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Inaugural African linear infrastructure and ecology conference

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It is likely that many drivers have, at some point, accidentally hit an animal on the road. The consequences? Not only an injured or dead animal, but probably an insurance claim, or a visit to the emergency room for various injuries. At the inaugural African Conference for Linear Infrastructure and Ecology (ACLIE) 2019, which was held this past week in the iconic Kruger National Park, and co-hosted by the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) and Eskom, solutions to prevent wildlife roadkill and improve driver safety were addressed. Work undertaken in Canada, demonstrated in one of the many fascinating presentations at the conference, shows that building wildlife bridges over or under roads effectively helps many animals to cross over the road, while avoiding an interaction with a vehicle. Simple, but effective!

Similarly, the Eskom/EWT Strategic Partnership – an African first – excited international delegates who saw how this unique relationship is directly reducing wildlife interactions with electrical infrastructure and preventing disruption to our power supply.

Centred around linear infrastructure, namely roads and rail, energy, canals, pipelines, and fences, and their impacts on the environment, ACLIE was the first of its kind, not only for Africa, but also in the framework of combining transportation and energy at one forum outlining multiple, common threats to the environment. ACLIE sought to move away from the current international conference framework, which usually focuses on each form of linear infrastructure in isolation (for example, roads only), and introduced a less siloed approach that combined all forms of transportation and energy, since these necessary modes usually co-exist and have multiple negative impacts on biodiversity. Examples include the loss of wildlife due to roadkill and electrocution on power lines. The EWT's Wildlife and Transport and Wildlife and Energy programmes have been addressing these impacts and developing solutions for years and were the drivers behind this international gathering of experts, to expand the knowledge pool. The impacts are not unique to South Africa, however; they are a threat worldwide.

Presentations ranged from global perspectives to individual country case studies, covering current scientific research, policy, legislation and best practice, and all with the potential to enhance both the project development process and the ecological sustainability of all linear infrastructure modes. A common thread across many presentations was the threat posed by current and future development across Africa. Over the next decade, major developmental projects have been planned for Africa, which will see 'development corridors', comprising networks of power lines, roads, railways, pipelines,

and ports being constructed to facilitate the movement of commodities. There are over 30 development corridors taking shape across Africa, spanning over 53,000 km in length, and potentially affecting protected areas with high conservation values and multiple threatened species. It is therefore timely that ACLIE was held, in order to better prepare ecologists and sustainability experts for this explosive development. The conference attracted many key players, including the World Bank and USAid (PowerAfrica), and was a golden opportunity to facilitate discussions and influence decision-makers around future developments on the continent.

Case studies of how to prevent Martial Eagles being electrocuted on power lines, or Samango Monkeys being killed on roads in South Africa, to examples from North America on the design of bridges specially constructed over roads to assist wildlife in crossing, and prevent collisions on roads, were just some of the practical illustrations of the significance of this work. Keynote speakers included Yolán Friedmann, the EWT's CEO, Deidre Herbst, the Environmental Manager from Eskom Holdings SOC Ltd, and George Ledec, the lead ecologist with the World Bank.

Wendy Collinson-Jonker, EWT Wildlife and Transport Programme Manager, elaborated, "We were extremely proud to be able to showcase our projects to the rest of the world at ACLIE, as well as share potential solutions for the proposed linear infrastructure developments across the African continent. The challenge will be implementing many of these solutions, but the input and support from experts who attended ACLIE may well assist us in ensuring development that is more resilient and ultimately benefits the economy but conserves the environment."

Feedback from the conference delegates supports the need for ACLIE to become a regular event on the global calendar – only through bringing together experts from around the world, will we truly address this very real threat to biodiversity.

Rodney van der Ree, an associate professor from the University of Melbourne, said, "The conference was a fantastic opportunity to network and look at innovative solutions to the problems posed by linear infrastructure. It was particularly great to see so many African countries represented here, given the current programme of infrastructure development on the continent – this suggests recognition of the potential threats and ownership of the need to find ways to address them. The opportunities for building sustainable infrastructure in the long-term are an exciting outcome of ACLIE."

Kishaylin Chetty, Senior Environmental Advisor at the Eskom Biodiversity Centre of Excellence, added, "The ACLIE 2019 conference brought industry and wildlife impacts to a discussion forum where all parties can work towards shared objectives, expanding knowledge, and understanding how to ultimately minimise the threat to wildlife. This is an incredibly exciting opportunity."

ACLIE 2019 was organised with the assistance of africaMASSIVE, and was supported by Eskom Holdings SOC Ltd, Road Ecology Center – UC Davies, TRAC N4, EcoKare International, SANPARKS, Balmoral Engineering, Painted Wolf Wines, and Arcus Foundation.

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About the Endangered Wildlife Trust

The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) has worked tirelessly for over 45 years to save wildlife and habitats, with our vision being a world in which both humans and wildlife prosper in harmony with nature. From the smallest frog, to the majestic rhino; from sweeping grasslands to arid drylands; from our shorelines to winding rivers: the EWT is working with you, to protect our world.

The EWT's team of field-based specialists is spread across southern and East Africa, where committed conservation action is needed the most. Working with our partners, including businesses and governments, the EWT is at the forefront of conducting applied research, supporting community conservation and livelihoods, training and building capacity, addressing human wildlife conflict, monitoring threatened species and establishing safe spaces for wildlife range expansion.

A beacon of hope for Africa's wildlife, landscapes and communities, the EWT is protecting forever, together. Find out more at www.ewt.org.za

Contacts

Wendy Collinson
Wildlife and Transport Programme Manager
Endangered Wildlife Trust
wendyc@ewt.org.za

Lourens Leeuwner
Wildlife and Energy Programme Manager
Endangered Wildlife Trust
lourensl@ewt.org.za

Belinda Glenn
Marketing and Communications Manager
Endangered Wildlife Trust
Tel: +27 87 021 0398
belindag@ewt.org.za