



Case Study: Nature Reserve

Umgano Project

Important biodiversity sometimes occurs on community owned land that must also support the lives and livelihoods of rural people. The Mabandla community in KwaZulu-Natal recognises the many benefits that can be achieved through sustainable land management, and has developed a spatial zoning approach that determines which land-uses should be implemented within certain zones. The area with the highest biodiversity value has been assigned to a 1 400 hectare conservation zone that will be formally protected. This is an example of a Nature Reserve, the highest level of biodiversity stewardship that carries the same legal standing as a state owned protected area. The spatial zoning and the establishment of the reserve will help to achieve the dual goals of conservation and community upliftment.



Background

The Mabandla community lives in a part of southwestern KwaZulu-Natal made famous by author Alan Paton, which is characterised by rolling grasslands and indigenous forests. As part of the Maputaland–Pondoland–Albany Hotspot, the area was identified as a Key Biodiversity Area and prioritised for community-based biodiversity stewardship. The grasslands include the Endangered Drakensberg Foothill Moist Grassland and Vulnerable Southern KwaZulu-Natal Moist Grassland and Drakensberg Cycad Veld vegetation types. The evergreen Mistbelt Yellowwood forests are equally threatened.

The biodiversity of the area remains in good condition, providing habitat for a range of threatened and endemic species. Significantly, the area forms part of a migration route for high altitude migrant species. The area also forms a link in regularly-used local migration routes between existing protected areas, for example for the Critically Endangered Cape parrot on foraging and nesting trips. Southern ground hornbills are known to have bred in the forests. The high rainfall makes the region an important water source area, which forms part of the catchment for two rivers of significance for domestic water supplies as well as downstream water users.

The Mabandla community is a traditional Ntlangwini ethnic group and they speak a form of isiZulu linked to Siswati. They retain a largely rural lifestyle. The Umgano Project Area is an area of state land that will be leased to the Mabandla Traditional Council on a long lease to honour a land reform undertaking.

Action

The additional lands are being used by the community, under the leadership of its traditional leader, iNkosi Baleni, for a sustainable land-use development project, known as the Umgano Project. The community itself operates the project, advised by official organisations such as Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and its own consultants. It aims to benefit community members through the implementation of a range of sustainable land-use business practices. Biodiversity conservation is also an important part of this initiative. The area in which this project is being implemented is not used for residential purposes but rather solely to benefit and earn wealth for the community, including conservation of its natural capital.

The principal revenue-earning land use is commercial afforestation. The timber plantation, established over 15 years ago, presently earns a gross income of R10–12 million per annum, and employs nearly 100 community members. This is the principal source of income for the project, which in addition to benefitting the community, provides the funding for the maintenance of the biodiversity and some seed funding for other income-generating activities.





Community spatial zoning

Zoning ensures that the land can provide ongoing income for the community while protecting the biodiversity on which they depend. The project area is divided into three zones:

- Agricultural/grazing zone: just over 40% of the project area is to be used as rangeland for a commercial cattle herd according to sustainable grazing practices and localised intensive agriculture.
- Commercial afforestation zone: the forestry plantation (about 28% of the area) has already been active for a number of years. The plantation has been certified by the Forestry Stewardship Council, which verifies that it is responsibly managed.
- Conservation zone: also about 28%, this is the area with the highest biodiversity value that will be retained in natural condition for conservation purposes. The conservation zone will be officially declared as the Umgano Nature Reserve under the Protected Areas Act.



Nature reserves are a type of biodiversity stewardship that is intended for property with high biodiversity importance. They include long-term title deed restrictions, which mean that even if the land changes hands, its status as a protected area remains in place. Nature reserves are established by a formal declaration in terms of the Protected Areas Act and have the same legal standing of state-owned protected areas. A nature reserve was the biodiversity stewardship option selected for the conservation zone of the Umgano Project Area. A nature reserve would ensure that this land designated for conservation would receive the highest level of protection. A nature reserve may also attract additional community-based adventure tourism as another source of income for the community.

Achievements

At the start of the Umgano Project, the Mabandla community was not familiar with the concept of biodiversity conservation in the modern technical sense, although they have a good appreciation of the natural environment. The technical terminology was not available in the vocabularies of rural communities such as the Mabandla people. After some time, however, it became apparent that the community leadership had a keen ethic for responsible stewardship of the natural environment. Through the Umgano Project, the community formally adopted this ethic through the concepts of biodiversity stewardship and sustainable development.

The Biodiversity Stewardship Programme of Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife views the Umgano Project as a flagship for community-based biodiversity stewardship. The project



received the Community Conservation award at the Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife Biodiversity Stewardship Excellence Awards in 2011. The project reveals how biodiversity stewardship can be used in combination with sustainable development practices to meet both community upliftment and conservation goals.

Declaration of the 1 400 ha Umgano Nature Reserve is imminent. This area will contribute to the provincial conservation targets for several threatened ecosystem

types and provide a haven for threatened biodiversity. It will hopefully also bring recognition by official agencies and the international community to the remarkable biodiversity conservation achievements made by the Mabandla community.

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