

REMARKS BY THE MEC FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, TOURISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS, REV. MUSA ZONDI

MEDIA TOUR - EZEMVELO

9 MARCH 2026

HILLTOP, HLUHLUWE

Programme Director;

CEO of Ezemvelo, Mr. Sihle Mkhize;

Traditional Leaders and Community Representatives;

Members of the media;

Good morning!

We are gathered this morning at this beautiful and historic Hluhluwe, iMfolozi Park, the oldest proclaimed nature reserve in Africa, a landscape that once served as the royal hunting grounds of King Shaka Zulu.

This is not just protected land. It is heritage. It is history. It is identity.

Conservation is embedded in who we are. And it protects more than wildlife, it protects water security, agriculture, tourism, livelihoods, and the legacy we leave to future generations.

TOURISM GROWTH AND REBUILDING THE ECONOMY

Conservation is not just about animals, but it is about rebuilding the economy. Ezemvelo is now attracting close to 600,000 visitors annually across its parks and resorts. That is a strong vote of confidence in our turnaround strategy.

Those visitors support:

- Local accommodation
- Tour operators and guides
- Craft markets
- Transport businesses
- And Community enterprises

This is real economic activity in rural KwaZulu-Natal.

INFRASTRUCTURE RENEWAL

Understanding that our ecotourism facilities needed a fresh, modern appeal, we have acted swiftly to upgrade our tourism assets while introducing exciting new offerings, such as a mobile coffee shop. We are also elevating the visitor experience by hosting world-class events, including the International Midmar Mile and vibrant music festivals, ensuring there is always something memorable for every guest.

Our chalet revamp programme is currently underway at:

- Hilltop
- Mpila
- Didima
- Midmar
- And Lotheni

Guest feedback has been positive and encouraging.

Upgrades at Mthwazi Lodge and Masinda Lodge have been completed through timeshare initiatives - demonstrating strong confidence from partners and stakeholders. We are restoring value to our tourism infrastructure and making our parks competitive and attractive.

COMMERCIALISATION AND INVESTMENT

Conservation must be financially sustainable. Ezemvelo receives approximately 87% of its budget from the provincial fiscus, with the balance generated through commercial activities. In an era of fiscal constraint, growing this self-generated component is essential. That is why Ezemvelo has launched its Commercialisation Strategy - to attract private-sector investment, bring in new skills and innovation, and unlock the full potential of its assets through long-term partnerships. Our Commercialisation Strategy is at an advanced stage.

We are unlocking value across the biodiversity economy value chain from eco-tourism and hospitality to retail, heritage tourism, and conservation-linked enterprises.

CURRENT INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Two significant 10-year concession opportunities are currently open:

- The HiP Health Spa in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park

- A portfolio of six retail curio shops across key parks

Additionally, a new state-of-the-art bush lodge here in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park is soon to be advertised.

These projects will:

- Attract private sector capital
- Create local jobs
- Enhance visitor experiences
- And increase revenue to reinvest directly into conservation

Commercialisation does not mean privatisation.

It means making conservation efficient, bankable, and sustainable.

RHINO PROTECTION: LEADING THE NATIONAL DECLINE

KwaZulu-Natal is not merely participating in conservation success, we are leading it. The national 68% decline in rhino poaching is a historic milestone, and KwaZulu-Natal has been central to that achievement. I am particularly proud to announce that in January 2026, KwaZulu-Natal recorded zero rhinos poached in our managed reserves.

This is not coincidence. It is not chance. It is the outcome of deliberate, coordinated, intelligence-driven interventions, including:

- Enhanced ranger deployment and technological surveillance
- Strategic dehorning programmes
- Intelligence-led operations with law enforcement
- Community partnerships disrupting poaching networks
- And target hardening of high-risk zones

We shifted from reactive responses to proactive prevention.

Ezemvelo has demonstrated that organised environmental crime can be defeated when there is discipline, coordination, and political will.

SAFEGUARDING BIODIVERSITY AND AGRICULTURE

Our mandate extends beyond anti-poaching. Following outbreaks of Foot and Mouth Disease, Ezemvelo participated in the FMD Ukubambisana Consultative Indaba to strengthen coordination between veterinary services and biodiversity institutions.

The recent Provincial Executive Lekgotla resolved that a joint task team between Ezemvelo and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development be established to formulate a comprehensive strategy to address wildlife diseases affecting livestock.

Biodiversity conservation and agricultural sustainability are interdependent pillars of our provincial economy. We are protecting ecosystems while safeguarding rural livelihoods.

COMMUNITY INCLUSION AND THE TRADITIONAL HEALERS' PHARMACY

Conservation cannot succeed without communities. To reduce illegal harvesting pressures and recognise indigenous knowledge systems, Ezemvelo has established a dedicated Traditional Healers' Pharmacy within the game reserve, opening at the end of March.

This initiative:

- Provides sustainable access to medicinal plants
- Reduces pressure on wild harvesting
- Strengthens relationships with traditional healers
- And integrates indigenous knowledge into biodiversity management

This is conservation with dignity. This is conservation with inclusion.

JOB CREATION AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Through infrastructure upgrades, tourism revitalisation, and concession programmes, Ezemvelo continues to support direct and indirect job creation.

Our artisan development initiatives are equipping young people with practical skills in:

- Electrical maintenance
- Plumbing
- Carpentry
- And infrastructure refurbishment

Ezemvelo is not only conserving land, but it is building people.

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

On 26 February 2026, Ezemvelo CEO Mr. Mkhize joined His Majesty Isilo uMisuZulu kaZwelithini in receiving a British High Commission delegation. The engagement focused on biodiversity cooperation between respective Royal Families.

This reflects growing international interest in KwaZulu-Natal's conservation model and strengthens global partnerships in biodiversity protection.

CONCLUSION

Today, KwaZulu-Natal is proving that biodiversity is not a liability on the fiscus. It is a strategic economic asset.

Ezemvelo is:

- Growing tourism
- Attracting investment
- Defeating poaching
- Preserving heritage
- Creating jobs
- And building rural economies

We are not merely protecting nature. We are rebuilding the economy through conservation. And we are doing so with discipline, innovation, and measurable results.

Thank you.