

# iSimangaliso

## News Flash



iSimangaliso  
Wetland Park



KOSI BAY COASTAL FOREST LAKE SIBAYA SODWANA BAY UMKHUZE FALSE BAY CHARTERS CREEK LAKE ST LUCIA CAPE VIDAL MAPHELANE

### **iSimangaliso's Victory for Nature Watch 50/50 on Thursday 21 July 2016 – SABC2, 20h00**

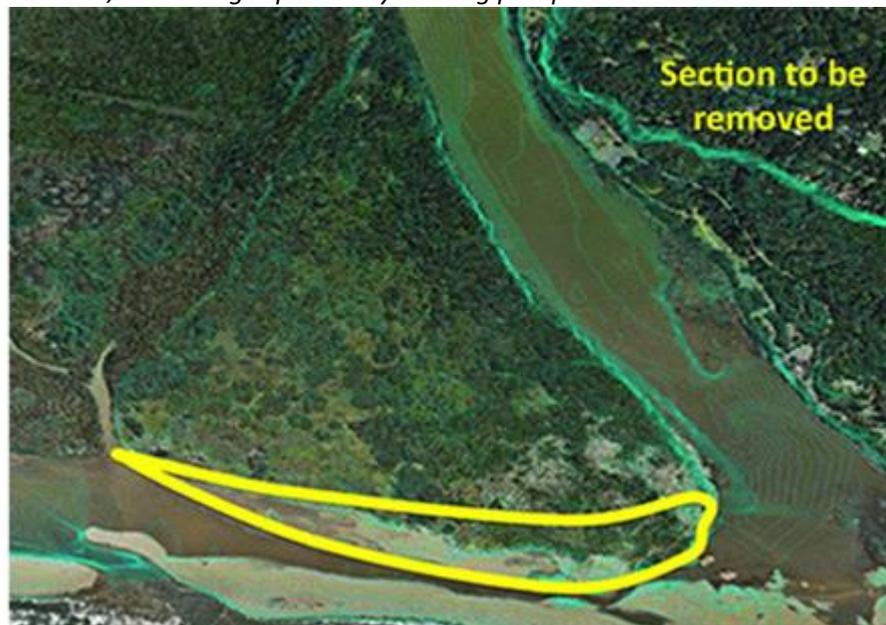
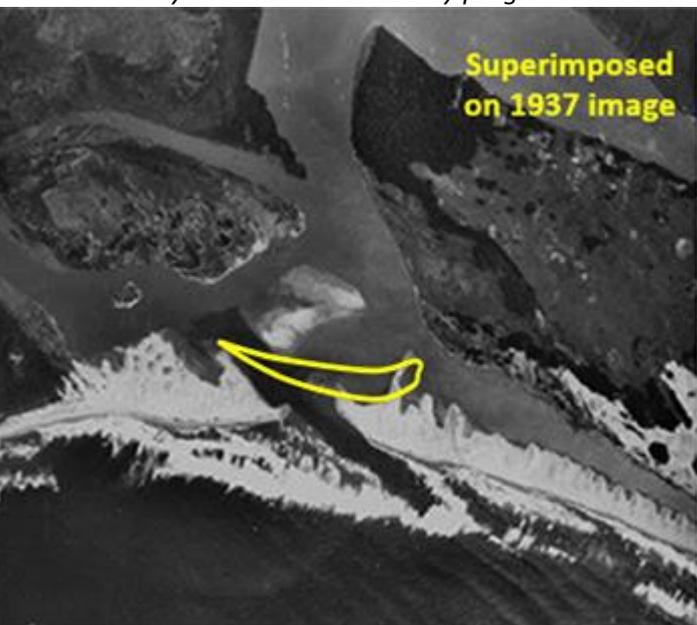
Earlier this year, the iSimangaliso Wetland Park embarked upon what is arguably the biggest wetland rehabilitation in the world, and a milestone in the healing of the Lake St Lucia Estuary. In February, a R10 million contract was signed with Cyclone Engineering Projects (Pty) Ltd to remove some 100 000m<sup>3</sup> of dredge spoil (sand, silt and vegetation) obstructing the natural course of the uMfolozi River.

Site establishment began several weeks later and despite a number of challenges thrown at us by Mother Nature – including extended drought conditions and the need to use sea water for the equipment rather than fresh water from the estuary – the site is established and the operation is running well on the Park's Estuary Beach.





*Cyclone has made steady progress in site establishment, and dredge spoil slurry is being pumped out to sea.*



*The mouth of the Lake St Lucia system in 1937 (left) and 2013 (right). The 2013 photograph shows the dredge spoil pile that was placed in the river course from the 1950s for a period to try and separate the uMfolozi River from Lake St Lucia. The yellow boundary shows the first portion of dredge spoil that is being removed by Cyclone.*

### **The history of Lake St Lucia's separation**

Historically, red flags had been raised about the possible impacts of silt on the estuarine system – a consequence of the canalisation of the uMfolozi River by sugarcane farmers and the now abnormally functioning floodplain. To mitigate the risks to the system, measures were taken to partially separate the uMfolozi River from the St Lucia Estuary in 1952 by depositing dredge spoil between the two and artificially breaching the uMfolozi River into the sea at the south near Maphelane.

Since then – and for 60-odd years – dredge spoil was artificially deposited in the natural course of the uMfolozi River. This significantly reduced freshwater to Lake St Lucia from the uMfolozi River, the largest of the five rivers entering the system. It also interfered with nature's ability to regulate the opening and closing of the estuary mouth.



*During the drought of 2002-2012, this management approach was brought into question. The impact of starving Lake St Lucia of the uMfolozi's freshwater was brought into stark relief. High salt levels in the Lake St Lucia system resulted in the extinction of species. The Tugela Bank prawn fishery collapsed and other fisheries suffered heavy losses. Natural resources available for subsistence use decreased significantly and tourism was negatively impacted.*

Innovative research by independent researchers from a range of disciplines was pulled together under the auspices of the newly established iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority. In 2010, a multi-disciplinary research team was contracted by iSimangaliso to concretise solutions for the hydrological problems facing the Lake St Lucia system.

The new research debunked the myth that siltation and sediments were a problem for the Lake St Lucia system. Silt is an important component of the estuary benthos – the life-giving organisms that inhabit the bed of the estuary and provide nutrition for, *inter alia*, fish. It also concluded that the uMfolozi River, which had been actively managed out of its system up to 2006, has two significant functions: as the major contributor of freshwater to the Estuary and, importantly, as the powerhouse that drives the mouth dynamics that keep it open and result in it closing.

The study strongly recommended that nature should be left to its own devices and the uMfolozi should be allowed to pursue its natural path northwards. This would allow the uMfolozi to once again take its rightful place as the contributor of some 60% of the Lake's freshwater.



*The first intervention, frequently referred to as the spillway, was completed in 2012. It entailed the removal of small quantities of dredge spoil to facilitate the flow of the uMfolozi River into the estuary along its natural course. This was no more than the river had been pursuing of its own accord when it pushed through the dredge spoil on the beach in 1999 and 2006, breaching to the sea, far north of the popular St Lucia Ski Boat Club.*

### **Environmental victory**

The significance of the uMfolozi River, especially during the current severe drought, was recognised on 20 May 2016 when iSimangaliso received a ground breaking victory for nature when the presiding high court Judge Mohini Moodley ruled in favour of the environment.

Judge Moodley dismissed the application by the Umfolozi Sugar Planters Ltd (UCOSP) and two farmers against iSimangaliso, the Departments of Environment Affairs, Water and Sanitation, Rural Land Reform and Development and Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries.





*This landmark judgement allows for Lake St Lucia's life blood to be returned. The uMfolozi River is the major source of freshwater into Africa's largest estuarine lake and the engine that keeps its mouth open to the sea. This is a story of environmental justice for the 800 hippos and 1200 large crocodiles whose home is the Lake, as well as many other endemic and threatened species. And for the people who depend on Lake St Lucia, the judgement comes as a relief after the many court applications that threatened their livelihoods. Tourism directly related to this estuary generates approximately R1.2 billion in revenue for the area and creates in the region of 7000 jobs. It is also central to the fisheries industry on the east coast of Africa.*

The dispute between the parties concerned the breaching of the uMfolozi River to the sea. UCOSP and the two farmers contended they had a right to do this to alleviate back-flooding on certain low-lying farms. The farms in question comprised less than 1% of the 9127ha under sugarcane.

iSimangaliso contended that it was implementing a management strategy for the estuary that had been developed after consultation with UCOSP that had started in 2008. The restoration project comprised minimum interference, the re-establishment of the natural river course, and a one-mouth policy.

"South Africa is a water scarce country and finds itself in one of the worst droughts in living memory. Innovation is key to conserving and managing our water resources. The struggle to save Lake St Lucia is central to this issue. Estuaries, with their surrounding wetlands, comprise some of the most productive yet threatened eco-systems in the world. They are important in the moderation of global climatic conditions, naturally improve water quality, and provide important economic and recreational opportunities. They form a vital link between marine, aquatic and terrestrial eco-systems.

"Caring for and healing of the earth is integral to our humanity. I would like to thank the Global Environmental Facility, World Bank, and the Department of Environmental Affairs for their support in achieving this goal," says iSimangaliso CEO Andrew Zaloumis.

### **A unique resource**

The world recognised the uniqueness of Lake St Lucia when iSimangaliso was listed as South Africa's first World Heritage Site in 1999. The UNESCO evaluation recognised that there "is no other place like this on the globe". First proclaimed in 1895, Lake St Lucia is the world's oldest protected estuary and forms the centrepiece of iSimangaliso. It was also recognised as a wetland of international significance and made a Ramsar site in 1986. It is Africa's largest estuarine lake and comprises over 60% of South Africa's estuarine area.

The Lake St Lucia estuarine system supports high levels of biodiversity and viable populations of threatened species, which are of international and national importance, including feeding and breeding areas for endangered and endemic species. It is the most important nursery ground for juvenile marine fish and prawns along the KwaZulu-Natal coast. More than 50% of all water birds in KwaZulu-Natal feed, roost and nest in this estuary. Importantly it is a breeding area for several bird species, which are rare or have limited distributions in South Africa. The system is one of the most important protected areas for the conservation of the Nile crocodile in South Africa and the. The hippopotamus is an iconic animal for Lake St Lucia. Listed as 'Vulnerable' on the IUCN Red List, Lake St Lucia is recognised as having the largest viable population of hippo in South Africa. The contribution to fisheries is also significant. Of the 155 fish species that have been recorded in the St Lucia estuarine system, 71 species use Lake St Lucia as a nursery area and at least 24 of these are important in marine line fisheries.

For Park information, visit [www.isimangaliso.com](http://www.isimangaliso.com), contact [info@isimangaliso.com](mailto:info@isimangaliso.com) or call 035 590 1633. Follow us on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) and [Youtube](#), or visit our website at [www.isimangaliso.com](http://www.isimangaliso.com).

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This iSimangaliso Newsflash is regularly issued by the iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority. These communications underline our ongoing commitment to update, inform and involve the public, holidaymakers and interested parties about the Park, and to address any concerns brought to our attention.  
Andrew Zaloumis, CEO

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