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4 April 2025

NEWS RELEASE

University of Pretoria led Mapungubwe science mission to shape sustainable futures across borders

Mapungubwe Hill. Image credit. Prof Ramutsindela.

PRETORIA - Drawing on lessons from the rise and fall of the ancient Mapungubwe Kingdom, a proposal led by Professor Maano Ramutsindela, the UP–UCT Future Africa Research Chair in Sustainability Transformations, has been selected as one of 12 global pilot science missions by the International Science Council (ISC) to accelerate real-world sustainability solutions.

The science mission titled: "The SDGs for a Sustainable Mapungubwe: Thriving Cross-Border Landscapes and Societies" was selected from more than 250 international submissions and is the only mission from Southern Africa to be included in the global pilot programme.

The ISC's pilot science missions, launched in March 2024, are designed to bring together diverse scientific, policy and community stakeholders to co-design innovative and locally informed sustainability solutions. The selected

missions will serve as models for trans-disciplinary collaboration and implementation, particularly in complex and vulnerable settings.

Ramutsindela is a professor of Human Geography at the University of Cape Town's Department of Environmental and Geographical Science, and an Extraordinary Professor in the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences at the University of Pretoria. He explained that the mission focuses on the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape, a UNESCO World Heritage Site spanning South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe.

"This Pilot Mission presents a unique opportunity to rethink sustainable futures for cross-border communities in southern Africa. By leveraging diverse expertise and knowledge systems, we aim to co-develop practical, real-time solutions that can serve as models for other regions facing similar sustainability challenges. There is no better site for the Mission than Mapungubwe, where the past meets the present to inspire hope for a sustainable future of thriving cross-border landscapes and societies," he said.

Reviving a historical landscape

The Mapungubwe region, once home to a flourishing kingdom that collapsed in the 13th century due to environmental shifts, now faces mounting challenges, including incompatible land use, ecological degradation and socio-economic vulnerabilities. The science mission seeks to co-develop pathways for sustainable well-being in the region by identifying social and environmental risk hotspots and engaging affected communities in long-term, practical solutions.

Professor Wanda Markotter, Interim Director of Future Africa at the University of Pretoria, said: "Future Africa is honoured to be part of the ISC Pilot Science Missions initiative through the selection of the Mapungubwe Science Mission, led by Professor Ramutsindela. This recognition reaffirms our commitment to fostering transformative research that addresses Africa's most pressing sustainability challenges while contributing to global sustainability solutions."

Collaborative solutions for a sustainable future

Initial work will focus on the Musina Local Municipality and surrounding areas in South Africa, with plans to expand into Botswana and Zimbabwe.

The consortium supporting the mission includes partners from academia, civil society, local government and international institutions:

- Future Africa, University of Pretoria
- University of Cape Town
- University of Melbourne
- University of Venda
- University of Johannesburg
- Dzomo la Mupo
- Vhembe District Municipality
- Michigan State University
- International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA)

According to the ISC, the selected missions reflect a broad range of geographies, disciplines and gender diversity, with strong representation from the Global South, showing a strong commitment to reimagining scientific

collaboration to address complex global challenges. The initiative aims to reimagine scientific collaboration in support of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in contexts where complex, interlinked challenges demand new approaches.

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of Accounting and Finance; Architecture; Electrical and Electronic Engineering; Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP's Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their 2024 World University Rankings (WUR). UP was the only South African university featured in the 2023 World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

For more information, please go to www.up.ac.za