

Developing a Plan for Protected Area Expansion and Sustainable Communities in the Greater Ithala Complex

Final Report - December 2013

Introduction

This small grant project, funded by the CEPF through the RIT of Wildlands, was designed to provide deeper insight into the issues pertaining to the expansion of the Greater Ithala Complex such that a more focussed plan could be developed for a subsequent large grant application. It was to build on “lessons learnt” from ACT’s other projects but also takes cognisance that this project area has challenges of greater complexity, magnitude and risk. Consequently the plan that will come out of the small grant project will point to innovative methods incorporating ideas from agriculture, economics, environmental law, biodiversity planning, and a combination of ecosystems and priority species approaches. An alternative project title, that was considered too unwieldy for general consumption, nevertheless encapsulates an holistic approach that will be required:

An Interdisciplinary Environmental Approach within the Greater Ithala Complex: Interrelating socio-economic upliftment, sustainable farming and community based biodiversity conservation

The end point of this small grant project should be a plan that feeds seamlessly into a large grant project that further develops and enacts that plan. The time-span for the project differed from that proposed in the LOI, primarily because of the late arrival of the funds (after the end date of the project) but also that the information that made up the desk-top was sought sequentially and accessed slowly. Much of that information is summarised in the Literature Review of this report and the rest can be accessed from the Appendices (listed at the end and available on request). This report has been finalised after the compilation of the subsequent large grant application and certain aspect of strategy have been refined since its submission, particularly the use of the elephant excursion plan as a mechanism to gain traction with elephant range expansion.

Background and Rationale

With its economically stressed communities living within an area of critical ecological importance, existing or expanded environmental protection within the Greater Ithala Complex is under threat. Northern KwaZulu-Natal is characterised by rural communities that are still heavily reliant on the delivery of ecosystem services. Increasing socio-economic pressures within these communities are resulting in further stress on the region’s key biodiversity areas which require protection within a fragmented protected area network. The Greater Ithala Complex falls within the Highland Grasslands Corridor and includes the Ithala Game Reserve, a section of the Pongola River and the communal lands to the north of it. Only about 700ha of south western high ground of Ithala Game Reserve forms part of the mist belt grassland with much of that vulnerable vegetation type falling within private or communal land. Increasingly these areas are becoming vulnerable to bush encroachment, alien plants or inappropriate grazing practices. Ithala Game Reserve has a growing elephant population which currently roams beyond its riverine northern boundary into community land. The communities in this area live adjacent to resources of global significance (in terms of ecosystem services) and yet they remain very close to the bread-line. Current agricultural practices within the communities have limited success and could benefit from expertise and

capacity building. Furthermore, expansion of the protected area network in this region could simultaneously reduce the human/wildlife conflict, associated with elephant populations, contribute towards the provision of ecosystem services and may also provide direct economic benefits to rural communities. The area is also home to the critically endangered black rhino, threatened white rhino and, occasionally, endangered wild dog. Whilst the conservation of the mist belt grassland in the southern high ground and the rhino and elephant habitat on the indistinct northern boundary initially appear to be separate problems, this is not the case. The loss of riverine habitat in the north of the reserve will threaten the ecological and economic sustainability of Ithala Game Reserve as a whole, including its mist belt grassland; this implies that an essential component of conserving the mist belt grassland is to expand the northern boundary of the reserve to include elephant and rhino habitat. With the complexity of poor local communities, multifaceted economic opportunities and critically important biodiversity/ecosystems, a highly co-operative interdisciplinary plan is required, one that will address both community needs and those of biodiversity conservation.

Literature Review

Central to this research, is the 30,000 ha Ithala Game Reserve, awarded to claimants of the Mahulumbela Trust and Ithala Game Reserve Trust in terms of the Restitution of Lands Act (1994). The reserve has a 1000m altitudinal range (significant in terms of climate change) and beyond containing the northern extremity of mistbelt grassland, is home to a significant number of priority plant and animal species, including the Barberton Protea (*Protea comptonii*), the Jozini Cycad (*Encephalartos senticosus*), the Pepper-bark Tree (*Warbergia salutaris*), black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*), white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*), and occasionally wild dog (*Lycaon pictus*) (Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, 2009). The northern boundary of Ithala Game Reserve is the unfenced Pongola River, approximately 56km in length (Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, 2009). Ithala Game Reserve's elephant (*Loxodonta africana*) population is currently at 150 individuals but this number will increase significantly with its growth rate estimated to be just under 8%. Without an appropriate fence on the northern boundary, the elephants cross into community lands with occurrences of up to 100 elephants being recorded over 6km outside the reserve (Barichievy, 2012). This situation contravenes the National Norms and Standard for the Management of Elephants (2008) and will lead to increased human/wildlife conflict. Fencing the river out of the reserve would be disadvantageous from four perspectives:

1. It would remove the possibility of protected area expansion in an ecologically critical area and this would contravene South Africa's obligation in terms of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD, 1992 and CBD, 2012), see below.
2. The Pongola flood plains are heavily utilized by black and white rhino and exclusion of these areas would lower the carrying capacity of these animals (Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, 2009)
3. Degradation of the land north of the Pongola River could negatively affect the delivery of ecosystem services, locally and down-stream, thus affecting the World Heritage Site, iSimangaliso.
4. It would eliminate the possibility of the local communities deriving benefits from a conservation-based land use.

The idea of local communities deriving benefit from protected areas is not new although examples of it have often created unrealistic expectations whilst retaining exclusionist undertones (Berkes, 2004 and West *et al*, 2006). “A first rather common step [*of community conservation initiatives*] is to abandon the letter but not the substance of control through some form of more or less benevolent paternalism” (Borrini-Feyerabend and Sandwith, 2003, Pg2). So community consultation processes often retain the ethos of imported experts informing local inhabitants of externally formulated plans and this creates the effect or impression of reducing the land tenure of the local communities. The consequence of this approach to community based environmental management is that there is little real “buy-in” or ownership of conservation initiatives beyond the acquisition of short term benefits. Consequently, community conservation initiatives often exhibit initial success that seldom endures beyond the honeymoon start-up phase, indicating that the initiatives are not being mainstreamed into the social fabric of the local communities.

The Greater Ithala Complex has fallen prey to this phenomenon, with the Simdlagentsha Ithala Community Conservation Partnership Project (SICCP), promising to expand Ithala by 15 thousand hectares into the areas of an additional seven traditional authorities (Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, 2008). Whilst the reasons for unrealised status of the SICCP is complex, it is now acknowledged that the process did not include grass roots participation of the community members and the process was not adequately managed or championed (Barichiev, 2012). It remains to be seen, if the derivation of direct benefits, from conservation based land-use areas, can be managed in conjunction with the South African government’s agrarian transformation plans (CRDP, 2009a) to empower rural communities towards economic independence. These deficiencies and questions will motivate further investigation.

The South African Millennium Development Goals Country Report (2010) highlights that environmental sustainability underpins the other development goals, including hunger and poverty alleviation. “Failure to achieve biodiversity stability... will undermine social and economic development efforts” (MDG, 2010, Pg84). One of the mechanisms to achieve the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) is the identification and protection of ecologically critical areas to be formally conserved (MDG, 2010). This intention mirrors Article 8 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD, 1992). Article 6 of the CBD outlines how signatory states should formalise strategies and plans to implement the terms of the convention; in South Africa, this was completed in 2012 (CBD, 2012). But the manner in which protected areas are to be identified and protected under law reveals, within that document, that protected area expansion in South Africa will involve areas that are privately or communally owned and community members must benefit from and participate actively in the process of conserving land (CBD, 2012). In the case of the Greater Ithala Complex, this could be realised through the delivery of ecosystem services to local communities, the payment for those ecosystem services valued beyond local communities, ecotourism and hunting (Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, 2009).

How can the benefits from conservation and agricultural based land-uses be amalgamated? South Africa’s commitments to food security, socio-economic development and environmental protection could easily conflict if they are not approached synergistically (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2010). Across the globe, initiatives to involve rural communities in sustainable farming and environmental protection, such that they derive tangible benefits, have been thwarted by exploitative economic agendas, legacies of political domination and top-down implementation systems (Berkes, 2004).

The importance of community participation has been identified as one of the key focus areas in ensuring the future of environmental initiatives (Phillips, 2003) not only as a moral obligation to communities but also that the integrated approach is logically inclusive of issues that affect the protected areas (Beltrán, 2000). “Participation in conceptualisation, planning, implementation and evaluation, by community members themselves is crucial. A better understanding of their own vulnerability and potential strategies to protect themselves from risk and increase their resilience is called for” (Department of Agriculture, 2002, Pg 18)

An interdisciplinary approach to economically sustainable communities will involve utilizing mechanisms to increase the productivity of rural agriculture; the Integrated Food Security Strategy (IFSS) advocates investment “in productivity enhancing environmentally sustainable technologies for the agriculture and agro-processing sector, targeting small scale producers” (Department of Agriculture, 2002, Pg 17 and 18). The control of farmland by local communities has proved to be a very real safeguard against extreme poverty (MDG 2010) with household often producing 50% of their dietary requirements from small scale food gardens and where markets can be created, financial benefits as well (Kruger, 2007). The application of large scale farming practices in rural areas is dependent on institutional investment, support and capacity building (CRDP, 2009b). By contrast, “smallholder agriculture is labour-intensive, uses few external inputs and is potentially productive” (Kruger, 2007, Pg 13). Conservation Agriculture, which amalgamates permaculture, traditional agriculture and ecosystem conservation (African Conservation Trust, 2012), has been readily accepted by small scale rural farmers. It may, then, produce more tangible benefits.

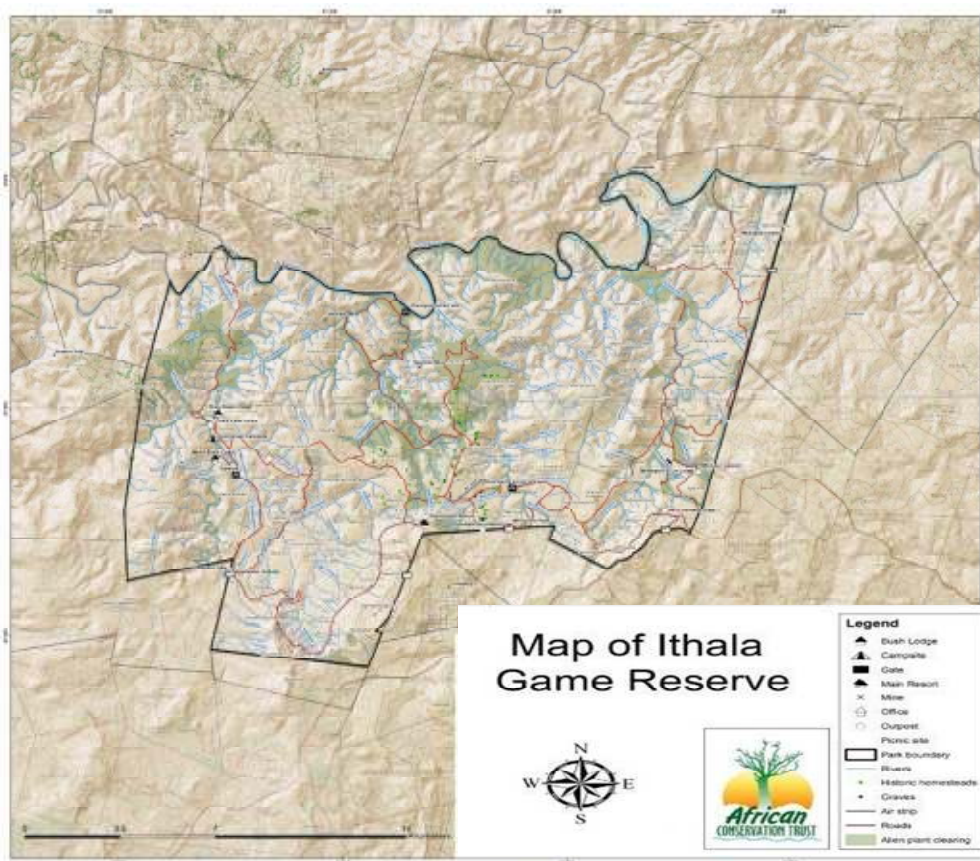
Case studies in South Africa, as well as many parts of the developing world, are indicating that a fresh approach to community based environmental management is required (Berkes, 2004). The knowledge gap has two interrelated components relating to the fields of protected area management (in relation to the delivery of ecosystem services) and socio-economic sustainability (in relation to sustainable farming practices, cultural heritage and land tenure). These knowledge gaps create three needs:

- Firstly, a new approach to integrating sustainable communities and biodiversity conservation is needed. In other words “mainstreaming and enhancing biodiversity friendly production landscapes that are well planned” (Dept Environmental Affairs, 2010, Pg 42).
- Secondly, the new approach must be replicable model for rural communities across South Africa
- Thirdly, the integration of human sustainability and biodiversity conservation needs to be successfully embedded across South Africa’s laws/policies pertaining to socio-economic sustainability and environmental protection? Currently “the value of biodiversity and ecosystems are not fully understood or valued within the South African economic institutions” and this situation manifests itself with a “lack of incentives to promote sustainable use of natural resources” (Dept Environmental Affairs, 2010, Pg 42 and 45 respectively).

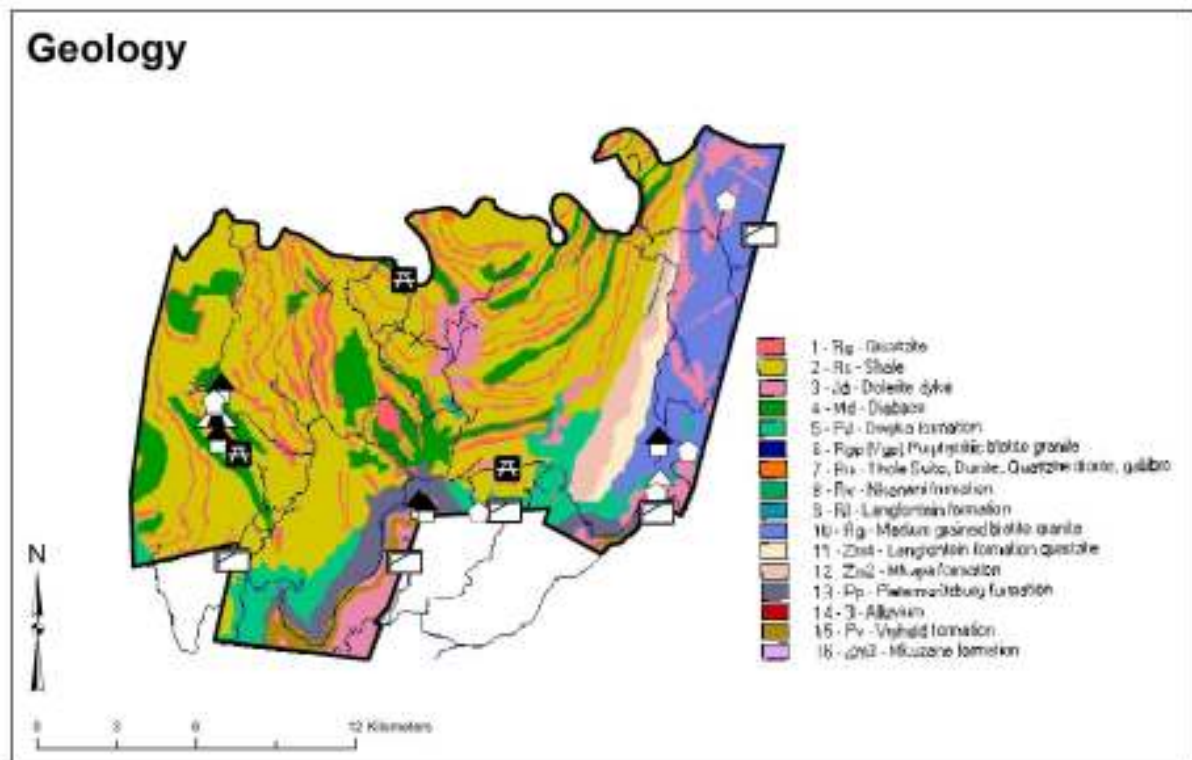
Activities Conducted within the CEPF Small Grant

1. Meeting with Ithala Park Management on the 23rd January, 11th November and the 19th of December 2013.
2. Five field trips between January and December
3. Meetings with Regional and District Ecologists around strategic direction for Greater Ithala Complex - Jan 2013.
4. ACT strategic meeting 4-8 Feb 2013 – Prioritization of Ithala and the sourcing of funds for the “sustainable communities” concept.
5. Data gathering Ithala Field Staff offices: reports and GIS data. 26-27 Feb 2013
6. Meeting with WWF re Ithala expansion possibilities and Black Rhino Range Expansion - 27-28 Feb 2013.
7. March- April 2013 Existing METT analysis
8. GIS – working map compilation – Mar- Apr 2013
9. Ithala mist belt grassland field trip and workshop with Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife – 22-25 Apr 2013.
10. Desk top review Mar - Oct 2013 – compiled within a report containing a literature review, the presentation of geographical information and summaries of stakeholder interactions, to be utilised in the formation of the long term plan or strategy that results in the community supported protection of critical biodiversity (the literature review and geographical information and the long term plan this document is contained within this document)
11. Initial engagement with stakeholders – This involved gaining information from Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife community conservation staff and establishing contact with Nkosi Buthelezi (Chairperson of the Ithala Game Reserve Co-Management Committee).
12. An examination of the Elephant Excursion Plan,

Geographical Information



Geology



4. If there is an interrelationship between land use planning, ecosystems approach, habitat protection and species conservation, can this be reflected in subsequent project design?

Aims and Objectives of the an Expanded Ithala Complex Project

The aim of this project is to seek a replicable means of attaining social, environmental and economic sustainability in the Greater Ithala Complex.

The objectives of the project are:

1. Identify the critical biodiversity components.
2. To investigate the feasibility of integrating social, economic and environmental factors into land-use planning and economic development of the area. In other words, the concept of society and the environment as separate entities is relinquished in favour of an holistic approach.
3. Introduce the above mentioned approach to communities in a non-prescriptive and highly participative manner. The purpose of this intention is to have the plan for sustainability being co-created by the communities, facilitators and expertise (requested by the communities).
4. To research the environmental values of the area such that they can be transferred into a means of contributing to the economic sustainability of the local communities – in other word investigating mechanisms for the payment of ecosystem services (PES).
5. To identify the habitat richness of the Greater Ithala Complex in terms of the northern extremity of mist belt grassland, the altitudinal range within IGR and the appropriateness of rhino and elephant expansion possibilities.
6. To combine points 1, 4 and 5 into an expanded protected area network that includes sections of mist belt grassland in the south and rhino and elephant habitat in the north.
7. To introduce conservation agriculture practices outside the protected area that aids in the conservation of grasslands and wetlands (investigate green economy)

Towards a Plan for the Greater Ithala Complex

The failure of community conservation initiatives is commonly related to community members being cosmetically included in a process that has externally driven ulterior motives. Community conservation that does not contribute to the holistic well being of the community members cannot possible receive enduring support. This necessitates a revised methodology that contextualizes the value of the environment through integrated land use planning. A South African perspective on the green economy is required (Dept Environmental Affairs, 2010) and this needs to be collaboratively developed; a means of accomplishing this to develop a case study as an evolving “work-in-progress” research project. A project seeking a replicable means of attaining social, environmental and economic sustainability in the Greater Ithala Complex, will involve a mix of social, agricultural and environmental components. If the aim of the research is to find a new way of approaching community conservation, sustainable agriculture and localized economic security, then the process will have to be highly participative. This points to the application of action research where “a group of people identify a problem, do something to resolve it, see how successful their efforts were,

and if not satisfied, try again” (O’Brian, 1998, Pg 3) The aim of the research should be to synergistically utilise and apply the following multiple disciplines into coordinated goals:

- cohesively create socio-economic independence of rural communities in an environmentally conscious manner,
- addresses food security in a manner that does not unduly tax water resources, degrade soil or provide footholds for invasive species,
- identify and allocate environmentally critical areas for formal protection.
- Ensure economic sustainability through:
 - Conservation agriculture increasing yields,
 - Protection of land that provides locally utilized ecosystem services
 - Identification of nationally or internationally significant ecosystem services and developing mechanisms for payment for those ecosystem services: green jobs, developed world tax, etc.
 - Local resource utilization, including hunting.
 - A realistic projection of tourism income to local communities.

The project aims to protect landscapes which have high biodiversity value and are significant to local communities for the delivery of ecosystem services. The African Conservation Trust intends to accomplish this aim through the implementation of a methodology that has four components:

1. The community’s social needs, their agricultural needs, their economic conditions and practices, as well as the landscape in which they live, are viewed as an inseparable entity. So protected areas form part of the community’s essential social and economic fabric and not merely land from which they are excluded.
2. A stakeholder communication network will be established in such a way that the local community’s legitimate land tenure and knowledge is recognized and respected by all the external advisory structures. A “plan” for an area, which could include social sustainability components, agricultural components and the identification of land to be protected for the delivery of ecosystem services, must grow out of the network.
3. Once the community has utilized the communication network to develop a strategy, both formal and informal governance structures can be used to embed the integrated enviro-agri-socio-economic strategies. The primary motivation behind the utilization of informal governance structures is that the formal structures are stretched beyond their capabilities whereas the informal ones retain the capacity to grow and remain dynamic to maintain a functioning society; they work where the formal structures are failing.
4. The African Conservation Trust’s “Applied Ecology Unit” has developed an innovative approach to project implementation. This involves the formation of a “Catalytic Implementation Team” consisting of ecological, agricultural and social experts (with a specific emphasis on working with disenfranchised communities). If the project outcome is to be sustainable (i.e. an economically viable community structure with a land use plan that includes an expanded protected area network) then the external interventions should be temporary. Because the project interventions will be selected by the stakeholders, through the communication network, the project implementation team effectively has a catalytic function where they enable the stakeholders’ desired outcome of social and environmental sustainability.

This social and environmental sustainability are inextricably linked and the project will be directed to capitalize on that reality; social sustainability relies on the delivery of ecosystem services; those services require protective land management policies and practices.

Significance of an Expanded Ithala Complex Project

There is a history of failed community driven projects pertaining to agriculture and community based conservation and yet the costs of failure are too high; for there to be anything other than a catastrophic future, communities must become sustainable, critical ecosystems must be protected and humanity's environmental footprint must be reduced (Liniger *et al*, 2011, UNEP, 2012, Department of Environmental Affairs, 2010). This work is turning the previously employed methodologies upside down by focussing its initial emphasis on building relationships with local communities through the establishment of communication networks and then utilizing the communication networks to create a plan; community ownership of the plan is inherent because the communities will have created it. This research represents an innovative approach to the significant and unsolved problem of rural sustainability and community based biodiversity conservation.

Expected Outcomes, Results and Contributions of an Expanded Ithala Complex Project

- The identification of community needs through a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and the establishment of a stakeholder communication network.
- An assessment of the local communities' reliance on the landscape for ecosystem services.
- The identification of ecosystem services that may be significant on a broader scale (national or global).
- The identification of biodiversity priorities at a species level (black rhino, wild dog, elephant and white rhino) and landscape level (wetlands, mist belt grasslands and riverine systems)
- The identification and allocation of land for conservation-based land use that will address social and biodiversity objectives.
- The initiation of a stewardship process for the areas identified for conservation based land uses.
- The identification and implementation of processes outside protected area that will improve landscape management and maintain the delivery of ecosystem services. Publicizing these could mobilize municipal and government support for responsible land management, for example government sponsored alien plant removal programs.
- The identification and utilization of existing laws, regulations, policies and customs to improve landscape management, for example, the Biodiversity Act, the Elephant Norms and Standards, the National Water Act, the municipal Integrated Development Plan, the Traditional Health Practitioner's Bill.
- The leverage of additional resources and funding to meet social and biodiversity objectives identified within the project.

Outcomes of the Small Grant Project and how the investigations could be expanded or directed into a follow-on larger Ithala project

1. An examination of management priorities within proclamation documents, management plans and Ithala Game Reserve Co-Management Committee minutes reveals that rhino protection, elephant range expansion, community involvement and benefit, mistbelt grassland protection (within and outside the protected area) will be the drivers behind future planning in Ithala.
2. METT analysis – Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife carries out annual an METT analysis using a modified and expanded Template. These EKZN METT scores could b used but for comparison, a METT analysis was carried out using the WWF/World Bank template. The Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife total score was 77 whilst the world bank score was 48. This denotes differences in the systems and not different accuracies of the two systems. The whole score sheets are available on request.
3. Field trips were conducted as follows
 - a. 23-25 January
 - b. 22-25 April
 - c. 9-11 July
 - d. 31 July – 2 August
 - e. 8-10 November

These were to: conduct inspections prior to METT analysis; partake in mistbalt grassland field trip; review park zonation; examine ecotourism facilities and opportunities; examine land-use practice north of the Pongola River; participate in game census.

4. Ecosystem services – local, provincial, global – An initial review of ecosystem services information that had been collected on Ithala, revealed two things:
 - a. The information that was collected pertained to services that had local significance.
 - b. The evolution of thinking on ecosystem services is likely to make the information and the manner in which it was collected obsolete.

The thinking around ecosystem services has to involve the concept of who and at what level will the value of ecosystem services be recognised; in other words, ecosystem services must be related to the payment of ecosystem services (see below).

5. PES – Investigation of the conversion of a numerical system into a fiscal one was investigated, most notably an examination of case studies involving different applications of REDD. For PES to work, there must be a willing payer and desk top investigations revealed that this was where most PES programs ran into trouble. Possibly the most interesting outcome of this project has been the idea of creating a system of PES based on cementing social, cultural, economic links between potential users of ecosystem services. A subsequent project will investigate social systems and economic systems which could provide fertile ground for reducing human/wildlife conflict and building sustainable communities around an expanded Ithala; this is being included as a core component of a CEPF large grant application.
6. “Plant Reintroduction and Supplementation Project” as a mechanism to conserve priority plant species from the mist belt grassland, where samples of priority species

are relocated to pre-identified refugia within the area. This plan is to be investigated further and if found valuable, included within subsequent park management plans.

7. Putting Ithala “on the map” – Ideas to follow up with in a subsequent project:
 - a. Stellenbosch University – Sustainability Institute
 - b. Foundation for Natural Leadership – Holland - dealing with emerging ecological economics beyond perpetual growth models and linking developed world people with developing world landscapes
 - c. Gaia Foundation – UK – Looking at developing world food security through empowering small scale farmers and shifting perception at the people/land interface.
 - d. Kenchaan Foundation – Holland – Currently involved in environmental projects around the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park – their connections could be utilised to secure social and economic links between developing and developed communities.

An objective of the follow-on projects will be to create connections with the above mentioned bodies such that they become part of an enlarged “Greater Ithala”. Exchanges that flow out of these connections could form the basis of a PES plan that is based on an expanded community and not “selling services”. This idea needs to be expanded!

8. Funding opportunities. Currently, the Humane Society International is funding the elephant immunocontraception program in Ithala. On the 8th July a meeting was set up with HSI Conservation Director to ascertain the possibility of extending the support to include range expansion; after an initial positive response, HSI told us (in August 2013) that they could not offer any more support because of the insecurity and amount of funding involved. Part of a subsequent project should be to create a platform whereby HSI could be included as a partner in the range expansion component of Ithala.
9. In November 2013, through Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife an invitation was received for ACT to present its plan to the Ithala Game Reserve Co-Management Committee chaired by Nkosi Buthelezi. Nkosi Buthelezi has a very strong leadership role in the region and securing this opportunity is seen as the gateway to further interactions with communities at both a leadership and grass-roots level. The presentation will be made in 2014. Beyond this, discussions with community conservation officers has confirmed that there is considerable animosity between certain traditional leaders and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife; this is what necessitated the strategy of embarking on a cautious approach, taking a step backwards on the SICCP plans and utilising the necessity of the Elephant Excursion Plan to gain traction with neighbouring communities.
10. On the 11th November a meeting was held with Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife park management and the District Ecologist in which three concepts were discussed and adopted as a way forward:
 - a. The Elephant Excursion Plan would be modified to form the new point of contact with communities for elephant range expansion. It was understood that this process would need to be approved by the Conservation and Scientific Services sections of Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife culminating with approval from the Executive and CEO. Then it could be introduced to the communities

through the Ithala Game Reserve Co-Management Committee; this process would need to be included within the activities of a subsequent plan.

- b. The subsequent plan would be focussed on mobilizing economic support for the Greater Ithala Complex through the creation of partnerships with other bodies. The idea would be to create an expanded “Ithala Community” that would include users of ecosystem services and other interest groups; this idea is an innovative approach that potentially re-frames PES to gain traction where previous attempts have failed.
 - c. The time line for utilising the Elephant Excursion Plan and the building of an expanded “Ithala Community” would be dictated by the review of the Park Management Plan, i.e. five years. But initial agreement from key stakeholder should be gained within the timeframe of the subsequent Large Grant project.
11. On the 22 November the CEPF Large Grant Proposal was submitted.
 12. On the 19th December a meeting was held with Ithala park management and senior conservation staff to start the approval process for the expanded elephant excursion plan. At this meeting we were given approval to make a presentation to the Executive via the COO. This would be set up for early 2014.

Paul Cryer

23 December 2013

Appendices

1. Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife METT analysis 2013
2. WWF/World Bank METT Analysis 2013
3. Report on the Ithala mist belt grassland field trip and workshop

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