

## Partnership biodiversity projects

### Case studies from across the Rio Tinto-BirdLife International Programme

#### Africa

### Richards Bay Avitourism Project – the Zululand Birding Route (ZBR)

<b>Location</b>	Richards Bay, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
<b>Rio Tinto company</b>	Richards Bay Minerals (RBM)
<b>Partner organisations</b>	BirdLife South Africa (BLSA), BirdLife Zululand (BLZ)
<b>Key people</b>	Duncan Pritchard, Sakhamuzi Mhlongo and Michael Blose (BLSA); Jeanette Small and Pete Outhwaite (RBM)
<b>Habitats</b>	Coastal wetlands, dune forests, savanna, scarp forests.
<b>Birds</b>	Green Barbet, Mangrove Kingfisher, Green Malkoha, Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon, Spotted Ground-thrush, Woodward's Batis, Rudd's Apalis, African Broadbill.
<b>Outcomes</b>	Community-based sustainable livelihoods and bird conservation.

A collaboration between Richards Bay Minerals and BirdLife South Africa, this project achieves sustainable development goals through community-led ecotourism businesses while achieving global and national bird conservation priorities in the region of the Richards Bay mine. Over 35 members of the local community have been trained as birdwatching guides and now make their living from ecotourism. Local government has been actively involved, such as in handing over a wetland to the project for wise conservation stewardship. See <http://www.zbr.co.za/>



Birdwatching at Thulasihleka Pan

#### Project background and history

Richards Bay Minerals (RBM) has been a major employer in the region since operations began in 1976. The company is located in an area that has remarkable bird diversity and includes several Important Bird Areas (IBAs). Spectacular and widespread species, such as African Crowned Eagle and Long-crested Eagle, can be found in the area; as well as rare and localised species, such as Pel's Fishing Owl, Woolly-necked Stork, Mangrove Kingfisher, Green Malkoha and African Broadbill. These birds inhabit a variety of habitats including wetland, dune and scarp forest and savanna ecosystems along the renowned Zululand Birding Route.

The Richards Bay and the wider hinterland area has approximately 600 bird species, including 45 species listed in South Africa's Red Data Book. No less than 24 species are regarded as national rarities, and 16 are regarded 'Zululand Specials', which attract birdwatchers to this area and make it one of the premier domestic birding locations in South Africa. As a result, the Richards Bay area is an excellent site for the development of bird-based ecotourism (avitourism). Ecotourism is currently one of the fastest growing domestic and international tourism sectors, and birdwatching is one of the ecotourism activities showing most rapid growth.

Rio Tinto, RBM and BirdLife realised early on that avitourism enterprises employing local people could be a win-win model of corporate social and environmental responsibility, achieving real conservation goals in the face of rapid coastal industrial development and providing self-sustaining employment for local communities. In response to this, the Richards Bay Avitourism Group was formed in 2001 to coordinate the development of the pre-existing Zululand Birding Route into a set of community-led avitourism enterprises to achieve the dual objectives of biodiversity conservation and sustainable community development.

#### Project details

##### *Bird Guides*

Over 35 birdwatching guides from the local Richards Bay communities have been trained at BirdLife South Africa's training facility at Wakkerstroom. Visiting birders have revealed unprecedented interest in using community bird guides and as a result additional guides are trained every year and all those trained are either employed full time or gather



Ongoye Forest's community guides

significant amounts of income as freelance guides. Workshops have also commenced to assist the guides share ideas, keep skills honed, and develop marketing and business management abilities. Additional training courses have also been developed in 2007–2008, and these are focused on assisting guides develop entrepreneurial skills and designed to improve guides' skills in delivery of environmental education.

The project, now in the post-partnership funding phase, is managed full-time by Michael Blose, one of the first guides trained along the route. The project has reached a point of core sustainability through wide support from local business and government.

Site Support Groups (a fundamental element of BirdLife's global conservation action plans) are also key to conserving IBAs. The Mzimela community has established a group of volunteers specifically dedicated to looking after the Ongoye Forest, a neighbouring estuarine Forest Protected Area. The success of the local guides has encouraged the local municipality to include avitourism in its integrated development plan, effectively prioritising avitourism within municipal planning.

#### *Birding infrastructure and resources*

The Zululand Birding Route is now represented on four tourism-orientated committees in the area and several special birding events were run in 2007 to encourage birders to visit the area. BirdLife Travel (a company that evolved from BLSA) has been administering accommodation for birdwatchers, recognising appropriate establishments as 'birder friendly'. Birdwatching hides have been built at Richards Bay and elsewhere in the region. In this way, local conservation infrastructure has also improved and become decentralised. For example, the Thulasihleka Pan site has been handed over to the project by the local municipality and has been declared a conservation amenity area, to be managed by the Zululand Birding Route. Development is also proceeding within the wider area: in 2008, a birders lodge was launched at Ongoye Forest, to be managed by the local community. This forest IBA is renowned for its rare endemic species, such as Green Barbet. A similar community-led bird-hide project is underway at the Muzi Pans, involving negotiations with the KwaJobe tribal leaders.

#### *Corporate involvement*

RBM employees are involved in BirdLife Zululand activities, including guide training and bird-ringing groups. The impact of the project as a whole is reflected in the support shown by various stakeholders: further funds have been provided by the local municipality, the Central Timber Corporation and the Richards Bay Coal Terminal for further guide-training and marketing, while SAPPI-WWF and Uthungulu District Municipality have approved the provision of funds for the Ongoye Forest Project. This initiative aligns itself with and realises some of RBM's long term goals for sustainable development. In part, these are considered within the context of RBM's mine closure plans, where it aims to cultivate sustainable livelihoods within the wider community independent of mining activity and yet realise an economically sustainable value for its mitigation and rehabilitation efforts on the site it manages.

The Richards Bay Avitourism Programme was one of three finalists in the Smithsonian Institution's 'Sustainable Tourism Awards'.

#### **The future**

This initiative has provided BirdLife South Africa with a good working model to inform the scaling-up and replication of Birding Routes elsewhere in South Africa. The ZBR will continue to develop and engage with new communities within Zululand more widely, achieving integrated objectives for IBAs, wider bird conservation and local communities.