

**Speech by Prof. Andrew Nambota.**

Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, distinguished delegates, partners, and friends,

It is a privilege to address you today on behalf of Peace Parks Foundation, as we gather to celebrate 25 years of transfrontier conservation area development in the SADC region - a visionary initiative that has transformed conservation in Southern Africa.

(A Shared Vision: From Diplomacy to Action)

Peace Parks Foundation was established in 1997 by President Nelson Mandela, HRH Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, and Dr Anton Rupert. Their vision was to create a network of interconnected protected areas that transcend national borders, fostering peace and stability through shared natural heritage.

Our journey began with advocacy and diplomacy, laying the groundwork for Southern Africa's first transboundary conservation area - the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, officially opened on 12 May 2000 by Presidents Festus Mogae of Botswana and Thabo Mbeki of South Africa. As Africa's first transfrontier park this landscape we are celebrating today, is a powerful symbol of regional cooperation. Rooted in a 1948 agreement, there are no border fences between the Botswana and South African sections - allowing for the free movement of wildlife and, uniquely, tourists within the park.

This milestone at a critical time in the history of peace-building in Southern Africa, demonstrated the potential of cross-border conservation and set the stage for subsequent transboundary landscapes across the region.

(Expanding the Network: A Commitment to Growth)

Over the past 27 years, Peace Parks has been instrumental in establishing 10 of the 18 TFCAs in Southern Africa, spanning 11 international borders. We are actively engaged in five transboundary landscapes including Great Limpopo, Lubombo, Malawi-Zambia, Kavango Zambezi and the Lower Zambezi-Mana Pools Transfrontier Conservation Area. Our efforts have been guided by the principle that government leadership is paramount, with Peace Parks serving as a facilitator and partner in the development process.

In 2024, we signed two significant agreements that underscore our commitment to expanding the TFCA network. The first, for the Sioma Ngwezi Management Complex in Zambia, which is a historic 20-year multi-party partnership agreement with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife, local communities, WWF Zambia and Peace Parks to co-manage this vital landscape within the Kavango Zambezi TFCA.

A Memorandum of Understanding with the Tembe Traditional Authority, Tembe Community Trust, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, and Peace Parks was also signed to explore a community-public-private partnership for the long-term management of this ecologically significant park within the Lubombo transboundary landscape.

### (Ensuring Sustainability)

Recognising that effective conservation requires more than political alignment, Peace Parks has moved beyond policy advocacy towards the active management of key protected areas. Through innovative mechanisms, we aim to ensure the long-term sustainability of these areas. In partnership with government agencies, communities and like-minded NGOs, Peace Parks works to achieve conservation at scale, restoring biodiversity through rewilding and conserving Africa's wild spaces through these transboundary landscapes.

Peace Parks also recognises that syndicated wildlife and forest crimes are two of the greatest threats to functioning transboundary landscapes. We have a dedicated combatting wildlife crime programme that works in support of government and border agencies to address transnational organised crime in a comprehensive manner across the SADC region.

In partnership with governments and in support of communities, our ambitious goal is to secure and enrich 980,000 km<sup>2</sup> of transboundary landscapes across southern Africa by 2050, focussing on three specific pillars.

The first step in all our work is community engagement, where we implement programmes that promote sustainable livelihoods, climate resilience, and local stewardship of natural resources.

Conservation, the second step, can only begin once infrastructure and security are in place, only after that can we look at rewilding; relocating species of both fauna and flora to restore ecological balance. With partners, we have reintroduced 18,170 animals of 31 unique species to previously degraded areas, contributing to an estimated population of 100,000 animals in the parks we co-manage.

Innovative conservation finance initiatives which develop models such as carbon credits, biodiversity funds, and tourism, generate revenue for park management and community development.

These three pillars form the bedrock of our work.

### (Integrating Communities: The Heart of Conservation)

Now, colleagues, let me speak to something that sits at the very heart of our work – people.

At the core of our work is the recognition that conservation cannot succeed without the active involvement of local communities. In the landscapes where we engage, communities are not just stakeholders – they are custodians of the land. In the co-management agreements that we facilitate, communities always have a seat at the boardroom table. It is their voice that we listen to when we speak about sustainable development.

At Peace Parks Foundation, we believe – and we know from experience – that there can be no lasting conservation without community development. We do not work in isolation from the people who live within and around transboundary landscapes. We work with them, hand in hand.

Whether it's working with communities to establish alternative, sustainable livelihoods through beekeeping or fish farming, or rolling out clean cookstove initiatives to reduce deforestation, improve household health and generate carbon credits for the communities so they can see value, our programmes are about giving people real incentives and practical tools to thrive in the transboundary landscapes they call home.

Our programmes support clinics, schools, and deliver access to clean water – because conservation must meet people where they are. Peace Parks also invests heavily in skills development and training – through institutions like the Southern African Wildlife College and the SA College for Tourism – to ensure that young people from local communities are not just beneficiaries of conservation, but active participants and future leaders in it.

When we speak of TFCA development as a driver of rural economic growth, this is what we mean. These are not just parks; they are living, breathing ecosystems that include people. And when communities begin to see that the wildlife around them isn't just a threat, or food, but an asset – something that can help send a child to school – that's when conservation becomes truly sustainable.

This, colleagues, is conservation with a human face. And that is the Peace Parks way.

#### (Ecological Linkages: Connecting Protected Areas)

The success of transfrontier conservation areas depends not only on the key/anchor parks themselves, but on the space between them – the ecological corridors that connect them. These areas consist of a mosaic of land uses that include communities.

At Peace Parks, we support this through habitat restoration projects, smart infrastructure, and collaborative governance

A strong example of this work is underway in the heart of the Great Limpopo TFCA, where we recently facilitated a national workshop to launch an ecological corridor between Limpopo and Banhine national parks. It brought together government officials, communities, NGOs, and the private sector to co-develop a shared vision - one rooted in coexistence and community benefit. This initiative is being guided by a multi-stakeholder steering committee, and it is laying the foundation for long-term ecological connectivity and socio-economic upliftment in this landscape.

This is what ecological linkage looks like in practice: landscapes that function, and include wildlife, livestock, and communities that thrive.

#### (Looking Ahead: Vision 2050)

Looking forward, Peace Parks' short term strategy 2030 focuses on protecting and professionally managing ten key protected areas and establishing restored ecological connectivity through seven key wildlife corridors.

Achieving this vision requires continued collaboration, investment, and innovation. We are grateful to our partners and funders for their unwavering support and belief in our mission.

#### (Conclusion)

The population of sub-Saharan Africa is projected to nearly double between 2022 and 2050, increasing pressure on resources and land availability, while climate change impacts will increase. It is therefore imperative that we implement large-scale conservation efforts in the region to ensure the development of healthy and sustainable ecosystems, which are essential for tipping the scales in the race to combat climate change.

The SADC TFCA programme stands as a testament to what can be achieved when nations, communities, and organisations unite for a common purpose. The journey from diplomacy to action has been transformative, and the impact on biodiversity, communities, and regional peace is profound.

As we celebrate the 25th anniversary of transfrontier conservation in southern Africa, we honour the legacy of those who envisioned and worked tirelessly to realise this dream. Their vision continues to inspire our efforts as we strive to create a future where people and nature coexist in harmony.

Thank you.