

# Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany Hotspot CEPF

## Small grant project - final report

Dr Bob Smith, Current Conservation Community Interest Company


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Project Title and Request
<b>Project Title</b> Developing an online social network for conservationists in the Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany Hotspot
<b>CEPF Region</b> – Please list the CEPF region where your project will be implemented. CEPF funding regions are described on <a href="http://www.cepf.net">www.cepf.net</a> . Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany Hotspot
<b>Project Duration</b> – Enter the approximate time period of your project. 12 months
<b>Strategic Direction from the CEPF Ecosystem Profile</b> – Enter the single strategic direction this proposal aims to address. Use the exact number, such as 1, 2, etc. and wording from the ecosystem profile for this region found on <a href="http://www.cepf.net">www.cepf.net</a> .  4.2 Establish and strengthen institutional arrangements that will increase and coordinate civil society participation and facilitate lessons sharing to promote linkages that ensure effective conservation action at a broad scale

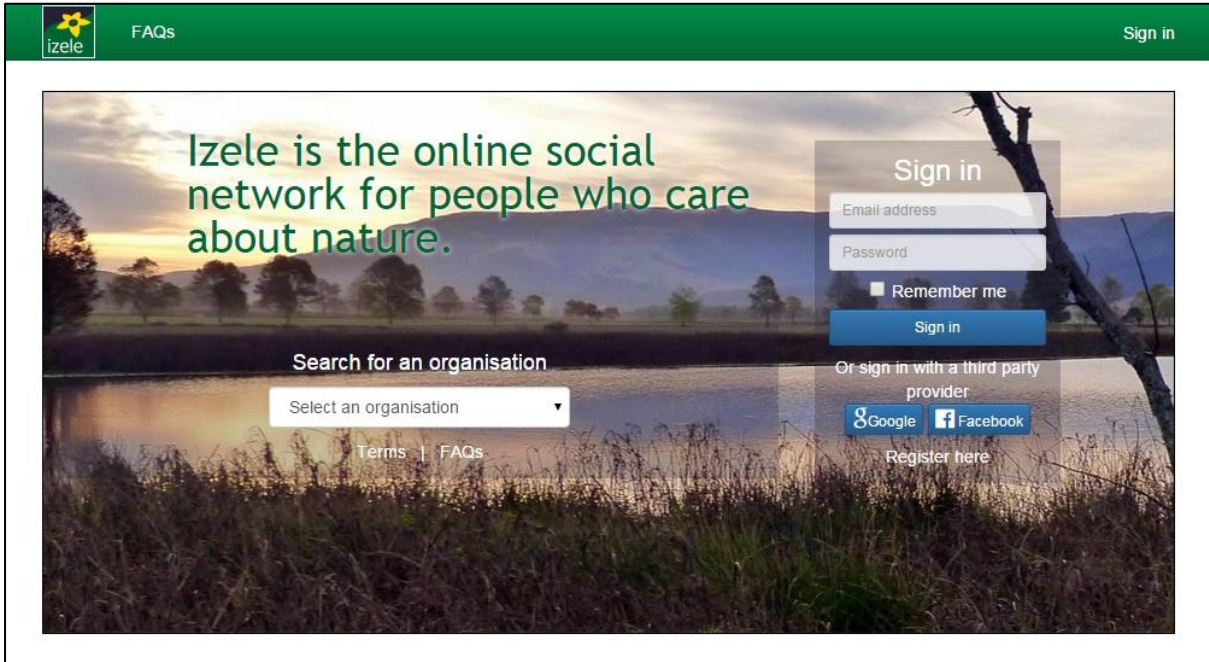
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Organization Information
<b>Organization Legal Name</b> Current Conservation Community Interest Company
<b>Project Lead Contact</b> – Provide the name and contact information for the person responsible for correspondence with CEPF regarding this project. Dr Bob Smith 56 Rushmead Close Canterbury, Kent CT2 7RP, United Kingdom  Email: <a href="mailto:bob.smith@izele.org">bob.smith@izele.org</a>
<b>Organization Chief Executive</b> – Provide the name and contact information for the chief executive or person who is authorized to sign contracts on behalf of your organization. Dr Bob Smith 56 Rushmead Close Canterbury, Kent CT2 7RP, United Kingdom  Email: <a href="mailto:bob.smith@izele.org">bob.smith@izele.org</a>

## Executive Summary

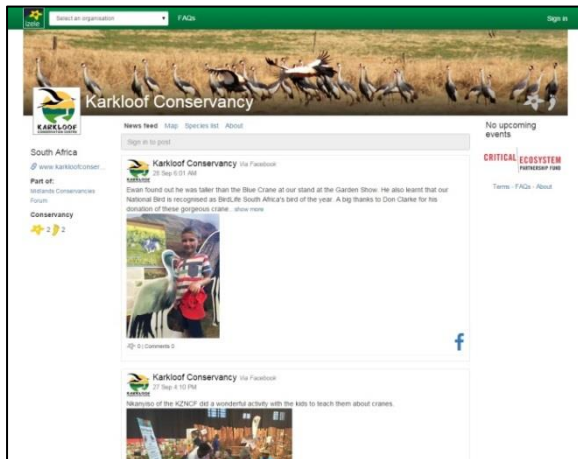
- The Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany Hotspot (MPAH) is an area of 275,000 km<sup>2</sup> covering part of Mozambique, South Africa and Swaziland. CEPF have supported a range of different projects in the MPAH, with a focus on building capacity in state protected areas, creating biodiversity stewardship projects on private land and supporting community-based projects on communal land.
  - The people working on these CEPF projects vary widely in terms of their experience and expertise, so it is vital that these conservationists share information and lessons learnt. In addition, the long-term success of these projects depends on sharing information and building links with their partners, neighbours and visitors. Thus, there is a need to foster these networks to widen and strengthen the conservation community in the MPAH.
  - This is why we have produced Izele ([www.izele.org](http://www.izele.org)), an online conservation social network to link and benefit people throughout the MPAH. The Izele website can be viewed on any computer, tablet or smartphone and encourages people to share news, information, maps and advice on a range of conservation issues. The website name comes from iZeLe, the isiZulu word for the black bird-berry tree (*Psychotria capensis*), which is found in the MPAH and has a star-shaped flower. This flower forms the basis of the Izele logo and the website's icon for marking a page or comment as a favourite.
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- The pilot Izele website consists of pages for three conservation areas (Lions Bush Conservancy, Karkloof Conservation and Rosetta Nottingham Road Conservancy) and two conservation groups (Izele and the Midlands Conservancies Forum). Representatives of these conservancies were part of the project Steering Group and provided feedback throughout the software development process.
  - Each conservation area page consists of: (1) the **News feed** tab, which lets users post news and links and brings together the latest posts from relevant Facebook and Twitter accounts; (2) the **Map** tab, which shows the location of the conservation area, together with neighbouring conservation areas; (3) the **Species** tab, which shows the name and photo of notable species found in the conservation area and a bird and mammal species list, and (4) the **About** tab, which provides details about the conservation area.
  - Izele creates an online social network by letting people share, post and comment on news and information. It also shows how each conservation area and conservation group is linked, both through showing their locations on the map and detailing project partners. This will raise the profile of every area and group by letting users browse the website through the maps and links to discover new pages.
  - The next steps in developing Izele involve: (A) working with other CEPF projects in MPAH to create pages on the website and encouraging users to post information; (B) seeking funds to build on the website functionality to further increase Izele's value to the conservation community, and; (C) increasing the number of regions where Izele is used, potentially by creating networks for other CEPF hotspots and so create a wider network that lets all CEPF projects share information and expertise.

## Screenshot of the Izele homepage

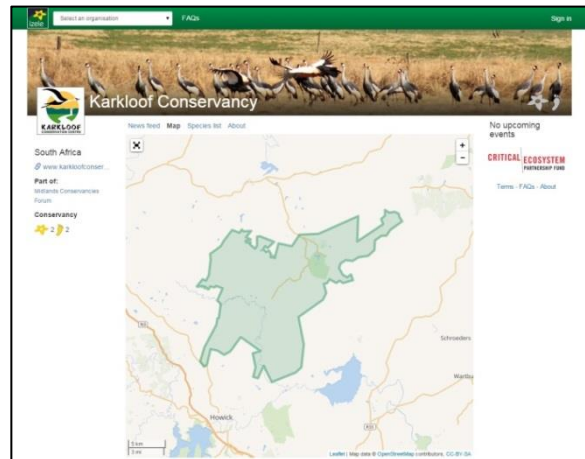


## Screenshots from the Karkloof Conservancy Izele page showing the four tabs

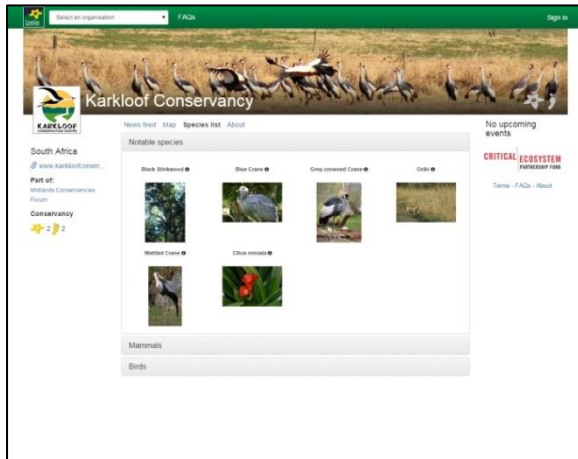
### News feed tab



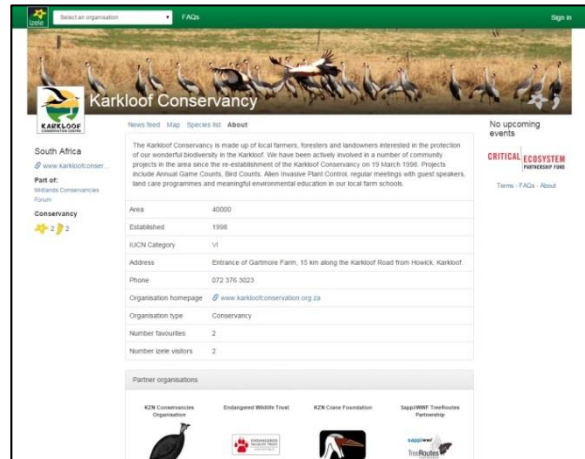
### Map tab



### Species tab



### About tab



## Project Rationale

### Background

The Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany Hotspot (MPAH) is an area of 275,000 km<sup>2</sup> that covers part of Mozambique, South Africa and Swaziland. The region contains a number of important state protected areas but many of its threatened and endemic species and habitats are found on private and communal land. This is why CEPF have supported a range of different projects in the MPAH, with a focus on building capacity in state protected areas, creating biodiversity stewardship projects on private land and supporting community-based projects on communal land. The people working on these projects also vary widely in terms of their experience and expertise, so it is vital that these conservationists share information and lessons learnt. In addition, the long-term viability of these projects depends on sharing information and building links with their partners, neighbours and visitors.

One issue with ensuring this long-term success is that the CEPF projects are spread over a large area and their partners, neighbours and visitors are similarly dispersed. The obvious way to link them is by using online systems, as these are widely used in the MPAH and are becoming ever more available. However, there is no system designed specifically for conservation that provides the functionality these different projects need. In addition, many of these projects are relatively small and lack the capacity to set up online systems that could support these different roles. Just as importantly, many of these conservation areas and groups are relatively unknown outside their local community, making it impossible to connect with the wider world.

The CEPF have already developed a Social Learning Network for their MPAH projects and funded other work to build conservation links in the region, so this provided a great opportunity to create an online social network to support and strengthen these initiatives. This opportunity is also made possible by recent developments in open-source software and the growth in the use of smartphones and tablets, making such a social network technologically viable. This is why the Current Conservation Community Interest Company, with funding from the CEPF, have developed a new project to overcome these issues, using on-line technology to widen and strengthen the conservation community in the MPAH

So this report describes the pilot project to develop Izele, an online conservation social network that seeks to link and benefit people throughout the Hotspot and beyond. The website name comes from iZeLe, the isiZulu word for the black bird-berry tree (*Psychotria capensis*), which is found in the MPAH and has a star-shaped flower. This flower forms the basis of the Izele logo and the website's icon for marking a page or comment as a favourite.



This project was piloted in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands with members of the Midlands Conservancies Forum. This document makes up the final project report and describes the project approach, results and our plans for the next steps.

## Project Approach

Izele is an online social network that lets conservation areas and conservation groups share news, information, maps and advice with their partners, neighbours, visitors and supporters. We decided to pilot this approach in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands and work with members of the Midlands Conservancies Forum. We selected this group because of all the CEPF-supported projects, these Conservancies had the most sophisticated social media presence. After consulting with the Wildlands Conservation Trust, we decided to work with members of Lions Bush, Karkloof and Rosetta Nottingham Road Conservancies.

The project management structure involved an Implementation Team and a Steering Group. The Implementation Team consisted of Dr Bob Smith from Current Conservation as the team manager and Tom Mullier and Greg Vaughan, who are independent consultants, as the software designers and developers. The Steering Group consisted of Twané Clark from Karkloof Conservancy and the Midlands Conservancies Forum, Greg Martindale from Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife, Kevin McCann from Wildlands Conservation Trust, Roy Tabernor from Lions Bush Conservancy and Adrian Wilson from Rosetta Nottingham Road Conservancy. We also discussed our project with Judy Bell and Nikki Brighton from the Midlands Conservancies Forum and received useful feedback from Emily Botts and Warwick Fraser on later versions of Izele. The Implementation Team met up twice during the project duration and had meetings on Skype on average once a week. The team manager communicated with the Steering Group members by email and Skype.

We decided that the first stage in developing Izele is to create an online social network that will be used by the conservation areas and groups. Once these groups are involved this then provides a space for individual users to interact with them. Many conservation groups and some conservation areas already have their own websites, so we wanted to ensure that Izele did not replicate their efforts. However, we also wanted to ensure that Izele could be the major web presence for any conservation area or group that does not have its own website. We also wanted Izele to contain information on each area and group that would build in value as the network of pages increased.

We began by developing the broad structure of the Izele website and identifying the types of content it should include. These discussions were based on the existing experience of the project developers and *ad hoc* assessments of existing websites. Next, the Implementation Team discussed how this content should be stored and linked and mapped this out using the MySQL Workbench software package. We then decided how much of this content and functionality could be included in the pilot version, given our budget, and then developed prototype screenshots of this pilot version using the Balsamiq wire-framing software.

These prototype screenshots were then converted into the alpha version of the Izele website, which showed the website layout but did not contain any functionality. The Steering Group commented on the alpha website and this feedback was used to develop the beta website, which contained all the functionality. The alpha and beta websites were password protected so that they could only be viewed by people involved in the project. The Implementation Team and Steering Group then tested the beta website and the software developers made the suggested improvements and fixed any bugs. The Izele website was launched in September 2015 so that anyone could see the pages and sign up.



## Project results

### Pilot website

The project has produced the pilot Izele website ([www.izele.org](http://www.izele.org)), which contains pages for three conservation areas (Lions Bush Conservancy, Karkloof Conservation and Rosetta Nottingham Road Conservancy) and two conservation groups (Izele and the Midlands Conservancies Forum). Each of the conservation area pages has four tabs (the News feed, Map, Species and About tabs) and the conservation group pages have two or three of these tabs, depending on their applicability. The website has been designed to work on any screen size and shape, so can be viewed on a computer, tablet or smart phone, but some of the content is hidden on very small screens. More details about each tab are given below:

**News feed tab:** this tab lets users post comments and share links, and also brings together posts from the conservation area or group's Facebook and Twitter accounts (Figure 1). This means all their social media accounts can be displayed in one place, making it easier for users to keep up-to-date with the latest information.

**Map tab:** this tab shows the polygon marking the boundary of the conservation area or several polygons making up a collection of conservation areas, together with a background map from OpenStreetMap (Figure 2). The tab lets people zoom in and out and pan in any direction to look for other neighbouring conservation areas. If the user clicks on any conservation area polygon then a pop-up label appears showing the name of the conservation area, its logo and a link to its Izele page.

**Species tab:** this tab lists six notable species found in the conservation area, together with their photos and links to their page on the Encyclopaedia of Life website (Figure 3). The page also lists the bird and mammal species found in the conservation area, together with links to their pages on the Encyclopaedia of Life, Wikipedia and ARKive websites.

**About tab:** this tab contains information about the conservation area or group, including a brief description, when it was established, its physical address, contact details and partner organisations (Figure 3).

Each tab also contains news on upcoming events, a link to the conservation area or group's main website and the number of times it has been favoured or liked.

### Creating a social network

Izele is designed so that conservation areas can share information with their neighbours, visitors and stakeholders and conservation groups can share information with their stakeholders, partners and supporters. In addition, Izele makes it easy for people to explore the website and discover new conservation areas and groups. This pilot version of Izele supports this social network in four main ways:

- 1) Registered users can add posts and comments to each conservation area and group page and so share information, links and news.

- 2) Each page shows whether the conservation area or group is part of a broader organisation and links to these organisation and their other project partners.
- 3) Each map tab lets the user explore the area around each conservation area, identify neighbouring areas and then visit the pages of these neighbours.
- 4) Each Facebook or Twitter post on the news feed tab links to the relevant social media account and so lets the user follow this account directly.

## User feedback

Feedback about Izele has generally been extremely positive. Key quotes from people who have used the site include:

*“I’ve been through the website now though and I think it’s great. I like the layout and the information that it contains and I like the idea that it has the potential to create a community that can interact together around joint conservation issues”.*

*“I think it’s a great idea that you can interact with it through Facebook and Google as this will provide a great connection with social media. I also think that it’s a great platform for many conservancies that cannot set up their own website.”*

*“First impressions are good – website looks good, is clean and functional. Provided it gets widely used, this could be a great resource for conservation organisations. And a welcome option for those smaller organisations that are unable to maintain their own websites”.*

*“This might just be the easiest way to keep our non-Facebook members happy!”*

These people also gave useful suggestions on new features that could be added to Izele in the future, including allowing groups to set up pages that could be accessed by their members and store important documents and references.

However, it should be noted that two of the three Conservancies relied on other people to check Izele on their behalf because they felt they did not have the relevant computer skills. This means that the Izele team will probably have to provide continued support in the short-term to ensure that more people use the website and create pages.

## Next steps

### Building the network

The next step will be to encourage other CEPF-funded projects in the MPAH to create pages on Izele. We will do this by emailing representatives of each project, approaching them in person when Bob Smith visits KwaZulu-Natal in November 2015 and attends the Conservation Symposium, publicising the project through various media outlets and working with people who have created pages on Izele to encourage their relevant friends and colleagues to do the same. Once we have more than 30 conservation area and conservation

group pages then we will focus on increasing the number of people who have signed up to the network and increasing the number of posts and comments that they make.

### Software improvements

This pilot version of Izele contains a core set of functions that will allow conservation places and groups in the MPAH to share information, maps and news with people within the hotspot and around the world. However, there is a huge scope for adding new functionality to Izele to strengthen this network and produce a globally important resource for anyone interested in nature and conservation. In the short term, these improvements should include the following:

- **Allowing conservation managers to create and edit their own pages automatically.** This will involve setting up a system so that anyone within the MPAH could create a page and upload the relevant text, images and boundary data and then specify which social media accounts should be featured in the news feed.
- **Improving information sharing between different Izele pages.** This will ensure that important information from the news feed from one page could be automatically shared on the news feed of linked pages. For example, popular stores from the Midlands Conservancies Forum could be shared on the news feed pages of members of the Forum. This would ensure that every page contained new and relevant information.
- **Letting people share photos on the news feed directly.** This will let people add photos to the comments they post on each page's news feed and then group them on each page to become a photo gallery of relevant images.
- **Improve the social media functionality in the news feed.** This will let page managers increase the number of Facebook or Twitter accounts that can appear on their news feed and specify that a post from a particular account should be displayed only if it contains a specific hashtag. This will let page managers broaden the number of accounts that can appear on the news feed by tailoring which posts appear.
- **Provide support for speakers of isiZulu, Portuguese and siSwati.** This will let people who speak isiZulu, Portuguese or siSwati use Izele, create pages and comment on other pages by translating the relevant text.
- **Provide options for group pages to store key information for group members.** This will let group managers set up a tab that contains links to all the key resources for the group members, such as documents and links to important websites.

### Funding options

The future success of Izele depends on obtaining funds to increase its functionality and improve its design. In the short term, we plan to apply for funding from conservation donors so that we produce a system that is even more relevant for the conservation community. For example, we would like to apply for funding from CEPF to set up projects in other hotspots, creating links within and between each hotspot. In the medium term we will develop options for using Izele to generate revenue, as that will be the only way to ensure its sustainable



future. This would be based on advertising and providing on-line services for those conservation places and groups that can afford it.

## **Conclusions**

The pilot version of Izele has been successfully completed and consists of three conservation area and two conservation group pages. Feedback on the beta site from users has been extremely positive and we are confident that Izele will be a useful resource for conservationists in the MPAH. However, the future value of this resource will depend on two factors. First, we need to encourage more people in the MPAH to get involved with Izele, especially by creating new conservation area and group pages. Second, we need to add extra functionality to make it easier for people to use Izele and to increase its value to conservation practitioners and the public alike. Both these aspects require time, effort and money and so the Izele team will have to raise further funds, whilst also working with partners in the MPAH to encourage new people to sign up and create pages. As part of this, we hope we can continue to work the CEPF to build this network in the MPAH and then link it with their other projects in hotspots throughout the world. This could then be the basis of a global network that would strengthen the conservation community worldwide.

## **Acknowledgements**

We are grateful to Rachel Sykes for helping develop the Izele pages and providing content. We are also grateful to Adrian Wilson, Emily Botts, Greg Martindale, Judy Bell, Nikki Brighton, Roy Tabernor, Twané Clark and Warwick Fraser for their feedback and advice on developing the website. In addition, we would like to thank Kevin McCann and Mark Gerrard from the Wildlands Conservation Trust for their help and advice while managing our grant and to the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund for their support in funding this project.

## Appendix 1: Izele screenshots

Figure 1: Screen shot of the News feed tab for the Karkloof Conservancy page on Izele

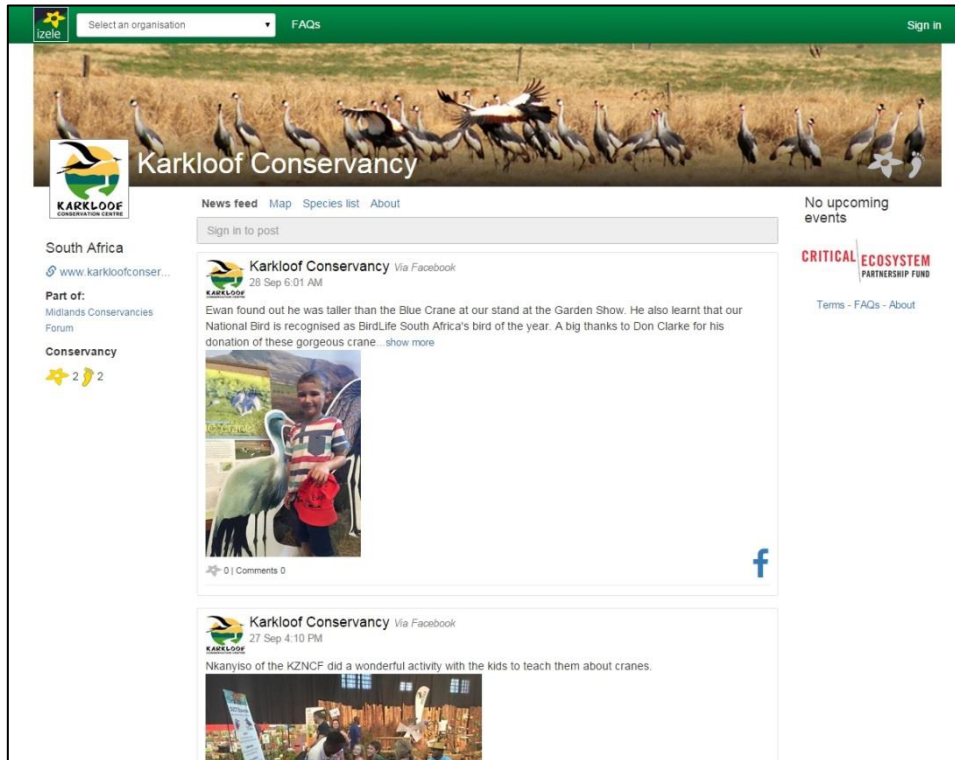


Figure 2: Screen shot of the Map tab for the Karkloof Conservancy page on Izele

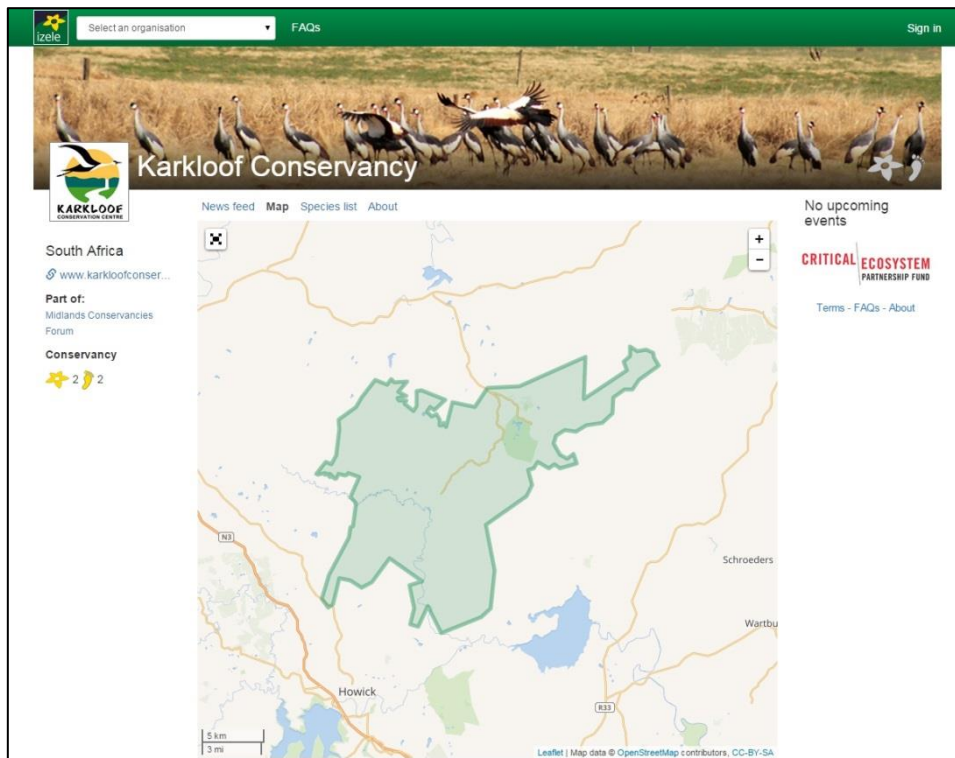


Figure 3: Screen shot of the Species tab for the Karkloof Conservancy page on Izele

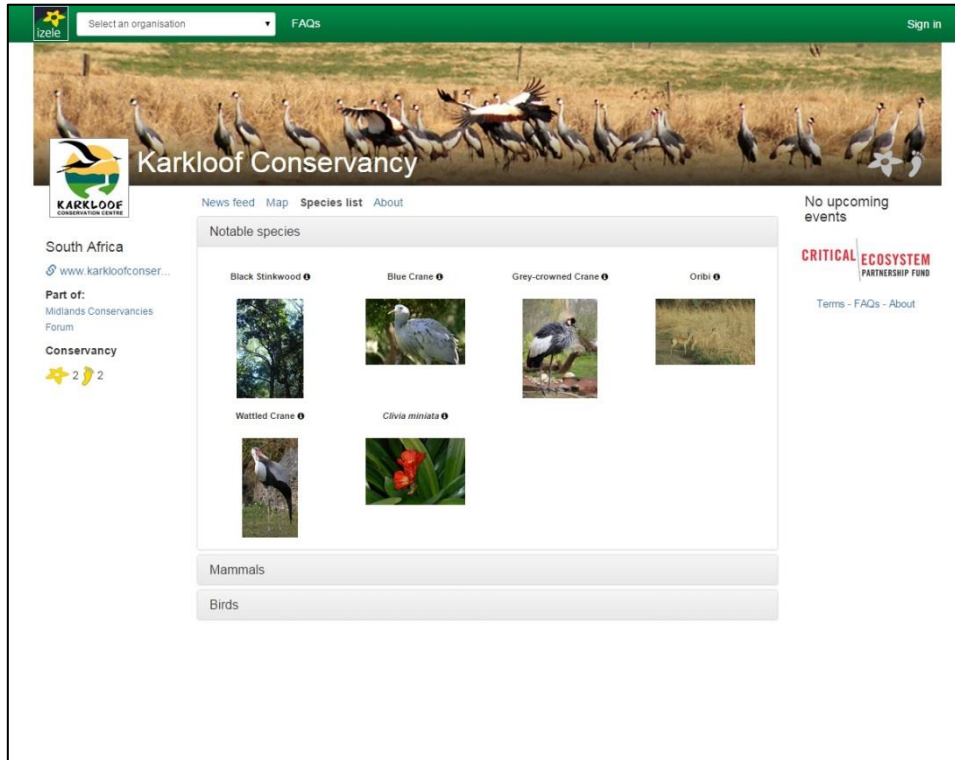


Figure 4: Screen shot of the About tab for the Karkloof Conservancy page on Izele

