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THE WITNESS:

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# Cableway TO NOWHERE?

The proposed Drakensberg cableway has been called economically unfeasible, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife has condemned it and the community most affected by it, the AmaZizi, are asking why their existing upliftment and conservation projects are being ignored. STEPHEN COAN reports

**A** PROPOSAL for a cableway for the Drakensberg to rival that of Table Mountain in Cape Town was first announced at the KZN Tourism Indaba in May 2012 by Michael Mabuyakhulu, KwaZulu-Natal's Economic Development and Tourism MEC.

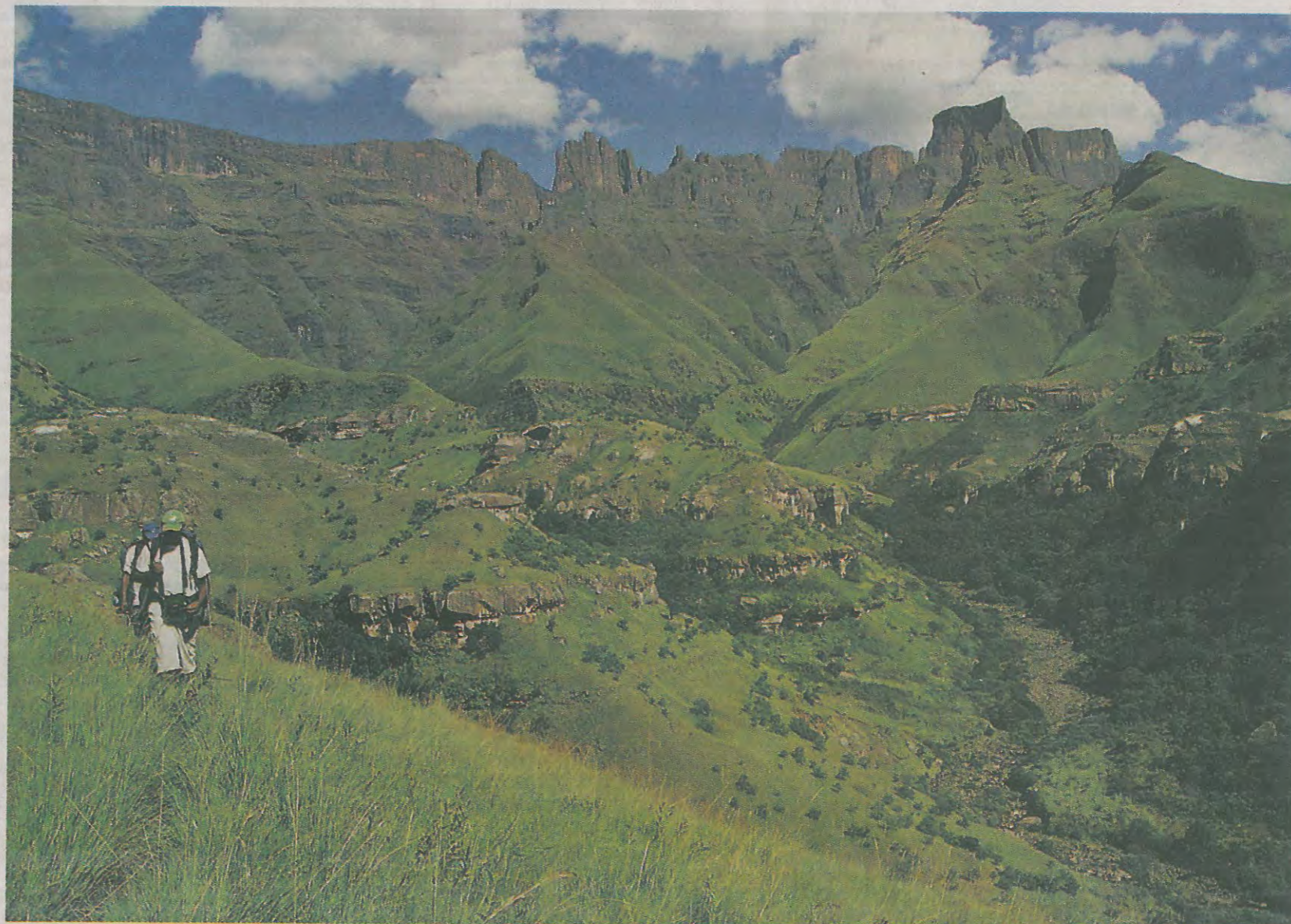
It was one of several "tourism icons" announced at the indaba, along with a giant statue of King Shaka at the Tugela River mouth and a bridge to rival that of Sydney's from the Point to the Bluff in Durban.

When the draft feasibility study for the cableway was released last July, Mabuyakhulu described it as "a game changer" — and that the proposed R500 million (now costed at R570 million) cableway would "change the tourism landscape not only for KwaZulu-Natal but for our neighbours in the Free State and in Lesotho."

He had earlier presented the study to local stakeholders in the Drakensberg where, for the first time, Mount Amery was identified as the summit terminus for the proposed cableway, with the base station located near Woodstock Dam. This made it clear that the cableway would traverse the land of the AmaZizi who live in the Busingatha valley section of the Mnweni area of the Drakensberg, also home to the AmaNgwane.

The release of the study, undertaken by Graham Muller and Associates, saw the beginning of an initial four-month consultation process, which was later extended to February 14, 2014. Parallel to this process, a business plan was drawn up.

Asked at the official study launch how the consultants and the DEDT would consult with the community and prevent intimidation, Mabuyakhulu said they would hold mass meetings. "We will not only consult with the inkosi. We will let everybody be heard, even those with contrary views. This is a democracy."



Members of the AmaZizi Wilderness Group do environmental monitoring in part of the proposed community nature reserve and wilderness area that will be impacted on by the proposed Drakensberg cableway. The Eastern Butte of the Drakensberg can be seen on the right, the cableway will run to its immediate left.

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On November 23, a public meeting was held at Busingatha hosted by the DEDT to consult with communities affected by the proposed cableway project. According to a DEDT statement, the meeting was attended by more than 10 000 people who "overwhelmingly endorsed the project".

However, the AmaZizi royal family and much of the community were not present as they were in mourning for their inkosi, Mthethi Miya, who died on August 7, as well as his brother, S.W. Miya, who died on November 16.

On December 11, the AmaZizi came out against the cableway and accused Mabuyakhulu of exhibiting a "complete lack of respect to the royal family of the AmaZizi".

According to traditional protocols, during a time of mourning for an inkosi, the community, especially immediate family, do not engage in social activities, which would include attending a meeting such as that held on November 23. Consequently, the meeting was seen as disrespectful and took place without the participation of key community members. According to local sources, most of those attending the meeting were bused in from outside areas.

In the statement, Miya said the AmaZizi were opposed to the cableway, adding that "contrary to the claims of some people", Inkosi Miya never agreed to have the cableway in the area. "That is why he authorised the AmaZizi Wilderness Group, to work with other community environmental working teams to promote a community wilderness area and work on wilderness management activities for the existing environment."

Miya said the AmaZizi wanted the area proclaimed "a community nature reserve and wilderness area". This is something the Mnweni Wilderness Working Team and the AmaZizi Wilderness Group have been working towards with assistance from Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife.

Over the past few years, the Mnweni Wilderness Working Team, with the backing of the mountain communities, has been working towards having portions of the area designated as a nature reserve incorporating a wilderness area. A management plan was created that gained the full support of the community and in September 2011, it was reported that Nkosi Mthethi Miya of the AmaZizi and Nkosi Menzi Hlongwane of the amaNgwane were applying for 45 000 hectares of their land to be proclaimed as a wilderness nature reserve under Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife's Biodiversity Stewardship programme. At the time, both amakosi said they wanted the land "untouched for future generations".

For this to happen the landowners — the Ingonyama Trust — must agree, and the plan for a nature reserve is now with them for approval. According to Ezemve-

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

## ▶ THE AMAZIZI INKOSI'S STATEMENT

*"Long years of planning and working for our community nature reserve and wilderness are being ignored. We have made a proper management plan for this area with expert help and do not want this cableway on our land."*

lo KZN Wildlife spokesperson Musa Mngambo, "discussions are proceeding well and we are hopeful that consultations will be finalised soon".

According to a statement from the trust, "this project like other projects is subject to Ingonyama Trust Board's land rights approval processes which require consent for use of the land from the relevant traditional councils, completion of all the formal processes required, such as EIA, confirmation from municipality in terms of utilisation of such land as per the IDP purposes".

In addition, the trust said they were unable to provide a "time frame" for a decision "because negotiations are still taking place between" between the trust and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife with a view to "finalising this proposal for the benefit of all stakeholders involved".

In January, a review of the cableway business plan raised serious concerns about the financial viability of the project.

Pietermaritzburg-based Newman Accounting and Tax Services, which did the review for African Conservation Trust and Wilderness Action Group, said the business plan did not indicate how there will be a 526% increase in visitors to the Drakensberg region, enough to make the proposed cableway sustainable. Nor did it detail any market research done to indicate that visitors will pay R350 per adult and R200 per child to go on the cableway

car, given that the prices are more than most of the other cableways in the world.

It was subsequently announced, following a meeting with Mabuyakhulu and his counterparts from Lesotho and the Free State, that the cableway might be extended by another five kilometres to link it to the Afriski ski resort in Lesotho and indirectly to the failed 1 500 ha Nondela golf course and housing development near Bergville, which collapsed shortly before its launch in 2008.

It was also reported that a new "market-testing process" and a "reworked" business plan would be released.

Next up was the announcement of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) being undertaken. It was previously understood that an EIA was dependent on private-sector investors buying into the project. The DEDT has not responded to questions as to why they are going ahead with the EIA without any sign of investors in the project.

In addition, a letter from Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife chief executive Bandile Mkhize, written in October, was made public in which Mkhize warned that the cableway proposal could jeopardise the status of one of the country's World Heritage sites and wreck plans to join up sections of the mountain wilderness area as per the initiatives outlined above.

Mkhize drew attention to the cableway's impact on the population of Bearded and Cape vultures nesting in the area, as well as the impact of the cableway on a wilderness area.

The letter also questioned the financial viability of the project given that the success of the cableway was based on the assumption it would attract 300 000 visitors a year. Currently only 135 000 tourists visit Ezemvelo's mountain resorts.

Meanwhile, the DEDT has still made no attempt to consult the AmaZizi inkosi, who has since issued another statement indicating unequivocally their op-

position to the cableway, "We do not want it on our land."

"Long years of planning and working for our community nature reserve and wilderness are being ignored. We have made a proper management plan for this area with expert help and do not want this cableway on our land. Our ideas for hotel development just outside our nature reserve are also being ignored ... Our nature reserve and wilderness area and the hotel development just outside could give many more sustainable jobs and opportunities to our people than the small number of local jobs (about 60) that the cableway might bring. Why is DEDT ignoring the royal family and traditional leadership of the AmaZizi as well as the project we have been working on for so long?"

• Stephen.Coan@witness.co.za

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