World Heritage Sites of South Africa

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According to the definition from the Oxford dictionary, heritage is “what is or may be inherited” or “inherited circumstances or benefits”. Heritage clearly includes things/aspects that are transmissible from parent to offspring. Heritage is not only cultural; it is also natural. Our natural heritage is part of the circumstances we inherit when we are born. This includes the natural environment, that is animals, plants and non-living things, such as water and soil.

As of September 2007 South Africa has eight World Heritage Sites. The selection of these sites is controlled by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). A World Heritage Site is selected for its cultural significance or natural beauty and importance as a natural habitat for the conservation of biological biodiversity. A Heritage Site is selected on the merit of at least one of ten selection criteria. There are currently 851 World Heritage Sites.

Of South Africa’s eight World Heritage Sites, four have been selected for their cultural significance, three for their natural importance and one for a combination of both. In this article I wish to emphasise the importance of our natural heritage. Let us explore why these sites have been declared World Heritage Sites. The other sites, selected for their cultural importance, are Robben Island, Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape, the Cradle of Humankind (fossil hominid sites of Sterkfontein, Swartkrans, Kromdraai and environs) and the Richtersveld Cultural and Botanical Landscape.

Vredefort Dome (Free State & North-West Province)
The Vredefort dome, partly in the Free State Province, is the remnant of the oldest and largest meteorite impact site known in the world. It formed an estimated 2 000 million years ago when a gigantic meteorite (larger than Table Mountain) hit the earth near the present Vredefort. The force of the impact opened up a crater, the remnant of which is still visible and is now about 90 km in diameter. The gold deposits, which had already been in existence for 900 million years before the Vredefort Impact, were driven deep into the Earth’s surface by the meteorite collision, and thus prevented from eroding away like many other gold fields.

iSimangaliso (Greater St. Lucia Wetland Park) (KwaZulu-Natal)
The site consists of 13 contiguous protected areas with a total size of 234 566 hectares. It contains the largest estuarine system in Africa and includes the southernmost extension of coral reefs on the continent. Other habitats include dunes, swamps, coastal forests, rocky and sandy shores, submarine canyons and the largest protected wetland in southern Africa. The highly endangered gaboon adder and a large variety of other snake species reside in the subtropical coastal dune forest. The Park’s location, between sub-tropical and tropical Africa, as well as its coastal setting, has resulted in exceptional biodiversity, including about 521 bird species. Marine turtles such as the Leatherback and Loggerhead, utilize the protected beaches to breed.
Cape Floral Region (Western Cape)

The Cape Floral Region is one of the richest areas of plant diversity in the world. It is home to nearly 20% of the African continent's flora. It also displays outstanding ecological and biological processes associated with the Fynbos vegetation unique to the region. Plant species density is among the highest in the world, and the high level of endemism (31.9%) has resulted in the region being identified as one of the world's 18 biodiversity hot spots.

References

uKahlamba-Drakensberg (KwaZulu-Natal)

The site's diversity of habitats protects a high level of endemic (restricted to a particular area) and globally threatened species, especially birds and plants. This site also contains many caves and rock-shelters with the largest and most concentrated body of rock paintings in Africa south of the Sahara, made by the San people over a period of at least 4000 years. The rock paintings are outstanding in quality and diversity of subject and in their depictions of animals and humans. The rock art in the park is better preserved than in any other region south of the Sahara. The status of this site is mixed, i.e. of natural and cultural value.

The school curriculum includes a section on Heritage. The Education Department at the Museum presents special lessons on Heritage, including an exposition of Heritage Sites, for grade 10 learners.