MPAH
case study series
MAPUTALAND–PONDOLAND–ALBANY HOTSPOT

Case Study: Biodiversity Partnership Area

uMzimvubu Catchment Partnership Programme

The uMzimvubu Catchment Partnership Programme aims to address the severe land degradation and invasive alien plant infestation in the Mzimvubu catchment. It is a partnership between 34 organisations that share the vision of 'an Mzimvubu river system that supports the flow of benefits from ecosystem services to people and nature'. The partnership is an example of a Biodiversity Partnership Area, in which partners agree to act together and share resources at a landscape scale. Through the partnership, restoration of the catchment area is showing benefits for the rural communities that rely on the land for sustenance, as well as protecting the important biodiversity of the area.

Background

The Mzimvubu River is one of South Africa's most important free-flowing rivers. With its source in the southern Drakensberg near Matatiele, it flows over 400 km to its estuary on the Indian Ocean at Port St Johns. It is designated as 'vulnerable' within a River Freshwater Ecosystem Priority Area. The Mzimvubu catchment also falls within the Maputaland–Pondoland–Albany Hotspot, a region of high biodiversity and endemism. The upper reaches of the river catchment were identified as a Key Biodiversity Area based on the high levels of endemism and importance of the area as a water source.

The catchment spans almost 20 000 km^2 of the poorest rural areas of the Eastern Cape Province. Communal land tenure covers up to 70% of the catchment and this land is in a state of worsening degradation. The highly diverse grassland and forest matrix of the catchment is threatened by poor land management practices and land cover transformation for development such as access roads and housing. Extensive erosion due to compromised groundcover is a problem in the catchment, resulting in high sediment loads in the river. The area also has severe alien plant invasions, with an estimated 20% of the catchment under threat from species such as black wattle. Alien plants affect the water flow in the river, grassland integrity, grazing availability, soil erosion rate and the biodiversity of the natural ecosystems.

Action

Since 2011, Conservation South Africa, in partnership with Environmental and Rural Solutions, has led a process to develop a 20-year strategy to conserve the threatened Mzimvubu catchment. The result is a new partnership called the uMzimvubu Catchment Partnership Programme (UCPP). With a current membership of 34 institutions, the aim of the UCPP is:

> *to conserve the full extent of the Mzimvubu river system, from source to sea, through sustainable restoration and maintenance of the catchment area in a manner that supports economic development and job creation for local people, and enhances flow of benefits from ecosystems goods and services to people and nature.*

The intention of the UCPP is to simultaneously address rural poverty and ecosystem degradation, through a better understanding by the land users of the value of the landscape and the services it provides.

Biodiversity Partnership Areas are a type of biodiversity stewardship achieved through informal agreements that do not legally bind parties to any obligations. However, as with the UCPP, Biodiversity Partnership Areas can be formalised with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding. Landscape scale partnerships hold a number of advantages, including shared resources, collaborative co-implementation of projects, information exchange and strengthened project sustainability.

UCPP members are exploring biodiversity stewardship in its broadest sense to find strategies which are based on reviving traditional governance approaches, and which have an appropriate fit with land user groups dependent upon that landscape.

The UCPP hosts quarterly partnership exchanges, each with a specific topical focus. It also organises regular site exchanges and practical problem solving. As a group, the UCPP makes formal submissions on a number of management issues and participates in public stakeholder representation towards mining, energy and other development applications. Each of the members of the UCPP has its own strengths and conducts

work within the catchment based on their specific focus. The UCPP has members conducting alien plant clearing, fire management, rangeland management, environmental education, research, biodiversity stewardship and more.

The 34 members of the uMzimvubu Catchment Partnership Programme include:

- Two traditional authorities
- Two municipalities
- Four state departments
- Two parastatal organisations
- Seven national NGOs
- Three regional NGOs
- Ten local NGOs
- Two small consultancies
- Two universities

Achievements

Counted collectively, the partners of the UCPP have had a significant impact on many aspects of catchment management within the area. Together they have spent more than R50 million on projects in the subregion over three years. More than 30 permanent staff members are employed and most have local offices. Another 800 people have been employed in short term 'green jobs' such as alien plant clearing or as ecorangers. In total, over 800 ha of alien plant infestations have been cleared and more than 5 000 ha of grazing land have been restored. Four MSc and four BSc students have conducted research in the Mzimvubu catchment. One of the most effective interventions of the partnership are the regular learning exchange workshops, which have included topics such as fire management in grasslands, alien plant management, environmental outreach, aquatic monitoring, ecoranger functions, career development and biodiversity stewardship incentives. The partners are also producing 'best practise' media for use by a wider audience.

Rangelands management

The rangelands management project revives the traditional concept of *Maboella* – a Sotho word that encompasses the act of taking care of something communally – by implementing communal herding practices to assist with grassland restoration through rotational grazing. The rangelands management project was initiated to help combat the extensive alien invasive plant growth in the Mzimvubu catchment through the employment of ecorangers. As an alternative approach, this project makes use of properly managed cattle as a tool for restoration. Workers first use horses and bicycles to get to site where clearing is done using manual methods, including bark stripping. No herbicide is used, apart from follow-up foliar spray when absolutely necessary. Once clearing has occurred, an active livestock herding programme employs ecorangers from eight local villages to assist with keeping stock in agreed areas for certain periods of time. Night kraaling of the whole herd provides trampling in cleared areas to assist with grassland restoration. Participating livestock owners are provided with support for inoculations and marketing. Using cattle as a restoration tool is showing impressive results, with little regrowth of alien plant species in the areas restored using this approach.

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UMZIMVUBU CATCHMENT PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMME

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