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case study series

MAPUTALAND-PONDOLAND-ALBANY HOTSPOT

Case study: Eco-business planning

Lubombo region, Swaziland

The eastern Lubombo region in Swaziland presents the conundrum of very poor communities living in a biodiversity rich environment. In this situation, there is a need to harness the natural wealth of the area to better provide for people. The Lubombo Conservancy and its partners have been developing a model for community upliftment and natural resource management that is based on eco-business planning. This model aims to create self-sustaining communities, understanding that protection and management of natural resources is the basis for a number of sustainable development opportunities.



Background

The eastern Lubombo region in Swaziland has been identified as a Key Biodiversity Area in the Maputaland–Pondoland–Albany Hotspot. The threatened savanna ecosystems host high levels of biodiversity and endemism, including several species of cycad. The region has extensive tourism potential, with its beautiful mountain landscapes and big game viewing. The Lubombo area of Swaziland forms part of the Lubombo Transfrontier Conservation Area linking Swaziland, Mozambique and South Africa.

Like most relatively large areas of critical ecosystems, the Lubombo area has many landowners and stakeholders, with different and often conflicting agendas. Attempts at conservation have been fragmented, and are impeded by increasing poverty and degradation in the lands surrounding the conservation areas. The area presents a conundrum of very poor communities living in a biodiversity rich environment. In this situation, there is a need to harness the natural wealth of the area to better provide for the people and uplift the communities.



Action

The Lubombo Conservancy and its partners have been developing a model for community upliftment and natural resource management that is based on eco-business planning. An eco-business plan helps to define the area, its resources, assets and markets, promoting community conservation and ecotourism activities, and attracting investments in the area. To change from a donor-dependent to a self-sustaining system, a plan for long-term investment needs to be developed, hence the focus on long-term business planning. The valuation and ownership through a structured and well-defined process will lead to biodiversity conservation and maintenance of ecosystems at landscape scale.

The landscape approach provides the appropriate basis for the eco-business model. Eco-business planning should occur at both a regional and local scale, with each scale informing the other. At a regional scale, a business strategy can create the foundation for the development of wider partnerships and networks, which increase creativity and capacity, and increase buy-in. Planning at a local scale helps communities to be sustainable in the long-term and allows them to access regional opportunities for improved livelihoods.



The Mhlumeni community

This community is poor and has little opportunity for income from the communal land. The community is almost completely surrounded by the Mlawula Nature Reserve, and there have traditionally been difficult relations between the reserve and community. The community eco-business plan helped to develop a full appreciation and understanding of the biodiversity assets and ecosystem services occurring on the communal land.

The first and most important step in developing the community eco-business plan was thorough stakeholder involvement. Stakeholder analysis is important for understanding the local dynamics, developing cohesive and unified community governance and clarifying the objectives, benefits and commitments of the plan. Involvement of all groups in a community was important, including women, youth, the inner-council, traditional healers and harvesters, cattle farmers, and representatives of different groups or associations. An important aspect of achieving community interest in the project was through mapping and zonation of biodiversity features. This helped to identify what biodiversity and other resources were available, where they were located, their status and value and which resources are under threat and require community action towards protection.

Finally, training and capacity building for entrepreneurship were provided to ensure that skills were retained within the community. As a result, conservation and tourism activities have been initiated, including options for camping along the trails and a possible eco-lodge. These local tourism initiatives are strengthened by their integration into the broader, regional Eco Trails strategy.





Achievements

The effectiveness of business planning at the regional scale is demonstrated in the recent development of the Lubombo Eco Trails initiative. The Eco Trails initiative is the result of a regional analysis of tourism and conservation assets. It consolidates the regional transfrontier conservation area product through routes and trail linkages. The trails make links through the landscape based on community-based ecotourism activities, complemented by the historical

significance of the Lubombo and ecological farming practices, all integrated into a single rich product. This has led to the promotion of the Lubombo farmers products under the Lubombo Eco Product brand. This creates a diversified tourism product that meets market needs. The Eco Trails initiative is purposely community based, with strong private sector and government support. Its advantage is its clear investment approach and sound business planning process that is done with the community.

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