MPAH
case study series
MAPUTALAND–PONDOLAND–ALBANY HOTSPOT

Ten lessons

from biodiversity stewardship in the Maputaland–Pondoland–Albany Hotspot

The Maputaland–Pondoland–Albany Hotspot (MPAH) is an area of high biodiversity and endemism that follows the eastern coastline of southern Africa and extends inland to the escarpment. It includes portions of Mozambique, Swaziland and South Africa. In 2010, the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) initiated a 5-year investment in the hotspot region that would 'support civil society in applying innovative approaches to conservation in under-capacitated protected areas, Key Biodiversity Areas and priority corridors, thereby enabling changes in policy and building resilience in the region's ecosystems and economy to sustain biodiversity in the long term'. The CEPF investment strategy recognised the role that biodiversity stewardship in South Africa could play in achieving this objective, and hence made biodiversity stewardship a focus of its 2nd strategic direction, to 'expand conservation areas and improve land use in 19 Key Biodiversity Areas'.

What is biodiversity stewardship?

Biodiversity stewardship is an approach to entering into agreements with private and communal landowners to protect and manage land in biodiversity priority areas, led by conservation authorities in South Africa. Biodiversity stewardship is implemented on sites that have been identified as important for biodiversity and ecosystem services, based on best available science. Biodiversity stewardship is a highly cost-effective mechanism for expanding protected areas. Under biodiversity stewardship, the land remains the property of the landowner. Biodiversity stewardship is particularly effective in multiple-use landscapes where biodiversity priority areas are embedded in a matrix of other land uses.

Ten lessons learnt

Recognising an opportunity for learning, the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI), through the MPAH learning network, and the Wildlands Conservation Trust, invited CEPF-funded projects to share their experiences gained while working on biodiversity stewardship. The lessons learnt could be shared with others involved in biodiversity stewardship, including provincial representatives and non-governmental organisations. The top 10 lessons that emerged from this process are summarised here:

1. **Partnerships:** Strong partnerships are a valuable foundation for biodiversity stewardship. This includes partnerships between provincial agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), landowners, communities and corporates. In regions were partnerships are well established, biodiversity stewardship progresses more smoothly and is ultimately more successful. Partnerships allow for shared resources and capacity, with each organisation able to work to their strengths. In particular, partnerships between NGOs and provincial agencies are important. Provincial agencies provide the mandated guidance, legislative role and formal structure. NGOs have the ability to respond more flexibly, and can act as trusted mediators between government and landowners.

2. **Continual engagement with landowners:** Establishing a good relationship with the landowners is one of the first steps of biodiversity stewardship. A visit by a biodiversity stewardship practitioner to conduct an initial site assessment is often the basis for this relationship. However, the relationship with the landowners will usually have to be maintained over a protracted period as the biodiversity stewardship process progresses. The best way to keep landowners interested and motivated is through constant interaction. This includes regularly advising the landowners of the current state of the process. Making contact with the landowners can be achieved through a variety of communication channels, including phone calls, emails, text messages or visits. Regular communication will prevent landowners from losing interest and will ensure their continued participation in biodiversity stewardship.

3. **Simple, clear communication:** Biodiversity stewardship involves a certain amount of jargon and specialist terminology. This is not immediately understandable to the public or landowners. It has often proven

necessary to simplify the concepts and provide additional explanation. This issue can be exacerbated by cultural or language barriers, or in situations where there are differential meanings of biodiversity stewardship. It is also valuable to make the intentions of biodiversity stewardship clear up front, to prevent misunderstandings that may hamper the process at a later stage. Biodiversity stewardship practitioners must remember to use simple, easy to understand language, and to provide clear explanations of the reasons for biodiversity stewardship, its process and requirements. There remains a need for simple communication tools and a standard protocol for communication.

4. **Champions and influencers:** Champions are those landowners or other individuals who advocate for biodiversity stewardship amongst their peers or communities. A champion can be highly effective in building motivation, sustaining interest and getting others involved in the biodiversity stewardship process. Biodiversity stewardship practitioners should always try to indentify suitable champions within a region or community. These individuals are usually already innovative landowners, who are leaders or influencers within their communities. Landowners may be more open to hearing ideas about biodiversity stewardship from their peers, rather than from outsiders. Champions can be important to the success of biodiversity stewardship initiatives and their role should be recognised and supported. It is not always the biodiversity practitioner's responsibility to convince landowners to enter into biodiversity stewardship. In some cases, a local champion can assume this role and use their influence within the community to encourage biodiversity stewardship.

5. **Institutional effectiveness and capacity:** Institutional capacity for biodiversity stewardship ultimately rests with the provincial conservation agencies. However, there are large differences in the resources and capacity between provinces. Even in the best-resourced provinces, capacity to expand biodiversity stewardship, and even to continue supporting current sites, is limited. Limited capacity has numerous consequences, from bureaucratic delays to the pursuit of lower levels of biodiversity stewardship in some cases. In order for biodiversity stewardship to continue to strengthen as a protected area expansion mechanism, human and resource capacity limitations within the relevant institutions need to be addressed. Aspects of political buy-in and alignment with other political priorities need to be considered when motivating for additional government capacity.

6. **Succession planning and continuity:** Since biodiversity stewardship is a relatively new concept, much of the effort thus far has been in establishing new sites. However, as the programmes continue, additional attention must now be paid to the issues of sustainability planning and the continuance of established sites. Biodiversity stewardship agreements can range in duration from 5 years to perpetuity, necessitating a protocol for continued support. Often, NGOs are active participants in establishing biodiversity stewardship sites, but then have to reduce their involvement due to funding or human capacity limitations. Succession planning can be as simple as taking the time to introduce your successor before you leave. Ultimately, the responsibility for biodiversity stewardship sites rests with the provincial agencies that will provide ongoing support. Succession planning needs to be considered during the establishment of new sites, to ensure that the necessary arrangements for continued support are made.

7. **Incentives:** A number of incentives have been put forward for landowners who enter into biodiversity stewardship agreements. The most formal are fiscal incentives in the form of tax deductions or rates exclusions, which are theoretically available to landowners. However, there have been legal difficulties with implementing fiscal incentives in practice. Other important incentives relate to land management support from the provincial agencies. Support-based incentives could be effective, but are limited by the lack of capacity among the provincial agencies. In some cases, landowners have joined the programme under certain expectation of incentives, which have not occurred. Incentives in the form of recognition and positive media attention can be effective, especially for large corporate landowners. Attention should also be paid to negative incentives, such as the perception that biodiversity stewardship may devalue the land. However, current incentives often do not provide sufficient motivation for biodiversity stewardship. Additional work is necessary to develop and implement innovative and effective incentives.

8. **Local knowledge and participation:** In working with local landowners, biodiversity stewardship practitioners must remember not to discount the extent of local knowledge. Landowners are often very knowledgeable about their land. If local knowledge is used to its full potential, it can help to assist the stewardship process while allowing landowners a true sense of 'ownership' over the biodiversity on their land. Landowners are also likely to be the partners that will face most of the practical matters involved in the management of the sites. Thus, it can be beneficial to listen to their ideas and opinions, instead of requiring them to follow directives that are predetermined for them. In communal areas, local knowledge can include not only familiarity with the land, but also an understanding of the social dynamics of the community. In these cases, a fully participatory approach is not only a legal requirement, but also a significant way to access local knowledge.

9. **Multiple landowners:** Including multiple landowners in biodiversity stewardship can seem like an attractive option, as it can encompass larger tracts of land under unified management regimes. However, negotiations can become increasingly difficult with the number of landowners involved. Establishing a biodiversity stewardship site involving multiple landowners is much easier when there is cohesion within the landscape, in the form of both uniform land-uses and a socially unified community. Such cohesion allows the negotiations to proceed more easily. However, in very variable landscapes, a decision must be made about whether the amount of effort needed during negotiations is warranted by the value of the site. Prior to engaging with multiple landowners, it is recommended that a reasonable assessment be made of the relative effort and resources that would be required to achieve a successful declaration.

10. **Willing landowners:** A number of factors can influence landowners' willingness to participate in biodiversity stewardship. These can include personal motivations, socio-political factors, commercial or institutional issues. Biodiversity stewardship practitioners often aim to secure high biodiversity areas or areas with special biodiversity features. However, if landowners in these regions are unwilling, it is a waste of resources to pursue sites that are unlikely to be declared. It is recommended that biodiversity stewardship practitioners should focus on the willing landowners wherever possible, or on convincing indecisive landowners in important landscapes.

Case studies

A set of five case studies describing some of the CEPF-funded project experiences in biodiversity stewardship have been developed. These case studies include examples of the different types of biodiversity stewardship agreements that have been implemented in the MPAH. These include:

- Nature Reserve: Botanical Society Nature Reserves
- Nature Reserve: Umgano Project
- Protected Environment: Mountain Zebra Wilderness Corridor
- Biodiversity Agreement: WWF Water Balance Programme
- Biodiversity Partnership Area: uMzimvubu Catchment Partnership Programme

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