

iSimangaliso Wetland Park CEO scoops international award

CEO of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park Andrew Zaloumis was recently honoured by KfW Stiftung for his commitment to conservation and visionary management.



Andrew Zaloumis, CEO, iSimangaliso Wetland Park

Zaloumis, who was nominated by UNESCO for the award, received the KfW-Bernhard-Grzimek-Preis for his groundbreaking work in people-centred conservation in one of South Africa's poorest regions.

The laudatory speech was given by Dr Fanny Douvere, coordinator of the UNESCO Marine Programme in Paris. "In taking world heritage conservation to a whole new level, Andrew Zaloumis has given hope to and inspired both the youth of iSimangaliso and his world heritage peers around the world," Douvere commented.

"Marking the 30th anniversary of Bernhard Grzimek's death, we are particularly pleased to honour Andrew Zaloumis whose personal commitment to a region, which is one of the richest in terms of biodiversity but at the same time one of the most endangered in Africa, is truly in the spirit of the man who has lent his name to the biodiversity award of KfW Stiftung. Andrew Zaloumis' approach to restoration of major ecosystems and its wildlife and sustainable management of natural resources is forward-looking and blazes a trail for many similar areas," points out Dr Lutz-Christian Funke from the board of KfW Stiftung.

SA's first UNESCO World Heritage site

Zaloumis first became involved in the iSimangaliso region as a human rights activist during apartheid. During this time he worked with communities in the northern section of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park. He went on to follow in the footsteps of his father, the late Dr Nolly Zaloumis, who was fundamental to the Save St Lucia campaign.

Under the direction of Zaloumis, the iSimangaliso Wetland Park became South Africa's first UNESCO World Heritage site. Zaloumis coined the term “developing to conserve” in the very early days of the redevelopment of the park. His visionary programmes have turned a failing state asset into an important contributor to Kwa-Zulu Natal's tourism GDP. iSimangaliso is responsible for some 8,000 tourism jobs, has created more than 160,000 short-term jobs, provided bursaries to young people for university education, offered training in tourism, construction, craft, art, agriculture among other, and opened doors for 215 entrepreneurs who have received seed capital for their businesses and mentoring.

On the ecological front, some 14,000ha of exotic plantations have been removed, all but one of the historically naturally occurring animal species have been reintroduced in the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, and the ambitious St Lucia Estuary rehabilitation project is two months from completion.

Biodiversity hotspot

iSimangaliso is one of the eight most important biodiversity hotspots on the planet. The area comprises five primary ecosystems, is home to 467 endangered and threatened species and is inhabited by eleven endemic species that cannot be found anywhere else.

"In order to conserve places like iSimangaliso, we need development plans that extend beyond industrial exploitation and economic cost-benefit calculations. If we are to flourish moving forward, our continued growth rests on social justice, political inclusion and environmental responsibility. Approaches to conservation that prioritise education, economic independence and raising awareness of the value of nature are the foundations for the emergence of a new generation of supporters for this unique place – a new breed of conservationists motivated by a profound sympathy for human suffering, who will reject the financialisation of conservation and embody a love for nature's intrinsic worth.

"Failure," Zaloumis states, "is not an option."

In his acceptance speech at the awards ceremony, Zaloumis said, “I would like to thank the KfW for this award. There is no doubt it will strengthen iSimangaliso's hand in mobilising the support and partners it needs. I would like to thank the UNESCO Marine World Heritage Programme for holding the bar high and stimulating a vibrant community of marine site managers and specialists. Our status as a World Heritage Site has helped solidify iSimangaliso's position among the world's icons and promoted its conservation. Finally, I would also like to acknowledge the many people who have stood by my side to make this possible. This has been and is a team effort."