



## Background to the Vhembe Biosphere Reserve

The Vhembe Biosphere Reserve (VBR) was inscribed on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Network of Biosphere Reserves in 2009, becoming the sixth South African Biosphere Reserve and the third in Limpopo Province. The VBR has since established itself as a representative body in the Vhembe District Municipality and Blouberg Local Municipality with its primary aim being the conservation of the areas uniquely bio-diverse environment, while simultaneously supporting and promoting much needed sustainable development. The 2012 Environmental Performance Index ranks South Africa at 128 out of 132 countries surveyed, with one of the fastest rates of environmental decline.<sup>1</sup> UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MaB) programme is one of the few global instruments that tackles the inter-related challenges of poverty, development and conservation and the VBR uses the MaB principles and guidelines to address these.

The VBR recognises that poverty alleviation is the greatest challenge in its area and that this poverty is compounded by population growth, unsuitable development, habitat destruction and climate change. It is only by confronting and meeting this challenge that the VBR believes that environmental conservation can be successful and in order to do so the VBR has to be representative of the majority of the stakeholders. To this end the VBR has made it a priority to involve the many local communities, environmental and developmental non-profit organizations as well as traditional leadership structures in the area. This has been successfully achieved with the direct involvement and assistance of the Limpopo Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism (LEDET).

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<sup>1</sup> Emerson, J.W., A. Hsu, M.A. Levy, A. de Sherbinin, V. Mara, D.C. Esty, and M. Jaiteh. 2012. **2012 Environmental Performance Index and Pilot Trend Environmental Performance Index**. New Haven: Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy / <http://www.epi.yale.edu> accessed 5<sup>th</sup> March 2012.

## **Current work of the Vhembe Biosphere Reserve**

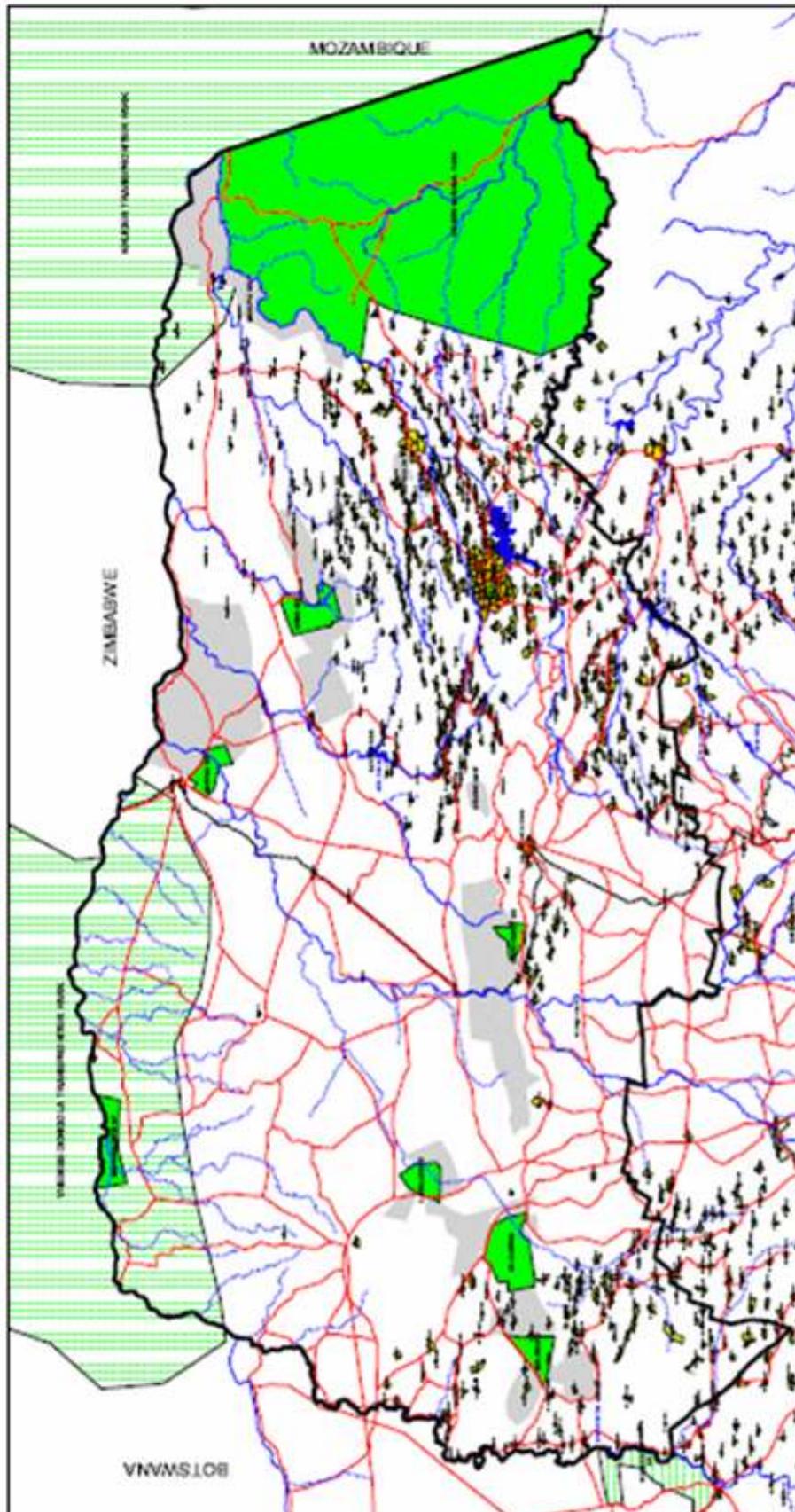
The VBR has from inception to date not received any funding yet it has achieved the approval of provincial and national government as well as UNESCO and brought together a very diverse group of stakeholders who guide its work. Fortunately, the VBR has at its disposal a wealth of experts and specialists, many based at the local University of Venda as well as at private research facilities, who have contributed substantially towards its success without remuneration or the support of an administrative office. It is currently working on a number of projects that will contribute significantly towards providing the area with a long-term sustainable development framework.

The current work programme includes the preparation of an Environmental Management Framework (EMF) for the VBR. There is at present no holistic environmental plan for the sub-region and this EMF will provide a basis for future decision-making based on sustainable development principles. Included in the EMF will be the following:

- A detailed Biodiversity Hot-Spot Analysis of the entire VBR: already completed by the Conservation Sub-committee and in use to inform planning for future core-conservation areas and corridors between protected areas.
- An assessment of how to address poverty alleviation using the natural assets of the area in a sustainable manner.
- A list of existing and potential “Biosphere Demonstration Projects” which can contribute significantly to job creation and sustainable living.
- An education programme based on identifying and developing specific skills training courses that will contribute towards socio-economic upliftment.
- Design and implementation of a research programme to identify the potential use of biodiversity for sustainable commercial exploitation and job creation. Indigenous Knowledge Systems will form a major part of this study.
- A study of the heritage resources of the area which will be included in conservation planning.

Furthermore, the VBR has been very involved in the debate on the establishment of mines in the area and engages actively in Environmental Impact Assessment processes. To this end it is seeking undertakings from mining companies to set a benchmark for best environmental practice according to international standards. The VBR has also been active in the debate between the Department of Environmental Affairs, UNESCO, South African National Parks and others about a buffer zone to protect the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape from mining applications.

# Map of the Vhembe Biosphere Reserve



Source: LEDET 2011