

Maphungubwe Legacy Project.

The thousand year old Iron Age Site, Maphungubwe in Limpopo Province, was the location for a Heritage Indaba held on June 5 and 6 2015 to launch the Maphungubwe Legacy Project.

The Heritage Indaba brought together government departments, municipalities, civil societies, traditional leaders and health practitioners to engage on heritage matters and develop common strategies to preserve and develop our heritage resources.

The Indaba was hosted by the Maphungubwe Heritage Foundation in partnership with the Department on Arts and Culture, Environmental Affairs, National Heritage Council of South Africa, South African National Parks, South African Heritage Resources Agency and Kara Heritage Institute. Dr Mathole Motshekga, Director of the Kara Heritage Institute, explained that one objective of the Maphungubwe Legacy Project is to promote, protect, manage, conserve and preserve heritage resources as defined by the National Heritage Resources Act, 25 of 1999.

"The aim of the project is to identify and record all heritage sites and living heritage within the Maphungubwe Cultural Landscape situated in the North Eastern Region of Limpopo province, notably the Vhembe and Mopani districts," he said.

The expected outcomes of the Legacy Project include the publication of a Heritage Register and Guide.

Dr Motshekga said that the Maphungubwe heritage site represents one of South Africa's greatest and earliest cultural legacies. One thousand years ago it was the centre of the largest kingdom in the subcontinent, where a highly sophisticated people traded gold and ivory with China, India and Egypt.

The Iron Age site, discovered in 1932 but hidden from the public until only recently, was declared a World Heritage site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in July 2003.

Maphungubwe is an area of open savannah at the confluence of the Limpopo and Shashe Rivers and abutting the northern border of South Africa and the borders of Zimbabwe and Botswana. It thrived as a sophisticated trading Centre from around 1220 to 1300.

In its statement on the listing, UNESCO describes Maphungubwe as the centre of the largest kingdom in the subcontinent before it was abandoned in the 14th century. Maphungubwe was home to an advanced culture of people for the time - the ancestors of the Shona people of Zimbabwe. They traded with China and India, had a flourishing agricultural industry and grew to a population of around 5 000.

Maphungubwe is probably the earliest known site in southern Africa where evidence of a class-based society existed (Maphungubwe's leaders were separated from the rest of the inhabitants).

"Twenty-three graves have been excavated from this hilltop site", the website continues to say. "The bodies in three of these graves were buried in the upright seated position associated with royalty, with a variety of gold and copper items, exotic glass beads, and other prestigious objects."

"These findings provide evidence not only of the early smelting of gold in southern Africa, but of the extensive wealth and social differentiation of the people of Maphungubwe."

The most spectacular of the gold discoveries is a little gold rhinoceros, made of gold foil and tacked with minute pins around a wooden core. The rhino, featured in one of South Africa's new national orders - the Order of Maphungubwe - has come to symbolize the high culture of Maphungubwe. The rhino is also a symbol of leadership among the Shona people of Zimbabwe. Maphungubwe is testimony to the existence of an African civilisation that flourished before colonisation. Besides the rich cultural heritage of Maphungubwe National Park, most of the continent's big game roam here. There is also a tremendous diversity of plant and animal life.

Sandstone formations, mopane woodlands and unique riverine forest and baobab trees form an astounding scenic backdrop for a rich variety of animal life.

Elephant, giraffe, white rhino, eland, gemsbok and numerous other antelope species occur naturally in the area, while visitors can spot predators like lions, leopards and hyenas, and birders can tick off 400 species, including kori bustard, tropical boubou and pel's fishing owl.

