



GKEPF JMF U19 Cup aims to Unite Communities and Conservation through Sport

The Greater Kruger Environmental Protection Foundation, Kruger National Park, and the James Mayinga Foundation launch the GKEPF JMF U19 Cup. The tournament will bring together 40 local football and netball teams to the Thulamahashe New Stadium for nine days, in a step to unite communities and conservation through sport.

Hoedspruit, South Africa, 13 December, 2024. From 14 to 22 December, 40 local youth football and netball teams from Bushbuckridge Municipality will compete for the GKEPF JMF U19 Cup at the Thulamahashe New Stadium. This tournament is a partnership between the Greater Kruger Environmental Protection Foundation (GKEPF), South African National Parks (SANParks) and the James Mayinga Foundation (JMF) that intends to promote social cohesion through sport and encourage positive relationships between people and conservation.

Sustainable conservation requires people-centred long-term strategies. Sport has a unique ability to unite people and can play a pivotal role in developing relationships and role models, enhancing social cohesion and resilience, and creating a space to promote environmental awareness.

SANParks' ME: Kruger National Park, Oscar Mthimkhulu, explains, "We are encouraged by this relationship which is essentially a coming together through sports between the state, private sector and communities to encourage a future where people and nature thrive together". Mthimkhulu adds that "SANParks, and by extension its 21 national parks like Kruger National Park, recognises the critical role of neighbouring communities and believes that this tournament can set a good example of how conservation can extend beyond the fences of protected areas to create healthy communities that result in healthy relationships and a healthy ecosystem."

The tournament is an extension of GKEPF's Sport Programme, a partnership between GKEPF, Sabi Sand Nature Reserve, Mala Mala, Sabie Game Reserve, and Timbavati Private Nature Reserve, supported by WWF-Khetha and USAID. Launched in 2022, the programme integrates with, and in some cases creates, leagues to support football and netball teams in the communities bordering the Greater Kruger protected areas by providing equipment, league guidance, financial support, and coaching clinics. Matches between community teams and teams from within protected areas are also arranged. To date, 83 teams have been supported by the programme.

The aim of the programme is to create opportunities for the youth, strengthen social support structures, encourage hope, and provide the youth with a positive focus in their lives. By doing so, GKEPF strives to build trust and relationships between the protected areas, the local communities, and the organisations dedicated to environmental protection, encouraging a shared sense of belonging and pride in our natural heritage.

Sharon Haussmann, GKEPF CEO, says, "We all understand the power that sport has to unite people. We have seen this first hand in South Africa." She explains that "It is not the answer to socio-economic problems, nor is it something that's going to provide endless opportunities, but it certainly has the power to bring people together. Sport is a healthy and positive activity that can help generate the relationships and trust we need if we want to develop a healthy region, and ultimately South Africa, that can be passed onto future generations. Sport provides an opportunity for us to hold hands to foster better understanding so that we can create a safer and thriving region for everybody: people and wildlife alike."

GKEPF's support of its members in creating a safe space for people and wildlife in the Greater Kruger landscape functions through strategic partnerships. Professional footballer and match analyst, James

Mayinga, grew up in Thulamahashe, making him an ideal role model for youth in the region. His foundation, through various programmes including this tournament, aims to bring the opportunities he experienced in his professional football career back to his home communities. Importantly, through relationships developed over the years, James has been able to invite numerous head coaches and chairmen of professional football clubs and university teams to attend the tournament. This provides scouting opportunities for the players, opening the door to furthering their football careers and higher education.

The 40 teams playing in the tournament consist of 16 men's football teams, 8 women's football teams, and 16 netball teams from throughout the Bushbuckridge municipality, from Welverdiend to Ximhungwe. Live broadcasting and streaming on SuperSport Schools' network significantly increases the reach of the tournament. Matches will be broadcast live on channel 216 on 14, 21, and 22 December, with all other days being broadcast on the SuperSport Schools streaming app. A satellite streaming venue has been set up in Welverdiend for those who are unable to get to the stadium but would still like to watch the games with fellow supporters.

The GKEPF JMF U19 Cup was made possible by support from the Oak Foundation. It has the potential to make a significant impact in the communities bordering the Greater Kruger. In a region where youth unemployment is over 65%, the risk of disillusionment, drug use, and criminal involvement is real. Creating a shared value in the natural heritage of the region and strengthening the relationships between the communities, the protected areas, and the organisations protecting the environment opens opportunities for sustainable conservation and healthy socio-economic development.

-Ends-

About GKEPF

GKEPF's members collectively comprise 2.5 million hectares of unfenced wilderness. GKEPF was established to support these private and provincial reserves, and national park by enhancing strategic communication and coordination to align anti-poaching efforts. These efforts include wildlife crime mitigation, data management, operational support, social engagement, ranger support and training, and conservation research.

Through an innovative private-public partnership, GKEPF is committed to implementing impactful, diverse, and far-reaching programmes and interventions that improve security throughout the Greater Kruger landscape, creating a safer environment for both people and wildlife in the region.

About SANParks

SANParks is South Africa's leading and internationally recognised conservation authority that manages 21 functional national parks. This public entity is under the jurisdiction of the [Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment](#) (DFFE) and is modelled around inclusive conservation as opposed to previous policies of exclusion. SANParks advances policies that are in line with the National Development Framework for Sustainable Development and the National Development Plan.

About the James Mayinga Foundation

The James Mayinga Foundation was established by professional footballer and football analyst, James Mayinga. The foundation aims to bring the opportunities James experienced in his professional football career back to his home communities, where dreams may seem distant. The foundation hopes to shape futures by promoting learning through sports, arts, and culture.

Contact

Graeme Wuth: graeme@gkepf.org, +27 82 628 4167