

# Walking to Stay Sane

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<https://mpophomeniconservationgroup.wordpress.com/2020/07/12/walking-to-stay-sane/>

Bhekisisa Gcumisa of Mpophomeni is locally known as Howickman. He is passionate about nature and can often be seen walking on his own around Howick, Mpophomeni and the Midlands. You will easily spot him with his huge hat and massive smile. Bheki wrote this article about walking during the Covid-19 Lockdown in 2020. A breath of fresh air in our present doom and gloom.

To live through two months of Lockdown in a four-walled township house, or even a comfortable home, is an impossible thing to expect of any young person. In desperation, I chose to burst out and take some solo runs. I got waves and grunts from the fellow-escapees that I passed. What a relief it was to be free again and to smell the outside air, even if it was quite cold. Once exercising became legal again I started walking around the Mpophomeni hills.

## Solo Walks.

My first full-day solo walk was to *Mashingeni*, a rural area which is situated at the other end of Mpophomeni township heading East. In fact, these two places are separated by a little stream (*uMthinzima*) that runs from the top of the hills and feeds to Midmar dam. When crossing this stream, one comes to an old cemetery with a pathway in the middle that I used to pass through.

Then the steep mountain began. Luckily it rained the day before, so skies were clear and decorated with small cute clouds. The skyline was so perfect at a distance, that I could hardly wait to see the other side. To the North the sparkling Midmar dam view seemed to become bigger and bigger every minute as I ascended. Finally, I reached the top of the mountain and spotted a suitable rock to rest on. Wow! I was fascinated to see what had been kept away from me all that time. This vantage point enabled me to view the whole of Mpophomeni township from one spot. Far away there was a huge shining mirror in shape of an octopus (Midmar dam) reflecting the sky's colour.

It sent a gentle breeze my way. The thick blanket of *Aristida* grass all around me reacted smoothly creating the effect of slowly moving wave. There were cattle feasting on this grass, and they clearly didn't see things the same way. Plants like *Aloe ferox*, *Aloe aborescens* and *Leonotis leonurus* were flowering in orange colour with *Anthanasia crithmifolia* and *Phymaspermum acerosum* in yellow. These plants blended in nicely with their colours as if someone did a landscaping. This quiet moment enabled my ear to pick up all the different kinds of sounds from miles away.

I stood and continued with my journey onto dirt road. The mountain has a reasonably flat surface on top and the first thing you see is a huge squared water reservoir built of cement on your right-hand side. I came to a rural settlement called *aMashinga angaphezulu* which simply means the upper *Mashingeni*. I went through this community towards East until I came out to open fields of grass. Few meters away from that starts a downward slope widely covered by indigenous forest. I discovered that, from this point, I could view the whole of Sweetwaters, Henley dam, Edendale valley and parts of Pietermaritzburg.

Opposite *Mashingeni* lies another well shaped mountain which separates Mpophomeni town ship from Merrivale Heights farms with the soldiers' base camp. That mountain was my second route



from the township. Vegetation and habitats are slightly different on this side – there are a few patches of non-disturbed ecosystems. You begin to sight raptors hunting and buck grazing.

### **Duo Walks.**

Coincidentally, my brother from church, Sboniso Madlala, had just returned home from University of Zululand and wanted to have a chat about something. We both agreed that the walk & talk model was going to be most suitable for our conversation since we hadn't seen each other for ages. Well it turned out to be an exciting experience which led to another four walk & talk routes – all starting from Mpophomeni. The second took us up to a peak where we were able to view the Cedara, Hilton, Merrivale and the rest of Howick. The third route was taken deep in rural areas, up through kwaChief, through *Hhaza* and our final destination was *Nqabeni*.

The fourth route took us through farms opposite Mpophomeni South West behind Midmar dam, on beautiful dusty roads that led us to Mondi forest plantation. Browsing through this forest resting on valleys and surrounding lakes, we came to a steep mountain where we discovered a most stunning view showing almost the entire Midlands and towards Bulwer. The fifth walk graced us with a great view stretching from Piggy Wiggly in Lions River all the way until Inhlosana Mountain. This day was very dusty, we could barely take any photos.

### **Group walks.**

Quite frankly we did not see this one coming. I was walking Sboniso back home when I received a call from one of our church elders, seeking assistance regarding her son and his friend who were both getting out of hand. A plan was instantly made for a good walk & talk, that would isolate their minds from the bad influence. I invited these young men for a walk and surprisingly they pitched up with other two friends. I must say, their punctuality did impress me. We went up the mountain as a group of six. Once the perfect view of Mpophomeni was reached, we sat and started to discuss life's realities.

Where do you see yourself in five years? What's your plan to get there? How's that going to impact the society? These were some of the questions that ignited our conversation. All sorts of interesting responses came up which made me see my team differently and understand their reaction towards life in general. Honourable Sboniso Madlala, whom I regard as my team leader partner, took us through varsity life touching all the aspects from how you choose a career, up to the moment when you are declared as a graduate. I could see the spark of hope on their facial expressions. As we proceeded on our walk, our relationship grew stronger. I believe that the spectacular views played a significant role in facilitating our discussions – and the questions kept on coming non-stop. This was a perfect time to sit and sanitise our minds while we were having fruits and snacks. We would be jeopardising justice if we did not talk about the main reason of this particular walk & talk which is the parents' concerns. "Without dilly-dallying guys, let's go straight to the point" Madlala said. He elaborated on popular misunderstandings between parents and their children. Especially on how much do parents go through in order to put bread on the table. In fact, every parent wants a better future for their children, and are caring angels.

The participation was transparent, so everyone came on board. It was not an easy one, but we left no stone unturned. I feel that the issues were thoroughly discussed in trying to reach common ground. With Bheki's innate love of hiking, and the proximity of great places to walk in Mpophomeni, the next obvious step was Howickman's Hiking Club. We now conduct adventurous walks exploring the hills and valleys of Mpophomeni with my team. Nature was created for us to explore before we pass on. Spending time in Nature helps us to de-stress, to clear our minds, to fix broken souls. We don't have to go miles away to reap these benefits – they right on our doorstep.