



OBSERVATORY  
Civic Association

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## WHY HAS THE “FIRST NATIONS COLLECTIVE” DONE A 180-DEGREE TURN ON THEIR OWN POSITION REGARDING HERITAGE?

The fate of the site known as the River Club is awaiting an historic judgement regarding an urgent interdict to halt construction of a R4.5 billion mega-development – already in the process of ripping up the land of a sacred riverine valley. The site is widely understood as holding enormous historical and spiritual significance for the Khoi people. A range of indigenous groups, arguably the majority of indigenous people, have campaigned for the River Club, as an integral part of the Two Rivers Urban Park, to be declared a heritage site. What has been the subject of debate among different interested parties is whether the unique significance of the site, can be respected if the site is transformed into a mixed-use, commercial hub of 18 towering buildings of up to 50 metres high and, of course, Amazon’s African headquarters.

Even those who have chosen to support the developers’ commercial development, have at least acknowledged the site’s history and heritage value. Yet, on 31 January, Chief Zenzile Khoisan, chair of the Western Cape ‘First Nations Collective’ (FNC), made the following surprising utterances in a [press conference](#) to deny the sacred importance of the site:

***“Not one bone or artefact has been found there,” said Chief !garu Zenzie Khoisan, chairperson of the Western Cape First Nations Collective.***

***“It was a swamp ... and later a dumping ground for all kinds of rubble. You will find that this was one of the most uninhabited places; marshland not suitable for anything,”***

Furthermore:

***...Western Cape First Nations Collective on Monday denied the development footprint overlapped with the historic battle site. They also denied the site had been used for sacred burials.***

This stands in diametrical opposition to the position Chief Khoisan (and subsequently the FNC) consistently espoused from at least as early as 2016 until now:

- In 2016, in a [Cape Argus op-ed](#) Chief Khoisan outlined why he believed the **entire** TRUP (Two Rivers Urban Park) should be a heritage site. This view was predicated on nothing other than the historical importance of the site, including and especially the site at the confluence of the two rivers. He argued that the whole of TRUP should be recognised for its significance.
- His article mentions the excavation of human remains at “an abandoned section of a railway shunting yard” which was claimed to be the body of the Portuguese colonial tyrant Francisco d’Almeida who, together with his raiding soldiers, was defeated by a standing army of Khoi warriors in The Battle of Salt River in 1510, This was one of the most significant events ever in Southern Africa’s history over the last 600 years and took place in the vicinity of the River Club. This “shunting yard” is in direct proximity of the site in question, a stone’s throw away from the confluence of the Black and Liesbeek rivers.
- Over the course of the next three years, from 2016 to 2018, Chief Khoisan did not make a single input to the EIA process and BAR process for the River Club development, even as other indigenous groups were contesting the emerging developer’s ambitions. He was not present to make any claims either way.

- Chief Khoisan only appeared in the latter part of 2019, during the proceedings of the Heritage Appeal Tribunal, as a result of the developers being instructed to commission a consultant to attend to Khoi perspectives on the River Club development. Their consultation process produced what has become known as the “First Nations Collective” a group of First Nations leaders and individuals *who are neither a collective nor representative of the First Nations on this matter*. They are, however, united in being firmly in support of the development and the developers, to the extent of having been provided with their own offices at the current site of the River Club.
- At first, the FNC did not dispute the historical or spiritual significance of the land. They confirmed its importance, but claimed they had the “best” plan for it – which was to support the development as mixed-use office space, but to include a Media Centre, Amphitheatre, indigenous gardens and walkways adorned with Khoi iconography.
- It is stunning to note the contrast between this clear and detailed description, in which Chief Khoisan uses the words ‘indisputable’ and that there is ‘without a doubt’ evidence that the Liesbeek corridor was “the pathway of the assault” in 1510, stands in sharp contrast with the statement in January 2022 of the Western Cape First Nations Collective in which they “denied the development footprint overlapped with the historic battle site.” It is impossible to reconcile those two statements.

***Ergo, the Chief has clearly done a complete 180 degree turn to his own position in 2019, days after the hearing at the High Court in order to seek an urgent interdict.***

We should not be surprised the First Nations Collective has changed its story. It is because the court case heard that the process of generating the First Nations consultation for the Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) selectively chose only groups who were willing to support the development and for whom it was acceptable to destroy the open space riverine valley. Such a position is increasingly unsupportable given the widespread acknowledgement of the enormous heritage significance of the site. We believe that in an act of desperation, the supporters of the project have created a fiction that the River Club site holds no heritage importance. We also believe the courts will see through such misinformation and grant the interdict because of the irreparable harm to irreplaceable heritage posed by this development.

In summary, Chief Khoisan and LLPT’s camp, has long conceded or held that the land is of huge importance, in terms of heritage. The sharp u-turn that took place on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 2022 is extraordinary and raises questions about Khoisan and the FNC’s sincerely held beliefs. There is no basis in the historical record for claiming either that it was “a swamp” or “marshland not suitable for anything”. The red herring of a “dumping ground for all kinds of rubble” is plainly misleading.

(Please see our more in-depth statement and media release [here](#).)

***Released by the Liesbeek Action Campaign, the Goringhaicona Khoi-Khoi Indigenous Traditional Council and the Observatory Civic Association***

**For inquiries:**

**Tauriq Jenkins:** High Commissioner, Goringhaicona Khoi Khoi Indigenous Traditional Council  
[tauriqishere@gmail.com](mailto:tauriqishere@gmail.com) | 064 734 2569

**Nadine Dirks:** Campaign Coordinator, Liesbeek Action Campaign  
[liesbeekactioncampaign2021@gmail.com](mailto:liesbeekactioncampaign2021@gmail.com)

**Website:** [www.liesbeek.org](http://www.liesbeek.org) | **Facebook:** [facebook.com/liesbeekactioncampaign](https://facebook.com/liesbeekactioncampaign)  
**Twitter:** [@LiesbeekAction](https://twitter.com/LiesbeekAction) | **Instagram:** [liesbeek\\_action\\_campaign](https://www.instagram.com/liesbeek_action_campaign)