

The Story of UmPhafa

Since 2005, Colchester Zoological Society, has been striving to develop the UmPhafa Nature Reserve in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. Today, in the face of this immense challenge, the 6,000 hectare reserve is flourishing.

Looking through photos of UmPhafa at its first conception, it is barely recognisable from how it appears today. Lands littered with scrap steel and endless miles of barbed-wire fencing characterised the old cattle farms where the reserve now stands. Today in place of livestock, roam healthy populations of proud looking giraffe and majestic kudu. Impala nibble at the acacia trees and warthog graze carelessly on the lawns surrounding the old Elworthy farmhouse. However, the immense task of rehabilitating the land to its natural condition, not to mention fencing the seemingly endless boundary, has seemed daunting at times. The process of re-balancing the natural order of species took a great deal of planning and a huge amount of time was spent monitoring every stage of the process.

The first animal releases took place in 2006 and continues to the present day, adding new bloodlines to resident populations. Each species has been carefully selected for the particular role that they play within the ecosystem in order to create conditions in which all animals live in a harmonious environment. Annual game counts have confirmed success in many species, such as zebra, kudu and giraffe.

By June of 2013, many populations had swollen to capacity on the original release property and a specialist game capture team was brought in to assist with the translocation of some of these animals onto another portion of UmPhafa. Then in 2015, another 1500hectare piece of the jigsaw puzzle fitted into place, when Sully Farm, a farm previously separating the reserve into two distinct areas, was purchased, and the reserve's fences could be dropped; enabling the wildlife species to naturally migrate across the Reserve.

With the completion of the rock packing along our fenceline in 2019 we successfully applied for our 'Adequate fence enclosure permit' receiving it in 2023. This ensured that we could introduce new iconic species such as Buffalo in 2023 and Cheetah in 2025.

Following a very intensive application process in 2023/2024 we were finally declared as a Protected Nature Reserve, this ensures that Umphafa is protected for the next 99 years from any unsustainable use and can solely concentrate on the conservation of its biodiversity, ecosystems and natural resources.



Research on the Reserve

Research forms the underlying foundation for the operation of UmPhafa and regular surveys are undertaken by staff in order to monitor the habitat and it is through this monitoring that we are trying to stabilize the habitat and improve it.

Using funds raised by Action for the Wild, as well as through donations a number of camera traps have been purchased and surveys have been initiated in order to measure the population size of species and level of natural migration on to the reserve as conditions improve.

Camera traps allow close observation of even the most elusive of species and, over the years, the reappearance of bushbuck, steenbok, caracal and honey badger have all been recorded. Being particularly susceptible to habitat change, large carnivores are generally the first to be affected as conditions deteriorate, so the return of leopard to the area after years of absence was noted with a great amount of excitement, and by 2023 over 16 leopard identities have been recorded on the Reserve. With a great amount of excitement, and by 2023 we had over 16 leopard ID kits. Since then, the leopard population has exploded and UmPhafa removed 4 off in 2025 to start a founding population on another Reserve. Plans are in place to move more in 2026.

Perhaps a lot more unexpected however was the arrival of spotted hyena. The characteristic whoop-whoop had been heard over a number of nights and eventually many sightings confirmed its presence on the reserve.

As the Reserve continues to thrive, many bird species are returning including; Wattled Cranes, Crowned cranes, Blue Cranes, Lappet faced Vultures and on the odd occasion Ground Hornbills.



Secretary Bird



Blue Crane



Caracal



Honey badger



Bush buck

Collaborating for wildlife

Collaboration with other conservation organisations is also a key conservation goal for UmPhafa, highlighted by the request to introduce Wild dogs into a managed boma on UmPhafa, an ongoing Reserve project since 2013. Our role to bond new packs for release onto larger Reserves is a key part in the meta-population management practice for this endangered species. So far we have hosted / bonded Wild Dogs 9 times. In 2022, UmPhafa received the Biaza Award for Field Conservation in assisting in the bonding of a Wild Dog pack that made a new home in Malawi.

UmPhafa also works with the Giraffe Conservation Foundation, the Durban Natural Science Museum and the University of KZN who are in their 4th year of soil surveys on UmPhafa as well as research on the Mottled Eel in the River Tugela. We are also a release site for FreeMe Wild and so far, 2 x spotted genets, the elusive wild cat, 3 x spotted eagle owls and 2 x Jackal buzzards have been successfully released on to the Reserve.

Due to our predator population expanding we now collaborate with the Cheetah Advisory Group, Predator forums, Endangered Wildlife Trust, Panthera and Wildlife Act. The leading groups for protecting endangered species in Kwa-Zulu Natal.

UmPhafa is also the focus for many archaeologists from the local Historical Society who have visited to inspect the Iron age ruins on the Reserve.

As the demand for more field data grew, the volunteer and research programme was established to assist with UmPhafa's projects.

Since UmPhafa initially opened its gates to this programme in 2010, over 588 enthusiastic individuals have visited the reserve, staying between 2 weeks to 3 months at a time. Each had the opportunity to experience the workings of the reserve first-hand and to contribute directly to conservation in South Africa. With the continued support of various Universities from the UK, in 2021 "Sully House" became the main accommodation for the Intern programme

This programme continues to grow in popularity, furthering the sustainability of UmPhafa's work in the future.



Research on Mottled Eel



Interns



On the Reserve

With the increase in animal populations, so has poaching activity increased along the borders. UmPhafa has made significant investment in its Field Rangers, now being a part of the Game Rangers Association of Africa has given the Rangers much needed support and assistance. With donations coming from several people their kit has improved with the use of mini drones, new binoculars, thermal monoculars and investment into Security camera traps.

With any successful conservation project, UmPhafa continues to focus and build on the current links with the local community from educational visits to schools, school game drives on UmPhafa, to employing local staff to help UmPhafa clear Alien Plants, collecting thatching-grass as well as helping us to harvest our Pecan nut trees along the Tugela River. Water deliveries, collection of firewood as well as recruiting from the local area.

UmPhafa also tries to assist the Community where it can with water deliveries and the collection of firewood.



Community clearing Alien Plants.



School Game Drives



With all aspects of UmPhafa gaining serious momentum, the reserve has come a long way towards achieving its initial objectives, but the efforts continue in order to meet new challenges, and the focus for 2026 – 2027 is:

- To increase its market for Interns both internationally and locally
- To introduce more hyena and remove leopard to other reserves
- Focus on our birding populations by introducing a new vulture restaurant with hide and pool as well as improving our wetlands area
- To continue and improve relations with the local community
- To clear more open spaces in areas where the bush has encroached improving the habitat for all the species.

