TIM JACKSON

top of the charts

Creating an accurate map of Africa's protected areas was no small undertaking, but the MAPA Project achieved just that. Now it has set its sights on something even more exciting – expanding the database to include every conservation initiative on the continent. **Sarah Borchert** learns more about it.

THREE YEARS AGO, WITH THE HELP OF Tracks4Africa, Google and dozens of volunteers, the MAPA (Mapping Africa's Protected Areas) Project set out to plot every major protected area in Africa. 'The idea behind this exercise was to create a single online home for useful information about Africa's protected areas,' says the project's founder and director March Turnbull. 'We wanted to build a digital inventory that would be available on the web for travellers, students, researchers, journalists and armchair conservationists.'

It was no mean undertaking. From 2008 to 2011, more than 20 teams of volunteers covered hundreds of thousands of kilometres, visiting parks and reserves and 'mapping' all the roads and relevant waypoints. Working in teams of two and travelling for up to eight weeks at a time, the volunteers tackled impassable roads, got bitten by things, contracted malaria, mended vehicles with wire and string – and mostly had a lot of fun.

Their hard-won information has been loaded onto a MAPA layer in Google Earth and a unique
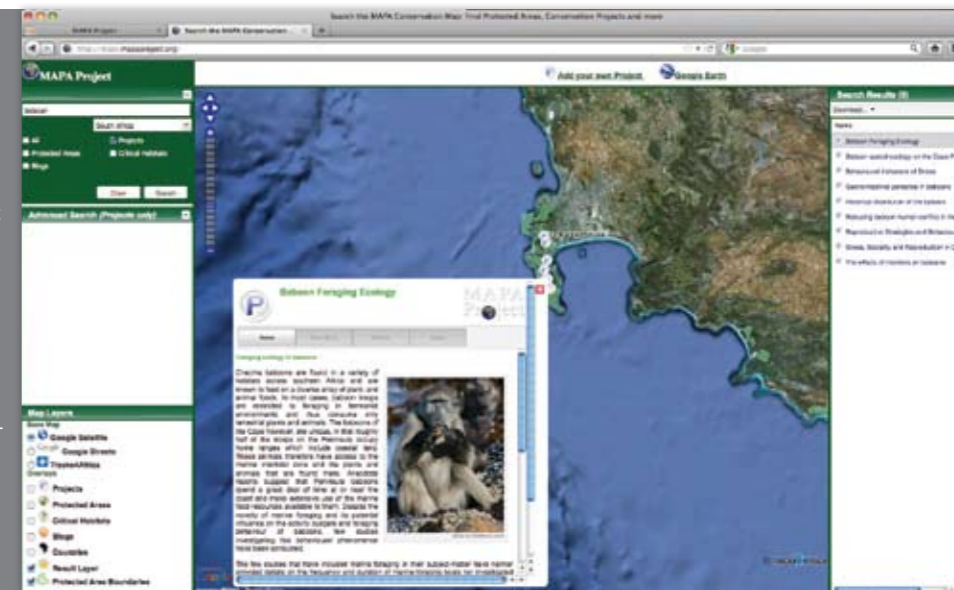

ABOVE Mapping Africa's major protected areas, including South Luangwa, took three years – and it was just the start of an even more exciting online initiative.

LEFT The MAPA Project is a free tool for conservation practitioners to put their projects in the public eye.

series of GPS maps. 'The MAPA Google Earth conservation layer is all about making Africa's conservation effort visible to the world. So we started by building an accurate map and have been illustrating it with pictures, videos and articles ever since,' explains Turnbull.

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On its own, a reliable, user-friendly map of Africa's parks and reserves is an incredibly valuable resource, but the MAPA Project hasn't stopped there. 'Now,' says Turnbull, with a slight twinkle, 'the hard work really starts. Conservation is not only about protected areas – there are plenty of places that aren't protected that probably should be, and thousands of (often under-appreciated) people working to conserve all of this. So we have expanded the map to include critical habitats and conservation projects.'

'Are you saying you're hoping to "map" every conservation project in Africa?' I ask. 'Yes,' he says, 'every one that wants to be seen.'

It's no pipe dream. A quick glance at *maps. mapaproject.org* reveals an Africa map containing the continent's national parks, other major protected areas and hundreds of

critical habitats – and an increasingly populated 'Projects' layer listing conservation endeavours and blogs, illustrated with photographs, videos and GIS content and littered with links to more resources.

How would you maintain something like this? I wonder aloud. 'Obviously a database is only as good as the data in it,' acknowledges project manager Alta de Vos. 'And the only way it's going to work is to encourage the projects to take responsibility for the information that is there. We've created the template, so all they need to do is populate it. It's free and it's simple. There's an automated e-mail system designed to keep the database current and a search facility to make sure every project can be found on the map.'

She continues, 'We're approaching as many projects as we can, but what we need now is for conservation practitioners to start loading up their project information, which is easy to do. There's an online video that talks you through the process and we'll be posting more helpful material and tips on the website. We're also running training workshops, which are proving very popular.' (See 'Putting yourself on the map'.)

The implications of a database that lists every conservation project and initiative in Africa are enormous. Having ready access to accurate, current information would be a boon to journalists (not to mention their readers) everywhere, while the potential for students, researchers, scientists and project managers in almost any realm of natural science to share knowledge and learn is virtually limitless.

But it is in the sphere of funding that the potential of the MAPA Project is particularly exciting. 'If you have money to fund conservation,' says Turnbull, 'you can go to the MAPA

layer in Google Earth, select the "project" layer and see what's out there.' Which means that if you have a project that needs funding – and there are one or two of those – you need to be listed to be in the running.

'What we imagine,' says De Vos in conclusion, 'is a community of conservation practitioners conversing with each other. It's a practical thing. Who else is working on whale sharks? What projects are going on around Tarangire National Park? Check the database and find out.' She pauses for a moment to let me catch up. 'Fully populated, the database will be a dynamic record of the hard-won skills and experience of conservationists from all over Africa. It can be an incredibly powerful tool for research, for efficiency and for collaboration. To get to that point, we're asking people to look at it, add their work and help this pan-African project unfold.' **AG**

To find out more about the MAPA Project and to add your organisation, go to www.mapa project.org. *Download the Google Earth layers at* maps.mapaproject.org

In the MAPA toolbox there is a browser-based map that can be used to search through the database of 3 000-plus points. 'This tool gets to the heart of the projects registry,' says March Turnbull. 'Say you want to start a community-based project in Zambia, you could search the database using this sophisticated tool for everything that might be useful to you.'

Here's another example. You can search for 'projects' in South Africa with the keyword 'baboon' and the map will populate with all the baboon-related projects. You can see where they are, examine them individually, download a map that you can e-mail to your friends, or you can download the list into an Excel spreadsheet. In 10 seconds, you have the e-mail addresses of everyone who is into baboons in the Western Cape. Press a few more buttons and you can see the winter and summer collar tracks of the troop that lives in Tokai Forest (and even which vineyards they raid!).

Putting yourself on the map
The MAPA Project, in conjunction with the Endangered Wildlife Trust, is running two sets of workshops in Johannesburg this month. Aimed at conservation scientists, managers, communicators and other practitioners, they will take place on 14–16 and 17–19 November 2011. Not a GIS expert or tech wiz? No problem! All you need is a laptop, a willingness to learn and a need to visualise your work. Go to *www. mapaproject.org* to find out more.