Conservation news

A beautiful, bioculturally important Game Reserve is dying in plain sight

In 2021, I reported in *Oryx* that Ndumo Game Reserve, one of South Africa's oldest and a Ramsar Wetland of international importance, was under existential threat (*Oryx*, 55, 811–812). Following scant acknowledgement of Ndumo's centenary year (2024), we (a group of concerned South African conservationists with long-term involvement in Ndumo Game Reserve) publicized its historical significance and precarious state in national newspapers. In *Koedoe* (2025, 67, a1830), I documented correspondence with the provincial conservation authority Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and Ramsar Africa dating from 2021, noting the lack of action over the status of Ndumo.

In 2025, a special issue of *African Journal of Wildlife Research* celebrated the rich heritage of ecological research and conservation management in Ndumo. The issue emphasized the Reserve's ongoing role in providing environmental education to local schoolchildren: unusually, black South African schoolchildren have been visiting since the 1970s. Sir Peter Scott visited in the 1960s, attracted by the Reserve's fame as a birding destination. My father Tony established the first crocodile research station in the country here, celebrated in one of South Africa's first televised nature documentaries. Numerous documentaries have since showcased the Reserve's biodiversity and scenic beauty.

In early 2025, environmental journalist Tony Carnie and I put public pressure on the Department for Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, and were told the long overdue Ramsar Article 32 update report on the well-publicized, dire conservation status of the Reserve was expected by 23 April 2025. We felt cautiously optimistic, given the Ramsar COP15 was convening in neighbouring Zimbabwe in July 2025 (at which South Africa would proclaim a commitment to co-leading wetland conservation in the region).

The Department then advised that their hands were tied until the Department of Water and Sanitation published a statement based on results of a major river catchment survey of the region. This survey had been announced and comments requested through a Government Gazette circular in June 2024, but few conservationists seemed aware of this.

A statement by the Department of Water and Sanitation was published on 6 June 2025, but the Department for Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment then wanted another report from Ezemvelo, including recommendations for remedial action. My suggestion that it would be more democratic—and catalyse action—to convene a workshop that included local stakeholders, given the longstanding impasse, received no response. July and the Ramsar COP came and went, with no report. Ezemvelo's report was finally submitted to the Department for Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment in August 2025, but not in the required online format, for which the Department indicated it would provide training.



Aerial view of farming on the Phongolo floodplain in Ndumo Game Reserve in 2023. Photo: supplied.

Meanwhile, irrigation, mechanized farming and permanent structures plough across the Phongolo floodplain, once the Reserve's heartland for the hippopotamus, crocodile nesting and winter grazing. Illegal fishing, hunting, grazing and deforestation continue. As this goes to press, there is still no confirmation that an update report has been submitted to Ramsar.

Ndumo Game Reserve is dying, with conservation efforts ensnared in a labyrinthine process reminiscent of the interminable probate case in Charles Dickens' novel *Bleak House*.

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Bats and Key Biodiversity Areas

Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) are globally significant sites for conservation. To date, c. 16,600 KBAs have been designated worldwide. Many of these evolved from the network of Important Bird Areas (IBAs) and were thus designated because of their value for threatened bird species. Most have yet to be reassessed under the Global Standard for the Identification of KBAs, established in 2016 for other taxa. In 2022, the Global Union of Bat Diversity

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Networks established a global collaboration to proactively include bats, where appropriate, in the KBA initiative.

At the 20th International Bat Research Conference, in Cairns, Australia, in August 2025, we convened a symposium and workshop to promote the inclusion of bats in the KBA network. This was supported with funding from The Rufford Foundation. Over 100 people from 30+ countries participated in both events, at which speakers summarized the current situation regarding bats and KBAs in India, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Mexico, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Nicaragua and Uganda. During the workshop we reviewed the KBA designation process and looked at examples of how bats could be included in current and future KBAs. As well as potentially adding bats to the lists of species for current KBAs, there was a discussion of the designation of new KBAs based on their importance for bats. The bat species most likely to qualify as a KBA trigger are those categorized as threatened (Vulnerable, Endangered or Critically Endangered) on the IUCN Red List, those with restricted ranges or those that congregate in large numbers, typically in caves, mines or trees. As a follow-up to the Conference, an online group has been established to drive forward the formal review of bats in the KBA process.

This collaborative work is ongoing and proposals are starting to be submitted to KBA National Coordination Groups for formal review. The Christmas Island KBA (Australia) was submitted in October 2025 and included the Vulnerable Christmas Island flying fox *Pteropus melanotus* as a trigger species. In Kenya, Mount Suswa has been proposed as a new KBA for the Vulnerable Harrison's large-eared giant mastiff bat *Otomops harrisoni* as this is the largest known aggregation of the species, and steps are underway to identify the species as a KBA trigger across its range in north-east Africa. The KBA initiative is a vital tool in the conservation of threatened bat species and their habitats and will help ensure bats are recognized fully in the Global Biodiversity Framework.

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The Brazilian National Forest Inventory provides data to support the application of IUCN Red List criteria

Brazil's National Forest Inventory (Inventário Florestal Nacional, IFN) is a public policy established by Law No. 12,651/2012 and coordinated by the Brazilian Forest Service of the Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change. The IFN collects biophysical, botanical, soil and socio-environmental data across the entire national territory on a standardized 20 km grid. Brazil's territory lies across six biomes, two of which are recognized as biodiversity hotspots (the Cerrado and Atlantic Forest), and includes Amazonia and the Caatinga, the latter endemic to Brazil.

On 5 September 2025, IFN made its datasets available online and open access through the interactive map and dashboards of the National Forest Information System (snif.florestal.gov.br/pt-br/temas-florestais/ifn). This unique dataset can be used to advance knowledge about Brazil's forest landscapes, land use, tree health, carbon stocks, and the relationships between forest ecosystems and local populations. This broad and integrative approach has already yielded detailed information on the conservation status of native tree species.

The IFN already holds coverage, abundance and population information for 389 plant species on Brazil's Official List of Threatened Species (130 Vulnerable, 231 Endangered, 28 Critically Endangered), of which 320 are trees, totalling 1,822 voucher collections and 10,632 measured and inventoried individuals across Amazonia, Caatinga, Cerrado, Atlantic Forest and Pampa. For trees, IFN holds data for c. 34% of threatened species in the country. Another important contribution is the reporting of data for 103 Data Deficient plant species. We encourage the use of IFN data to support extinction-risk assessments and reassessments, as the inventory provides information for monitoring of plant populations in Brazilian forests, landscape data, use of plants by people, and occurrence records and population data, the latter of which are often scarce in IUCN Red List assessments.

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