# Awelani Eco-Tourism Lodge and Community Conservation Area Project

## Brief Background

One of the TFCA’s main objectives is to create more opportunities for activities such as ecotourism and natural resource based enterprises thereby contributing to socio-economic development at community level. As part of fulfilling this objective, the Department of Environmental Affairs has entered into an agreement with Vhembe District Municipality (VDM) in Limpopo Province to establish and develop the Awelani Community Conservation Area and associated tourism infrastructure. This is in line with the fact that the area falls within the broader concept of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Areas (GLTFCA).

The project started after the Mutele Community which is situated approximately 11 kilometres west of Pafuri Gate of the Kruger National Park (KNP), made approximately 1800 ha of land available specifically for conservation and eco-tourism. This was done in order to address the high unemployment rate among the community members. In 2006, Vhembe District Municipality applied for the then SRPP funds from the then Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT), and as the process of getting funds from SRPP did not materialize, VDM decided to fund the project from its own budget with the assistance of donor funds from the lottery. After securing funds, the municipality built a lodge in 2008 and it is called Awelani Eco-Tourism Lodge.

The area falls within the broader GLTFCA and therefore Vhembe District Municipality recognized the need to involve and collaborate with the Transfrontier Conservation Areas Directorate within the Department of Environmental Affairs on this project. Early in 2011 the municipality approached the department for possible collaboration which then led to the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on the establishment, development and management of the project between the two institutions. Subsequent progress has been made since the establishment of a working relationship between the Department of Environmental Affairs and Vhembe District Municipality. This amongst others include:

1. Looping-in Cooperazione e Sviluppo (CESVI) which is an Italian NGO. This NGO assisted with funds to purchase assets such as vehicles, a trailer and furniture for the lodge;
2. Appointment of a private operator, Transfrontier Parks Destination (TFPD) on behalf of the community for the period of 5 years.
3. Transfer of R2 Million from DEA to VDM specifically for priority projects, mainly infrastructure development which will lead to the full functioning of the lodge;
4. Coordination of the declaration process to obtain legal conservation status by declaring the area as a nature reserve under the NEM: Protected Areas Act 57 of 2003

The two institutions (DEA & VDM) are working directly with other key stakeholders such as Limpopo Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism (LEDET), South African National Parks (SANParks) and the communities on this project. LEDET is the lead coordinator for the process to obtain legal conservation status for the area. SANParks is providing technical expertise in terms of tourism, conservation and community public partnership processes. SANParks also agreed in principle to donate game to Awelani Eco-Lodge. The type of game to be translocated will be identified after a conservation assessment study by SANParks has been done. The project is 95% complete and arrangements for the official opening are underway. However there is still lot of work to be done and more funding is required to complete the infrastructure development such as the game fence. .

The Lodge is a good example of how critical the link between tourism and conservation is in generating real benefits for the communities in terms of job creation and social development.

## Funding sources for the project

* Vhembe District Municipality with the assistance from the Lottery for the construction of the lodge;
* The municipality (VDM) also covers for monthly operational cost from its budget;
* Department of Environmental Affairs in 2014 donated R2 million from the line function budget
* CESVI which is an Italian NGO also donated money to purchase assets such as vehicles and furniture for the lodge.

## DEA specific roles to the project

* Assist VDM in sourcing funds for the implementation of the project
* Facilitate the process of declaring Awelani as a Nature Reserve under the NEM: Protected Areas Act 57 of 2003;
* Play advisory role on the overall implementation of projects associated with the establishment of Awelani Community Conservation Area;
* Ensure and facilitate the sharing and exchange of information among the parties on matters relating to the development of Awelani Community Conservation Area
* Enable the transfer of funds from DEA to VDM for the development and management of Awelani