

Pondoland... a vigorous seaboard of wild, unspoilt beaches, dunes, forests, and gracious, friendly people

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Along the beautiful eastern coast of southern Africa, below the Great Escarpment which separates the elevated interior plateau from the coastal lowlands, is a dynamic area of plant and cultural endemism. Home to a unique combination of biological species, the region has a scenic, topographical, and cultural diversity unsurpassed in South Africa.

The shore of this astonishing region is a coastline popularly known as the Wild Coast, a vigorous seaboard of wild, unspoilt beaches, dune and coastal forests, open estuaries, sheer coastal cliffs with deeply incised river gorges and swiftly flowing rivers.

Rich in archaeological interest, the Pondoland region is a depository of rare Sangoan and other stone-age artefacts, as well as many San cave rock-art sites in the Mkambathi Nature Reserve that belong to the same tradition as the much celebrated Drakensberg paintings. Numerous Iron Age and Stone Age sites, including shell middens from early beachcomber origin, can be seen along the coast.

The region's exciting annual "sardine run", is a unique marine event that takes place every year between late May and early August when millions of Cape pilchards migrate to Wild Coast waters from the Cape in large shoals. These shoals are hotly pursued by large flocks of marine birds, dolphins, and varieties of whale, shark, and fish in the world's largest animal migration.

Inextricably entwined with the antiquity and richness of the region, and possessing and using it as their inalienable cultural right, are the extraordinary Pondo people, whose simplicity and wisdom have become indistinguishable from the sacred land they now traverse.

Historical evidence suggests the area was originally settled by Bushmen (San) and Hottentots, but towards the end of the 17th century these were displaced by successive waves of pastoral people wandering down from the northeast. These peoples split into various groups and the northern group became the Pondo.

Professor Russell Kaschula, Head of the Department of Languages at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, says of the Pondos:

"There is a powerful spirituality and innocence about these people, and Pondoland is an interesting place for those who have not reconciled with the negative

issues in their lives. There seems to be an energy and power that draws people there for spiritual healing. The traditional healing methods can almost be likened to Western psychology, a process of questions and answers enabling one to undergo a self-transforming experience that leads to a more fruitful life".

The Pondos were grateful to their ancestors for the land they were entrusted to protect. Its rich, fertile soil and abundant sea food gave them the means to survive in an environment of astonishing natural beauty.

They now live in a region that is internationally recognised as a botanical "hotspot" of plant biodiversity and which has the greatest variety of tree species (over 600) in the world. It is only one of 235 recognised "hotspots" that contain about 50% of the planet's species in only 2% of the land. Little wonder that it was the inspiration for JRR Tolkien's best-seller, *The Hobbit*.

The land provides food and medicine, and the Pondos are well known for their traditional plant therapy. Professor Kaschula adds: "There are also healers specialising in plant medicine who spend months in the forests learning the various plant qualities under expert tutelage. It would appear a lot of people from various cultures round the world come to Pondoland to be trained in traditional healing. Although they never compromise their principles, the Pondos will always share their knowledge."

It is well-documented that early Dutch and Portuguese seafarers bear testimony to the docility, kindness, and graciousness of these people. A young French Huguenot, Guillaume de Chalezac, spent a year living as foster-son to a Pondo chief until he was rescued by the English vessel *Centaurus*. His diary, published in 1748, provides readers with a warm account of his hosts who are described as well-mannered, respectful, friendly, and hospitable towards each other and strangers. He describes the women as appealingly modest.

Don Pinnock, during a visit to the region, said: "We overnighted in a comfortable hut with a new floor in Rhole village. There we were spoiled rotten with tea, home-baked bread and a country meal of beef, potato-like ndombes, stir-fried cabbage, and the staple samp and beans. Sponge mattresses with clean bedding were laid out on grass mats and a bath of hot water appeared on cue."

Living in circular huts made from mud and



Photo credit: Riaan (www.riaanphotography.com)

clay, with a conical-shaped roof of dried grass, the Pondos breed cattle, grow grain, pumpkin, and fish and hunt with weapons made from materials at hand. Extraordinary basket weavers, they also make the most intricately exquisite beadwork. They are farming people who ride the valleys, hills, and grasslands on their sturdy ponies confronting the challenges of the 21st century with their integrity and culture intact, as it has been for centuries. They have not been left alone, however.

During the 19th century, they felt the force of British colonial rule. Left alone for a while, their land was eventually annexed by the British in 1894 and through various political, economic and religious pressures, the people were forced to accept it.

When the apartheid government came to power in 1948, there was a socio-economic and political shift in the history of South Africa and the indigenous people became aliens in the land of their birth. Land became the property of the new government and taxes were levied to force indigenous peoples to seek work on the mines to survive.

On 6 June 1960, on Ngquza Hill, the Pondo nation had to face the might of their new enemy. Although lives were lost in a peaceful, unarmed demonstration, they look back with pride that they played a prominent role in liberating South Africans, and their martyrs of that day remain an enduring memorial for the land entrusted to them.

Today they face another threat to their land and culture. An open cast mining project is set to go ahead for heavy metals such as rutile

and titanium. It will extend 1.5km inland from the shore for 23km, from the Mtentu River northwards to the Umtumvuna River along one of the most idyllic settings and ecologically sensitive environments on South Africa's coastline. Some Pondo elders consider it an invasion, and fear it will desecrate the graves of their forefathers and negatively affect them socially and culturally. Many local and international conservation organisations agree with them.

Core to the Pondo philosophy is the African concept of ubuntu. It means to share and care through principles of harmlessness and unselfishness. The region, so rare and extraordinary, its pristine Wild Coast, and its people need ubuntu now more than ever.

In the words of Nelson Mandela: "A traveller through a country would stop at a village and he didn't have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him ... the question therefore is: are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to be able to improve? These are the important things in life, and if one can do that you will have done something that will be very appreciated."

That is ubuntu. Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu: a person is a person through other persons.

Famous Pondo people:

Oliver Tambo – former ANC president

Stella Sigcau – former Pondo princess and politician

Madosini – traditional songstress

Winnie Mandela – former wife of Nelson Mandela

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September:

* A new primary school site was laid out behind Assisi Drive. Most of the bush has been cleared and the site fenced. This is the new site after the first site on Tarragona Road had to be abandoned. It was great news for St Francis to have a new school!

* The first St Francis Marine charter yacht was launched at the Port this month. Tequila Sunrise is a 50ft yacht which will be used for charter cruises in the Bahamas skippered by Sandy Marr and his wife Eleanor from Knysna were at the launch with St Francis Marine's CEO Duncan Lethbridge.

* The Census 2011 shows that Kouga has the highest population growth rate in the Eastern Cape. The population increased from 71 390 (2001) to 98 588 (2011), with a growth rate of 3,2% compared to the 0,4% growth rate of the province as a whole. The reason for this growth is that Kouga is seen as a beacon of hope for a better life. This has resulted in a steady stream of new arrivals who look to the municipality to meet their basic service requirements.

* The idyllic Eastern Cape town of St Francis Bay continued to flourish with the property sales and building boom since the beginning of the year. The article on these important developments of the town was first written about by St Francis Chronicle's Editor and then went viral after the Editor's article was published on Alec Hogg's new fast growing and extremely popular business website,

Biznews.com. The article spoke about the property sales boom and recounted how St Francis Bay was rising from the ashes with new homes being built after the fire. This caused immense interest in St Francis Bay. The cash injection was a necessity, builders in St Francis Bay maintained. "It was a tragic thing that happened but the resultant building boom has helped the town survive."

* In spite of many being in favour of a nuclear plant being built at Thyspunt many people and organisations are still concerned about the evacuation plans in the case of a nuclear fall-out. Some non-profit organisations raised this concern and said they could well protest against the construction of the nuclear energy plant in Thyspunt.

October:

* Due to economic factors, the Cape St Francis Civic Association can no longer afford to continue with the Adopt-A-Highway project as it operates now. The Adopt-A-Highway project is managed and financed by the Cape St Francis Civic Association (CSFCA). At present the R330 road is cleaned from the Kromme Bridge to Cape St Francis once a month. During season it is increased to twice a month. An appeal was made to businesses and residents of St Francis Bay to 'come on board' with the organisation, otherwise...

* A final decision on whether to go ahead with the construction of a nuclear power station – Nuclear 1 – at Thyspunt will be taken before the end of the financial year on March 31,

2014, Energy Minister Ben Martins told a media briefing. Martins says that the Department of Energy will be embarking on study tours to a number of key nuclear energy nations, including China, France, Korea and the United States ahead of the final decision. Martins said that Government had decided on an "energy mix" adding that part of this "does involve nuclear power"

* Jeffreys Bay Wind Farm impacts on local community through employment Renewable energy generation aims to positively impact the environment and just as importantly local communities, especially through employment and skills transfer. The Eastern Cape is undoubtedly one of the primary regions that has been able to capitalise on the employment opportunities that this new sector offers.

November:

* St Francis Bay police are investigating a case of armed robbery and searching for three suspects who allegedly stabbed a couple in their 70s in a Harbour Road house at about 5 am ones morning. The couple were fortunately not seriously wounded. The man was stabbed in his right buttocks and the woman had a slash mark on her face.

* The Environmental Impact Assessment on Thyspunt is once again delayed. The delay is primarily due to comments received by the Department of Environmental Affairs which resulted in additional information to supplement existing specialist studies. Eskom is confident that the release of the

Draft Environmental Impact Report for public comment will take place in March/April 2014.

December:

St Francis is heading for a bumper and fun season for visitors and residents, it seems with plenty of exciting events for young and old from social to sport lined up and holiday accommodation has been snapped up. Bookings in the B&Bs are still pouring in for January and some establishments are booked up to February... Owing to the shortage of houses to let some agents are appealing for more homes. The amount of publicity St Francis Bay received in the past year with all the devastation experienced put it on the map as a preferred holiday destination.

** Kouga Municipality's traffic officers are once again adopting a 'zero tolerance' for drunken drivers. Eight extra, temporary traffic officers will be appointed for the season. The zero tolerance approach to driving under the influence of alcohol also extends to driving without driver's licences. Traffic officials will also be focusing on non-roadworthy vehicles, which are prone to cause accidents. Traffic officers will be assisting at busy intersections during the holidays and further point controls will be conducted at entrances to the beaches, in particular on New Year's Day.

* Motorists to St Francis are advised that the speed limit on the R330 has been reduced from 100kms to 60kms from the Oyster Bay Rd turn-off to past the Sea Vista township in an effort to reduce the number of accidents caused by speeding.