

## INTERNATIONAL MOUNTAIN DAY - 11 DECEMBER

The theme for International Mountain Day 2010 is "*Mountain minorities and indigenous peoples.*" It aims to raise awareness about indigenous peoples and minorities who live in mountain environments and the relevance of their cultural heritage, traditions and customs.

South Africa's beautiful UKhahlamba Drakensberg Park was declared a World Heritage Site in the year 2000. It has diverse habitats protecting many endemic bird and plant species. Numerous caves and rock shelters contain the largest concentration of rock art, made by the San people, south of the Sahara. These paintings were made over a period of 4000 years and help us to understand their beliefs and way of life. The paintings document animals, humans as well as representation of their spiritual life. The San people who occupied the sub-continent are recognized as the original indigenous inhabitants. They roamed freely throughout southern Africa but eventually found refuge in these peaks when they were invaded by migrating Bantu-speaking people and later European colonization. There is no other monument to the San people, who made this their home, other than the 35,000 individual images to be found in 600 sites throughout the mountain range.

It is important that we maintain the ecological integrity of this region. The UKhahlamba (Zulu translation – "barrier of spears") Drakensberg (Afrikaans translation – "dragon mountains") Park has a natural beauty and with an average height of 3000m is the highest mountain range south of Kilimanjaro. These mountains are the main watershed of South Africa and are the home of the second highest waterfall (947m), the Tugela Falls, in the world. The highest being the Angela Falls in Venezuela with a drop of 979m.

The park contains aquatic, forest, scrub, fynbos, savannah, mountain grassland and heath plant families and of the 2,153 plant species 98 are endemic or near endemic. Birds located in the park include the globally endangered Cape Parrot and white-winged Flufftail, as well as the globally threatened Corn Crane, Lesser Kestrel and Yellow-breasted Pipit. The Blue Crane, Cape Vulture and Southern Bald Ibis are counted as globally vulnerable, while the Pallid Harrier and Black Harrier are on the near-threatened list. Birds most often associated with the Drakensberg although not strictly endemic are Drakensberg Siskin, Bearded vulture (emblem of the Southern KZN birding route), Drakensberg Rockjumper and Sentinel Rock Thrush. Other special birds are Bush Blackcap, Gurney's Sugarbirds and Malachite Sunbird. Mammals in the region are the threatened eland and endemic grey rhebuck. One may also encounter colonies of clawless and spotted neck otters.

International Mountain Day is an opportunity to create awareness about the importance of mountains to life and to stress the importance of sustainable mountain development, as well as to build partnerships that will bring positive change to the world's mountains and highlands.

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