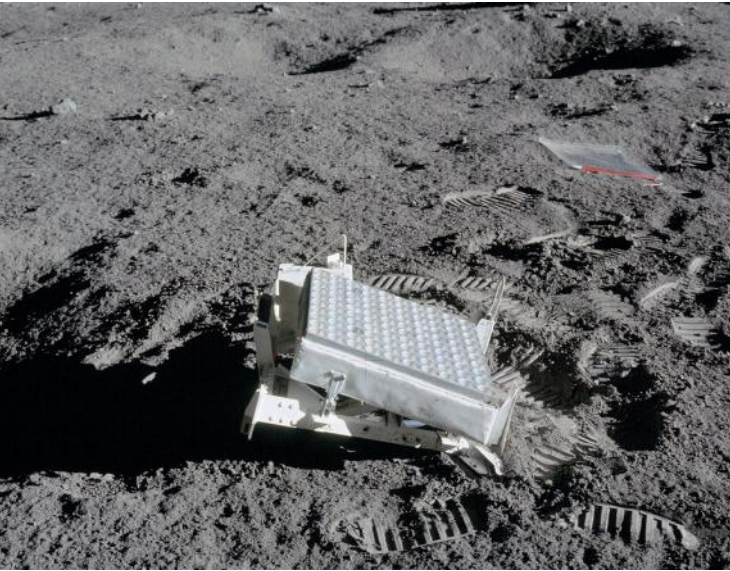
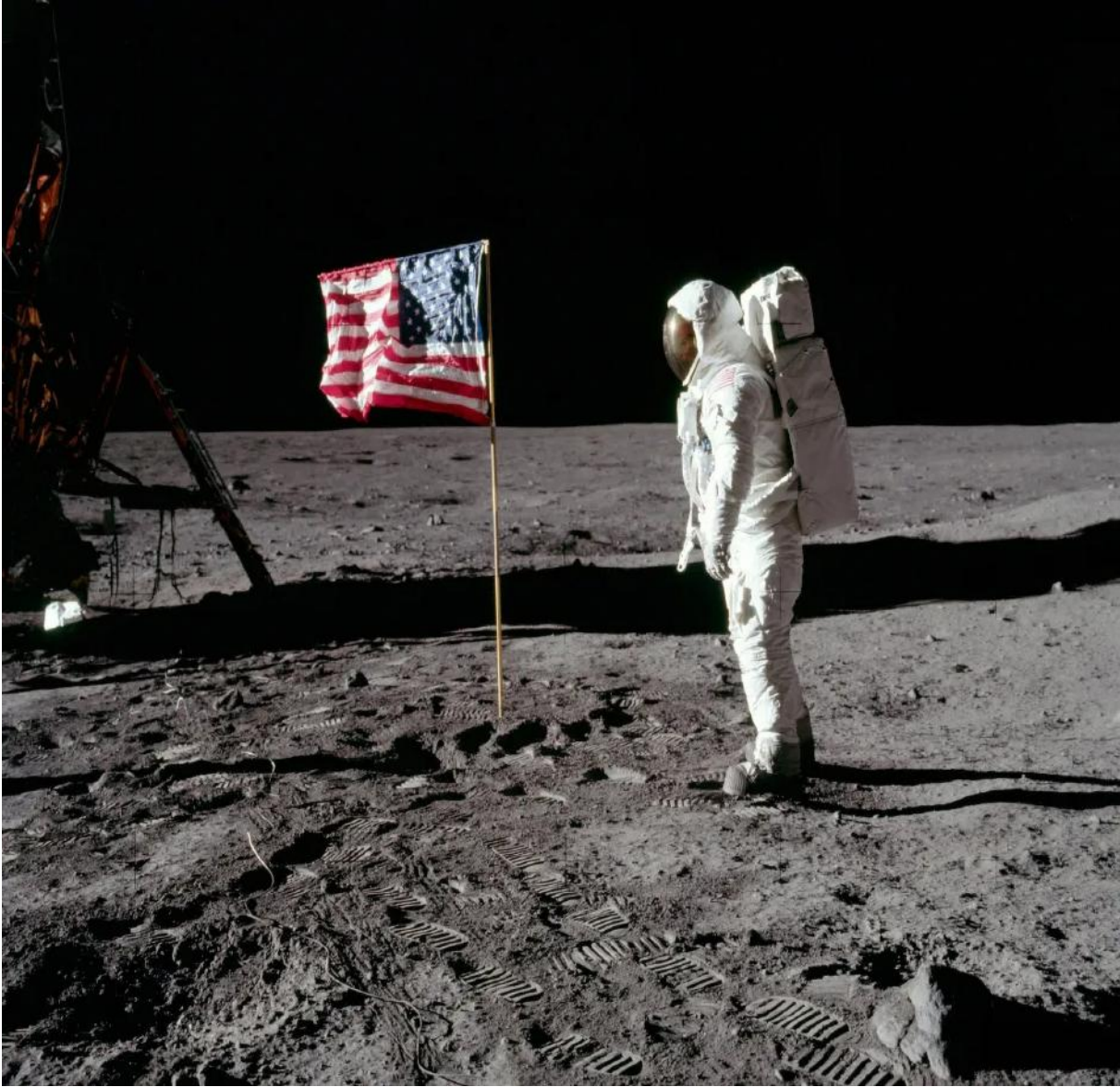
Artemis crew (above), Apollo 11 (below left), moonrise (below) and laserson the moon

“There's no blast crater beneath the lunar module.”
Sceptics claim that the module's descent engine should have created a noticeable crater. In fact, the lunar module's engine was designed to throttle down significantly during landing to ensure a soft landing. Combined with the Moon's low gravity and the nature of its fine, compacted regolith (lunar soil), the result is a very subtle disturbance rather than a dramatic crater.

“The Van Allen radiation belts would have killed the astronauts.”
The Van Allen belts are regions of charged particles trapped by Earth's magnetic field. While hazardous, the Apollo trajectories were carefully planned to minimize exposure, and the spacecraft passed through them quickly. The radiation dose received by astronauts was well within safe limits - comparable to or even less than some long-duration medical imaging exposures.

In addition to the above, samples of lunar rocks have been analysed by multiple institutions around the world, with all agreeing that the chemistry of the rocks does not match any known rocks on Earth. And we can still fire lasers at the mirrors left of the lunar surface by the Apollo astronauts to accurately measure its distance from Earth. But ironically, perhaps the most conclusive argument comes from the Americans' direct competitor. The original Apollo landings were the culmination of the Cold War space race: a power struggle between the USA and Russia. America won the race to put a man on the Moon, but not once did the Russians suggest that they cheated, or staged the landing. If anyone was going to question it, surely it would have been the losing side! There will always be people who question the landings, and they have every right to, but they do not have the right to take away from arguably one of humanity's greatest achievements. Even though the original missions were somewhat politically motivated, to safely land and return astronauts from the Moon, only 65 years after we invented flight, is a testament to human ingenuity and ambition. Soon we will return astronauts to the lunar surface once again, and this time set up permanent structures. There are plans to convert ice on the lunar surface into breathable oxygen and use the lunar soil to 3D print structural components. There are even tentative ideas about building telescopes on the Moon's surface. There will always be doubters, but I for one, am incredibly excited about humanity's expansion to the stars!

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



Reading the Sky: Appreciating the Uniqueness of Raptors



John Kinghorn
Avitourism Project Manager: BirdLife South Africa

There is a moment familiar to every bird-er: a distant shape appears against the sky, wings held steady, circling on invisible currents. For a few seconds, it is nothing more than a silhouette - until instinct kicks in. Is it broad-winged or narrow? Heavy or agile? Before colour or detail comes into play, the process of identification has already begun.

Raptors demand this way of thinking. They are not birds that give themselves away easily. Often seen at a distance, backlit or soaring high above, they challenge us to move beyond our dependence on field guides and instead learn to *read the sky*. And in doing so, they reveal far more than just their identity.

Built for the Air

Every raptor is a product of aerodynamic refinement. Some are engineered for power, others for speed, and many for endurance. The Peregrine Falcon represents perhaps the most extreme expression of this design. When it folds its wings and drops into a hunting stoop, it becomes a living projectile - streamlined, controlled, and devastatingly precise. At speeds often exceeding 300 km/h, it is not simply falling uncontrollably; it is navigating airflow with extraordinary control.

Contrast this with the steady, commanding presence of the regal Martial Eagle. Where the peregrine is speed, the Martial Eagle is authority. Broad wings carry it effortlessly on rising thermals, allowing it to survey vast stretches of landscape with very little effort. Based on transmitter data from tagged birds, these regal birds have been documented soaring at heights above 5,500 meters (approximately 18,000 feet). They are never in a hurry, nor do they need to be.

Between these extremes lies a spectrum of varying flight styles, each characteristic in its own way. Buzzards flap then glide with measured rhythm, harriers drift with buoyant ease, and kestrels hover for what at times can seem like eternity. For the observer, flight is not just motion; it is identity in action, an aerial fingerprint that is often

unique to specific families and sometimes even species.

Precision in Every Detail

Look closer, and the tools of a raptor's trade come into focus. Vision, for instance, is not just sharp - it is exceptional. Raptors have a significantly higher density of cone photoreceptors (colour-detecting cells) in their retinas, which provides for a near-crystal-clear image. A species such as the African Fish Eagle can detect the faintest of movement of a fish beneath the water's surface from remarkable heights. What appears effortless is, in reality, the result of highly specialised visual processing and evolutionary adaptations.

Then come the talons: curved, powerful, and purpose-built. In dense forests, the Crowned Eagle uses these to take prey items that seem improbably large for any 'normal' bird. Strength here is not incidental, but rather essential, and deadly. These are apex aerial predators, and every feature about them reflects that role.

Even the beak tells a story. Falcons, including the peregrine, and some kites, possess a subtle notch along their upper bill - a "tomial tooth" - used to dispatch prey quickly and efficiently by severing the spinal column at the base of the skull. It is a small detail, easily overlooked, yet entirely characteristic of their hunting strategy - speed.

Silence and Specialisation

Not all raptors rely on force or velocity. Some succeed through stealth. Owls move through the night with near-perfect silence. Comb-like serrations on the leading edge of their wings break up the turbulent air that would otherwise typically create a sound when in flight. These specially adapted feathers dampen sound to an almost eerie degree. Where falcons strike with explosive speed, owls approach like shadows, often unseen and very seldom heard.

Elsewhere, specialised adaptations in raptors take unexpected forms. Secretarybirds defy convention altogether. Confidently striding through grasslands, their spectacular plumes do little to conceal their watchful gaze, detecting the slightest movement, guiding the delivery of their powerful leg-strikes to subdue their prey.



White-backed Vulture (top)- Erin Bayliss, Whalberg's Eagle (left) and African Fish Eagle (above right) - J Kinghorn



World Travellers

Some raptors are not only masters of their environment but also masters of travel. Each year, Amur Falcons undertake a +22,000km journey that spans continents. From their breeding grounds in Asia to summer skies in southern Africa, they travel thousands of kilometres, including long, uninterrupted flights over open ocean (sometimes lasting 3 - 5 days). For a bird of their size, the scale of this migration is nothing short of extraordinary.

These seasonal arrivals bring a sense of movement and connection to South African birding. The sky above us is not static; it is ever moving and part of a much larger, interconnected global ecosystem that worries not about passports or border control.

A Precarious Future

And yet, for all their remarkable strength and adaptability, raptors are not immune to pressure. Across South Africa, and indeed the world, they are persecuted. Threats such as poisoning, habitat loss, and power-line collisions continue to take their toll on populations. Species such as White-backed Vulture and Black Harrier stand as sobering examples; once widespread, both are now critically endangered and endangered, respectively.

Raptors sit at the top of the avian food chain. When their populations begin to decline, it is rarely an isolated issue. It is a signal, one that speaks to broader environ-

mental challenges that are likely to be affecting entire ecosystems. We should heed these warnings.

For birders, the journey into raptor identification begins with uncertainty. A distant silhouette, a fleeting glance, a guess that may or may not be correct. But over time, something shifts. You begin to notice the angle of a wing, the rhythm of a glide, the subtle clues that turn confusion into recognition. In that moment, identification becomes far more than just reciting the name of a particular species. It becomes an understanding of how that bird fits into the landscape: how it moves, hunts, and survives.

These birds are not just birds to be identified; they are patterns to be read, shapes to be processed, and stories to be understood. Once you learn their language, the sky above us begins to make sense in an entirely different and unique way.



Arrow Tips Found in South Africa are the Oldest Evidence of Poison use in Hunting



Marlize Lombard - Professor with Research Focus in Stone Age Archaeology, Palaeo-Research Institute, University of Johannesburg

The oldest evidence for the use of arrow poison globally was long thought to come from Egypt, dating to 4,000 years ago. It was a black, toxic residue on bone arrowheads from a tomb at the Naga ed Der archaeological site.

New evidence from southern Africa is challenging this.

New research has found poison on stone arrow tips from South Africa dating to 60,000 years ago. It is the oldest direct evidence for hunting with poisoned arrows.

This adds to what is already known about the know-how of ancient African bowhunters. These abilities may have contributed to our species' long and flourishing evolution in the region, and ultimately the successful spread of *Homo sapiens* out of Africa.

Hunter-gatherers in southern Africa

The evidence comes from Umhlatuzana Rock Shelter, in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province. The site was partly excavated in the 1980s to preserve archaeological material that could be damaged during the construction of the N3 highway between the cities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg.

Umhlatuzana is recognised as an important Stone Age site where hunter-gatherers lived at least 70,000 years ago. It is one of only a few sites in southern Africa where people continued to live until just a few thousand years ago.

In southern Africa, people have a long

history of hunting with poisoned arrows. For example, a team of South African and Swedish archaeologists found residues on arrow tips dating to between a few centuries and 1,000 years ago, that revealed how different arrow poison recipes were used.

Recently, three bone arrowheads stored in a poison-filled bone container were reported from Kruger Cave in South Africa dating to almost 7,000 years ago. This pushed back direct molecular evidence of arrow poison use to about 3,000 years before the Egyptian poisoned arrows.

Traces of poison have previously been found on a stick and in a lump of beeswax dating to between 35,000 and 25,000 years ago at Border Cave in KwaZulu-Natal. These were seen as indirect suggestions of early hunting poisons.

As a researcher in cognitive and Stone Age archaeology, I studied some of the artefacts from Umhlatuzana almost 20 years ago, finding use traces and adhesive residues on some of the quartz backed microliths (small, shaped stone tools) from 60,000 years ago. This showed that they were probably used as arrow tips.

Now, Sven Isaksson in the archaeology laboratory at Stockholm University has been able to identify molecular traces of toxic plant alkaloids (chemical substances), known to be an arrow poison, on a handful of these artefacts.

Poison from Indigenous Plants

This latest research revealed the presence of buphadrine and epibuphanisine toxic alkaloids on five out of ten analysed arrow tips from Umhlatuzana. The same alkaloids were also found on bone arrowheads col-

lected by Swedish travellers in the region 250 years ago. This tells us that the same arrow poison was used for many millennia in southern Africa.

Both alkaloids can be found in several southern African species of Amaryllidaceae, a family of flowering plants growing from bulbs. But only what is colloquially known as *gifbol* (poison bulb, *Boophane disticha*) is well-recorded as the source of an arrow poison. The plant's bulb contains a toxic juice (exudate).

Finding these specific alkaloids on five out of the ten quartz arrow tips studied cannot be coincidental. Ancient hunter-gatherers would have been familiar with the toxic properties of the *gifbol* exudates. For example, by about 77,000 years ago, people of the same region also understood the insecticidal and larvicidal properties of some aromatic leaves that were used for bedding. So they probably would not have kept the *gifbol* substance in their living space.

Substances with buphadrine and epibuphanisine molecules are not used commercially or in archaeological conservation, ruling out accidental modern contamination of the arrow tips.

Gifbol bulbs can survive for a century or more, despite drought cycles and fire regimes. The plant is indigenous to South Africa, thriving in grassland, savanna and Karoo vegetation. It is widespread throughout the southern, eastern and northern regions of South Africa, growing within a day's walk from Umhlatuzana Rock Shelter today. For various reasons, it's likely that it was also available to the inhabitants of the site thousands of years ago.

The toxic chemicals in the bulb last a long

time. They don't decompose easily, even in wet environments, and they interact well with mineral surfaces like stone arrow tips. That's probably why they survived for 60,000 years at Umhlatuzana.

Implications of the World's Oldest Known Poisoned Arrow Tips

The quartz arrow tips with *gifbol* poison now represent the first direct evidence for hunting with poisoned arrows in southern Africa, and globally – at 60,000 years ago.

It demonstrates that these ancient bowhunters possessed a knowledge system enabling them to identify, extract and apply toxic plant exudates effectively. They must have also understood prey ecology and behaviour to know that the delayed effect of poison shot into an animal would weaken it after some time. That would make it easier to run down, a technique known as persistence hunting.

Such out-of-sight, long-distance action is a convincing indicator of complex cognition that requires response inhibition (being able to delay an action for a reason). Because poison is not a physical force, but functions chemically, the hunters must also have relied on advanced planning, abstraction and causal reasoning.

Thus, apart from providing the first direct evidence of hunting with poisoned arrows, the findings contribute to the understanding of human adaptation, techno-behavioural complexity and modern human behaviour in southern Africa.

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Variability - Embracing Change



W R Leigh 1939

Andrew Paterson
Philosafaris.com

Lion hunt differently all the time. No two stalks are identical; few kills unfold the same way. In different regions they may specialise in particular prey species, and certain ways of taking them down, but they don't perfect a single technique that applies to all hunts - they adapt and adjust to the opportunity presented. This isn't inefficiency; it's mastery. In the language of resilience, this is variability: the capacity to function across a range of conditions rather than optimising for a single set of circumstances.

Last month, we explored diversity as the first of Brian Walker's attributes of Social-Ecological Resilience (SER) - the presence of different elements within a system that provide multiple options when conditions shift. This week, we turn to the second attribute: variability. Whilst diversity asks *what* elements exist, variability asks *how* those elements behave when circumstances change. It's the difference between having multiple tools and knowing how to use them when the situation demands it.

In Nature, as in special forces operations, variability and unpredictability is survival. In our own lives, it's the difference between adaptation and collapse.

The Resilience of Irregular Rainfall

Walker's work in African savannahs reveals a counterintuitive truth: variability isn't something to eliminate - it's something to preserve. In *Finding Resilience*, he describes how traditional pastoral communities in East Africa have thrived for centuries not *despite* irregular rainfall patterns, but *because* of them.

These communities maintain diverse herds - cattle, goats, sheep, sometimes camels. That's diversity: different livestock species with different strengths. But what makes them resilient is the variability in how they manage these herds. When rains fail in one area, herders move their cattle to where moisture remains. When a particular grazing zone degrades, they shift to another, allowing the first to recover. During prolonged dry periods, they might increase the proportion of goats in their herds, as goats survive on rougher forage than cattle. This adaptive behaviour—the capacity to adjust strategies as conditions change - is variability in action.

The nomadic rhythm isn't chaotic wandering; it's adaptive management cali-

brated to ecological variability. The system works precisely because the environment doesn't behave predictably, and the people have learned not to demand that it does.

Problems arise when external forces attempt to impose stability. Colonial and post-colonial governments, viewing nomadic movement as primitive, established sedentary ranching schemes with fixed water points and permanent settlements. The intention was to create predictable, manageable systems. The result was catastrophic.

Concentrated grazing around permanent water sources stripped vegetation, compacted soil, and triggered erosion. Without mobility - without behavioural variability - herders couldn't respond to localized drought or disease outbreaks. The diversity of livestock remained, but the adaptive capacity to deploy those options flexibly was eliminated. When severe drought arrived, communities that had survived centuries of variable rainfall collapsed under conditions they would once have navigated with relative ease.

The Kruger National Park experienced this exact pattern. From the 1930s onward, over 300 artificial boreholes and 50 dams were constructed across the park, powered by windmill pumps. The intention was sound: provide water to game in the drier western regions. But the result mirrored the pastoralist collapse. Water-dependent species like elephant, buffalo, and zebra concentrated around these artificial water points, triggering severe localised overgrazing and shrubby bush encroachment. More critically, lion prides followed the increased prey densities into areas that had previously served as refuges for rare species like sable, roan, and tsessebe - specialist grazers that depend on specific tall-grass breeding habitats. These rare antelope couldn't escape the competition and predation pressure. Their populations plummeted. Following the science, SANParks has subsequently implemented a programme to close over two-thirds of these artificial water points after 2003, deliberately restoring natural variability to the system.

The lesson is stark: systems managed to minimise variability become brittle. Resilience emerges not from dampening fluctuations but from developing the capacity to function across them.

The Stoic Preparation for Fortune's Turns

The Stoics understood this principle intimately. Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121 - 180 AD/CE), writing in *Meditations*, didn't envision a life of unbroken calm. He prepared for turbulence. "*When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: The people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and surly.*" This wasn't pessimism - it was variability training.

Seneca (4 - 65 AD/CE), one of first century Rome's wealthiest and most influential men, took the practice further, advocating deliberate discomfort. He suggested periodic fasting, sleeping on hard floors, wearing rough clothing - not as punishment but as rehearsal. "*Set aside a certain number of days,*" he wrote, "*during which you shall be content with the scantiest and cheapest fare ... that it may be a test of yourself*

instead of a mere pastime."

This was *premeditatio malorum*: the premeditation of adversity. By voluntarily experiencing hardship, Stoics expanded their range of psychological tolerance. They weren't trying to eliminate difficulty from life; they were ensuring that when difficulty arrived uninvited, it wouldn't exceed their capacity to endure it.

The parallel to ecological variability is direct. Just as savannahs maintain resilience through irregular rainfall and adaptive responses, human beings maintain psychological resilience through irregular experience and adaptive capacity. The mind that encounters only comfort becomes as fragile as the rangeland managed for constant optimal conditions.

Variability in Special Forces Teams

In the special operations community, this principle manifests with particular intensity. Elite units don't train operators to function under ideal conditions - they train them to function when everything goes wrong.

Special Operations Force teams operate in environments where predictability is an illusion. Intelligence proves incomplete. Equipment fails. Cultural assumptions crumble. Mission parameters change mid-execution. These operators haven't perfected responses to anticipated scenarios; they've developed adaptive capacity across a spectrum of psychological and tactical conditions.

This requires embracing emotional variability as a training tool rather than treating it as a system failure. Conventional military culture often emphasises constant emotional control - maintaining composure, projecting confidence, suppressing fear. But resilience doesn't emerge from emotional suppression; it emerges from developing the capacity to experience psychological turbulence and remain functional within it.

Soldiers who train only in controlled, sterile environments never develop the adaptive range necessary for genuine crisis response. They've optimised for "normally," which means when ambiguity escalates, when moral complexity intensifies, when fear or doubt surge beyond familiar boundaries, they face the same problem as the sedentary pastoralist facing drought: their system lacks the flexibility to absorb the disturbance.

Truly resilient training deliberately introduces variability - managed stress inoculation that expands the window of tolerance for psychological distress. This isn't trauma accumulation; its calibrated exposure followed by reflection and recovery. A warrior who has experienced fear, uncertainty, frustration, and moral ambiguity in training contexts, and has developed strategies for remaining functional within these states, possesses far greater resilience than one who has been protected from such experiences.

The paradox is that attempting to shield soldiers from psychological variability actually undermines their resilience. It's the equivalent of ecological over-management: it produces brittle minds that fracture when reality exceeds control.

Signals, Not Failures

Walker emphasises that in resilient sys-



tems, fluctuations aren't problems to eliminate - they're information to process. Variable rainfall tells pastoralists where to move. Variable prey density tells predators where to hunt. Variability is signal.

The same applies to emotion. Discomfort, fear, and doubt aren't system malfunctions; they're data. A soldier who interprets anxiety as failure will suppress it, eliminating the signal and reducing situational awareness. An operator who interprets anxiety as information - *something here requires attention* - can use it to sharpen focus and adjust response.

Emotion regulation improves when we accept that psychological states will fluctuate, and that this fluctuation is healthy. Trying to maintain constant internal conditions is as futile as trying to maintain constant external conditions. Both attempts trade adaptability for the illusion of control.

Living with Variability

On foot in the African bush, you learn quickly that no two days are identical. The weather shifts. Animal behaviour changes - as per the lioness charge, never presume, remember? Areas and trails that were accessible or full of game yesterday may not be so today. Don't rue this - work with it. Develop a repertoire of responses rather than a single protocol. Remain alert to changing conditions rather than expecting the environment to conform to your plans.

This is how resilient systems function. Not by achieving stability, but by maintaining capacity across variable conditions. Not by perfecting a single optimal state, but by cultivating the range to adapt when states shift.

Walker's second attribute reminds us that resilience isn't found in constancy. It's found in the ability to "*roll with the punches*" - to absorb disturbance, learn from turbulence, and emerge with capacity intact.

Lion don't hunt the same way every time because their environment doesn't present the same conditions every time. Their variability is their strength. Ours can be too.

Next month, the third attribute of Social-Ecological Resilience: Modularity.

If you want to get hold of Andrew you can email him on ecostaic@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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When sudden illness or injury strikes, every second counts. That's where Emergency Centres (EC) step in - our specialized department is designed to provide immediate, life-saving care when time is critical. Operating around the clock (24/7), the Emergency Centre is the backbone of urgent healthcare, ensuring that help is available whenever it's needed most.

The Purpose of EC Services

Emergency Centres exist to stabilize patients, deliver rapid interventions, and determine the next steps in care.

Equipped with advanced diagnostic tools, cutting-edge medical equipment, and highly trained staff, ECs are prepared to handle everything from heart attacks to traumatic injuries. Their 24/7 availability makes them indispensable for conditions where delays could mean the difference between life and death.

Common Reasons for EC Visits

Patients arrive at ECs for a wide range of urgent medical concerns. Some of the most frequent include:

- 1. Chest pain or cardiac symptoms - to rule out heart attacks or other cardiac emergencies.

- 2. Severe headaches or migraines - especially when pain is unusual or intense.
- 3. Abdominal pain - from appendicitis, pancreatitis, kidney stones, or digestive crises.
- 4. Injuries - such as fractures, sprains, or head trauma.
- 5. Breathing difficulties - caused by asthma attacks, allergic reactions, or respiratory distress.
- 6. Fever or infections - particularly in children, where symptoms may signal serious illness.

- 7. Seizures or loss of consciousness - possible indicators of neurological emergencies.
- 8. Pregnancy-related complications - sudden symptoms requiring urgent evaluation.

While many visits involve true emergencies, EC's also serve patients who seek care after hours or when symptoms appear suddenly and unexpectedly.

Hoedspruit Private Hospital emergency numbers: EC Direct: +27 010 3000 280, Casualty: +27 12 000 111 3

Pain is not always something you have to live with

Many people believe their only options are medication, surgery, or simply enduring ongoing pain. In practice, there are other approaches.

Dr George Estienne Neuhoﬀ is an interventional chronic pain physician consulting in Johannesburg and regularly in Hoedspruit. He qualified at the University of Pretoria (MBChB, 1994), completed his Diploma in Anaesthesia (1998) and FCA (2002), and has further advanced his training through Pain School International in Budapest. In 2022, he became a Fellow of the International Pain Practice.

His work focuses on the management of acute and chronic pain, including cases related to trauma, post-surgical complications, age-related conditions, and nerve damage. Many patients are not suitable for surgery or are looking for alternatives.

A key area of his practice is advanced pain management techniques, including dorsal root ganglion interventions, which are used in selected cases to address complex nerve-related pain.

Pain is often not visible and not easily understood by others, despite its impact

on daily life. By the time patients seek specialised care, they have often been dealing with it for an extended period.

Consultations are approximately 60 minutes, allowing for a thorough clinical assessment and a clear understanding of the cause of the pain, as well as a structured long-term plan.

Dr Neuhoﬀ consults in Hoedspruit every 4 - 6 weeks and runs a theatre list at Hoedspruit Private Hospital.

Outside of his practice, he spends time in the bush with his family and is a keen birder.





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5	8	9	3	1	7	2	4	6
8	6	3	7	9	5	1	2	4
1	9	7	8	2	4	6	5	3
2	4	5	1	6	3	7	8	9
6	5	8	9	7	2	4	3	1
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