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The Relationship Between the Agenda of Conservation Authorities and Community Development in Rural Areas of South Africa

Abstract. This paper explores the relationship between the mandate of conservation authorities and the agenda of community development in rural areas and provides recommendations on how to improve the status quo. The analysis is based on qualitative data collected during five interviews with uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park's (UDP) community liaison officers and traditional leaders of the communities surrounding the UDP. The results reveal disjointed coordination between the conservation authority and the surrounding communities regarding development. Problems include funding constraints, extreme poverty levels, poor communication, and communities' overreliance on the UDP for material benefits. The authors provide recommendations on how to promote community-based tourism that relies on sustainability practices and argue that development activities cannot be effective without close cooperation between conservation authorities and communities.

Keywords: community development, rural tourism, community-based tourism, sustainable tourism development, uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park

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1. Introduction

Conservancies worldwide play a crucial role in protecting natural heritage and promoting biodiversity. In South Africa, conservancies, which take the form of national parks, are managed by the South African National Parks (SANParks), a public entity responsible for conserving the country's protected areas and natural resources (SANParks, 2016). The focus of conservancies has been to preserve wildlife within their boundaries. Unfortunately, national parks have repeatedly

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failed to attain their objectives by following this one-sided approach. Recently, parks have started to build positive and equitable relationships with neighbouring communities as a means of improving the effectiveness of their conservation efforts and foster community development (Anthony, 2007; Saayman and Saayman, 2010). Nonetheless, communities surrounding South African national parks remain underdeveloped and impoverished, lack access to basic services like running water, electricity, health care and education, despite their proximity to parks that generate revenues from tourism (Mnisi and Ramoroka, 2020).

Little research has focused on how conservation authorities and communities can partner to facilitate community development. This study aims to contribute to the literature on sustainable practices that conservation authorities can pursue to develop communities surrounding national parks and on the role communities can play in their own development. The objectives of this article are to (1) provide insights into existing links between national parks and surrounding communities; (2) identify roles that conservancies and communities could play in community development; (3) analyse the shortcomings of present strategies and provide recommendations on how existing approaches could be improved. The article reports results of a qualitative study involving five interviews: two with community liaison officers of the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park (UDP) and 3 with traditional leaders of selected communities.

2. Literature Review

National parks are the largest category of protected areas, both globally and in Africa (Muhumuza and Balkwill, 2013). National parks in South Africa, established through the 1926 National Parks Act, were created to (1) protect the ecological integrity of one or more ecosystems for present and future generations; (2) exclude exploitation or occupation detrimental to the purposes of designation of the area; and (3) provide a foundation for spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational, and visitor opportunities, all of which must be environmentally and culturally compatible (Chape et al., 2003). Whereas over 50% of global protected areas and national parks are located on indigenous land, over 85% of national parks in Africa have been established on rural land previously collectively owned by local communities (Zeppel, 2009). Consequently, African national parks are surrounded by communities whose wellbeing is often overlooked and whose development is seldom on a par with developments taking place in national parks.

National parks play a vital role in community development in South Africa

(Zeppel, 2012). 21 national parks and a diverse range of ecosystems in South Africa provide numerous opportunities for economic development, environmental education, cultural preservation, health and well-being, community engagement, conservation of biodiversity, and scientific research (Saayman and Saayman, 2010; Strickland-Munro, Moore & Freitag-Ronaldson, 2010; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2014). The tourism industry associated with these parks generates considerable revenues for local businesses, which provide domestic and international tourists with lodging, food, and other tourism-related services, in addition to creating employment opportunities for members of local communities.

In 2018, tourism in South Africa accounted for 1.5 million jobs and contributed USD 24.1 billion to the country's economy, i.e. 8.6% of the GDP (WTTC, 2019). It should be emphasised that most of this contribution, as is the case in other African countries, is generated by wildlife and nature-based tourism (Buckley and Mossaz, 2018; Duim, Lamers & Wijk, 2014; Odeniran, Ademola & Jegede, 2018) in national parks located in rural areas inhabited by local communities.

Through educational programs for visitors, schools, and local communities, by promoting environmental awareness, sustainable practices, and conservation of natural resources, these parks help to support conservation efforts to foster community development (Novelli and Scarth, 2007; Gilg, 2010; Muhumuza and Balkwill, 2013). National parks also provide opportunities for outdoor recreation, enabling visitors to connect with nature by hiking, bird watching, and game viewing, offering opportunities for physical activity and stress reduction (Li et al., 2021).

National parks in South Africa also play a vital role in the preservation of culture as they protect cultural resources, such as rock art sites, historic buildings, and cultural landscapes that are significant to the identity of local communities (Chikodzi et al., 2022). Additionally, visitors can learn about the history and culture of the communities around the parks. Revenues generated by the parks can be used to finance public facilities and infrastructure in local communities. Finally, parks can foster civic pride and involvement, and facilitate cultural exchange between guests and hosts (such as learning of new languages) (Gursoy and Nunkoo, 2019; Tovar and Lockwood, 2008).

The conservation of biodiversity is also beneficial for community development. As Novelli and Scarth (2007) point out, the protection of natural resources, such as wildlife, plants, and ecosystems, is critical for the provision of ecosystem services such as water purification and climate regulation. Ecosystems with more biodiversity are more resilient, which is essential for the provision of goods and services that support human well-being. Finally, by maintaining biodiversity it is easier to preserve cultural resources that are dependent on natural resources, such as traditional medicines and spiritual beliefs.

Referring to the problematic link between national parks and their surrounding communities, Yang et al. (2021) argue that it is only through effective and successful community management that national parks can achieve their conservation goals. According to Muhumuza and Balkwill (2013), national parks have taken two approaches in their conservation efforts. One is the preservation approach and the other is community-based approach to conservation. The preservation approach, also known as the 'fines and fences' approach, was dominant until the 1980s. It prohibits the use of natural resources other than tourism within the park. The community-based approach to conservation, which has been recognised as a better alternative at the regional and international level, consists in allowing neighbouring communities to benefit substantially from the parks (Muhumuza and Balkwill, 2013).

In recent years the latter approach has been more prevalent as part of efforts to overcome the problems caused by the exclusion of human activity from the parks (King, 2010; Reindrawati, Rhama & Hisan, 2022; Shackleton et al., 2007). Since livelihoods of communities depend on natural resources such as forests, land, and water, Imanishimwe (2022) believes communities and park stakeholders need to collaborate in order to develop a joint approach that combines biodiversity conservation with human wellbeing.

Despite the implementation of various strategies and efforts to protect biodiversity and use it responsibly, challenges such as habitat loss, climate change, pollution, unsustainable resource use, and invasive alien species have exacerbated (Butchart et al., 2010; Vodouhè et al., 2010; Reindrawati, Rhama & Hisan, 2022). In addition, many authors have stressed that local communities surrounding conservation areas continue to derive comparatively few benefits from tourism (Giampiccoli and Saayman (2018), Giampiccoli, Saayman & Jugmohan (2015), Mowforth and Munt (2016), Palmer and Chuamuangphan (2018)). This situation is often perpetuated by conflicts between communities and conservation authorities.

According to Yang et al. (2021), these conflicts can be attributed to four main causes: land issues, ecological conservation policy, development and utilisation, and poor mechanisms of revenue distribution. Land conflicts arise when communities are denied access to land which originally was theirs to use. Some ecological conservation policies restrict subsistence agricultural practices, such as hunting, fishing, herb harvesting, and firewood collection. The development and utilisation of a national park can lead to conflict when community members experience various negative impacts because of increased tourism, such lifestyles and ideas brought by visiting tourists (such as use of drugs and excessive alcohol consumption), growing crime and social ills, loss of traditional values and culture, and increased cost of living as a result of prices driven up by tourism (Gursoy and Nunkoo, 2019; Tovar

and Lockwood, 2008). Finally, conflicts arise when communities do not receive meaningful and tangible benefits from tourism, yet they bear the costs of conservation (mostly when their crops and livestock are destroyed by wildlife).

In order to enable the development of communities located around conservation it is necessary to taken into account several critical factors (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2014; Zeppel, 2012). These factors include attitudes, the level of trust, and activity interference. Communities' attitudes towards conservation areas and authorities are influenced by ecological benefits, the legality of the park's existence and governance, social influence, and the park management's dealings with the community (Abukari and Mwalyosi, 2018). When these attitudes are positive, communities are more likely to support park activities and there are fewer conflicts. When attitudes are generally negative, trust is at its minimum and conflicts prevail. Availability of resources, interactions between the park management and communities, employment opportunities plus education and awareness campaigns have been found to have a positive effect on community attitudes (Belkayali and Kesimoğlu, 2015).

Since the success of conservation efforts largely depends on the level of trust in relations between the park management and communities, transparency and effective communication are critical to foster confidence among parties involved (Abukari and Mwalyosi, 2018; Yang et al., 2021). Belkayali and Kesimoğlu (2015) also emphasise the importance of efficient communication between communities and national park authorities, especially regarding interference factors. These refer to changes in the environment caused by human activities, such as poaching, logging, unsustainable agricultural practices, and collection of non-forest products either by residents or tourists (Abukari and Mwalyosi, 2018; Reindrawati, Rhama & Hisan, 2022). It is therefore necessary to create zones where particular human activities and land use patterns are allowed and prohibited so that community development can be aligned with ecological conservation (Yang et al., 2021; Imanishimwe, 2022).

3. Method

This study concerns communities surrounding the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park (UDP) (formerly Natal National Park, Royal Natal National Park, and Natal Drakensberg Park), in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province of South Africa. Figure 1 below shows a map of the park. The UDP was chosen for its status as a UNESCO world heritage site and its prominence in attracting tourism in the area. The study focuses on communities surrounding the northern and central sections of the

UDP, which offer the most accommodation possibilities in the UDP. Much of the rural land surrounding the UDP is owned by the Zulu king through the Ingonyama Trust, whose mandate is to hold the land on behalf of the Zulu Kingdom for the “benefit, material welfare, and social well-being of the members of the tribes and communities living on the land” (Ingonyama-Trust, 2019).



Figure 1: A map of uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park
Source: Ezemvelo-KZN-Wildlife (2018)

The main rest camps in the vicinity are Royal Natal, Cathedral Peak, and Injusuthi. The focus on the northern and central parts of the park is deliberate as they

receive the most tourism activity. At 3,482 metres above sea level and measuring 243 thousand hectares, the Drakensberg, “the Dragon Mountains” in Afrikaans and Dutch, is the highest mountain range in Southern Africa (DAC, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). While the UDP itself is a world heritage site, rural communities that surround it are not dissimilar to other rural areas in South Africa and the results of the study are likely to be applicable to other areas in Southern Africa.

Data for analysis were collected in December 2021 during 5 in-depth interviews: two with UDP community liaison officers (CLOs) for the selected parks and three with community traditional leaders (CTLs) of the selected communities (who are custodians of the land on behalf of the King of the Zulu Kingdom). The purpose of the interviews was to collect information about the role played by the respondents (CLOs and CTLs) in supporting the communities’ development and to identify their challenges and aspirations. All interviews were recorded and in a few cases the researchers used the help of an interpreter. The recordings were transcribed, organised and coded to enable thematic analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Respondents’ Roles, Mandate, and Challenges

The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between the UDP and the selected communities. The CLOs were asked to explain their mandate and roles within their communities and share their views on whether the communities were satisfied with their activities. According to one CLO, the UDP has 15 management units (camps), which are divided into three areas of jurisdiction (Northern, Central, and Southern) that CLOs are supposed to oversee.

Both CLOs had been with KZN Wildlife for 13 years. Their tasks mainly include managing the wildlife area located outside the park, which is in direct contact with the communities. Their mandate involves engaging with the community and its various stakeholders (such as the CTLs, schools, different municipalities, commercial farmers, other conservation agencies and NGOs like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF)) in order to manage nature outside of the park.

CLOs are also tasked with managing and facilitating the Community Levy Fund, a fund established by the UDP for the purpose of distributing some of the revenue from tourism to the communities. CLOs inform the communities of the Fund’s availability, requirements, and the application process. Below are excerpts of the interviews concerning questions asked in this regard.

I have been a CLO for three years, but I have been with KZN Wildlife for a total of 13 years. I used to be a Reserve Manager for 10 years before assuming this role. My main duty is to ensure that the relationship between the communities adjacent to the reserve is good. My duty is to engage with the communities through environmental education and awareness. If there are maybe issues where the communities are not happy, for example, when the communities have got a problem of damage-causing animals, they do consult me, and I consult the relevant District Conservation Officers to go and do an inspection. Sometimes I also go with them and advise the community accordingly of what they should do to try and stop the problem.

I have been into this job since 2007 [13 years]. My job entails environmental awareness, engaging with different stakeholders like traditional chiefs, schools, commercial farmers, different district municipalities, other departments who are doing the same job as mine, other NGOs like WWF and so on. We work together to manage nature, especially outside the park. The aim of KZN Wildlife is also to manage the outside of the park because what happens there affects what happens inside the park. I also facilitate the Community Levy Fund in terms of application access to the communities.

As can be seen from the above quotes, the UDP views the communities as an important part of the park, which needs to be taken into consideration for the benefit of conservation. Initiatives such as the Community Levy Fund are an attempt to distribute tourism revenues in the community.

CTLs are custodians of the land and creators and enforcers of their customary laws. As such, they work directly with various government departments and employees, such as the police, social workers, the local municipality, and magistrates. They are also responsible for community development initiatives that empower their people. They also resolve conflicts (such as land and marital disputes) in their communities. The following extracts provide additional details:

We assist people to resolve conflicts. We make sure that we communicate with the police, assist the police with information if we have information. If there is a minor dispute like dispute of land and marriages, we assist people customarily in terms of customary law. We also participate in the municipality. We also hold Imbizos, which are community meetings where we make by-laws. We are social workers, we are magistrates, we are just everything.

We play a vital role in the community. We play the role of SAPS [South African Police Service] in ensuring peace and apprehending crime perpetrators. We are also responsible for land allocation to our people. We are also the face of government in the communities.

I make sure that there are projects to empower the community, like projects to make the road and build a lodge, for example, so that people will have something on their tables.

The CTLs were also asked about challenges they encountered in the execution of their mandate. All of them mentioned the lack of support from the government (administrative and financial). Another challenge was people's discontentment, particularly those fined with stiff penalties for violating traditional laws. The following excerpts provide more details:

The government is not recognising us as Traditional Leaders and do not support us financially. For example, the traditional council of 25 people which I lead does not get anything or even a stipend from government. They don't really assist us. That is the main challenge that we have.

Perpetrators of crime do not like us especially when we are impartial in resolving conflicts. Most of them expect us to take side which we do not. In one case an Induna¹ was killed when the aggrieved parties didn't agree with his verdict.

It follows from the above that the mandates of CLOS and CTLs are to serve the communities they represent. CLOS are the face of the UDP among the communities they serve and act as the bridge between the park and the communities. While CLOS are employees of the UDP, they represent interests of the communities in the UDP and try to win the communities' support for the park's conservation efforts. As custodians of the land and the culture, CTLs influence community members with their lifestyles. It can therefore be concluded that both CTLs and CLOS are instrumental in the development of tourism.

4.2. Engagement Channels Between the Park and the Communities

The UDP contacts the communities through the CTLs and their *Indunas*¹ and individual community members do not have direct access to the UDP management or CLOS unless they go through the Indunas and the CTLs. Below is an extract of the interview which illustrates this point.

The Chiefs are our main contacts in terms of the community because the Chiefs are the leaders. We also work directly with the Indunas who are Chief's assistants in charge of

¹ Indunas, also known as a chief's assistants, are responsible for sub-communities that fall under the leadership of the CTL and are respected and valued elders from the community that form part of the traditional council.

valleys that fall under the Chief's territory. If we go to the Chiefs and tell them whatever we need to do, it goes to the Indunas to reach the whole community. The Indunas also have access to contact the UDP management even without my consent if there is an issue, but the community cannot just go and contact the reserve manager without having the support of the Induna or the Chief.

From the above it follows that the existing communication channels are bureaucratic and may not be always effective. The failure of communities to experience more benefits from the UDP and tourism could therefore result from the fact that opportunities associated with the existence of UDP and tourism are poorly communicated.

4.3. Satisfaction Levels with the Role of the UDP in Community Development

The CLOS were not satisfied with the UDP's support for neighbourhood community development. While they believed that although the UDP was doing everything it could to support the communities, they perceived their efforts as ineffective owing to the lack of resources, the size of villages, and the high rates of poverty. One example of a development initiative mentioned by the CLOS was employment of locals, particularly with regard to occupations in the park that do not require special skills.

There is not that much the Park is doing for the community.

I wouldn't say that I am satisfied but what I can say is that Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife is doing all that they can do to support the community ... It's just that because the community is so huge and the neighbouring communities are such a poor community, you'll find that whatever role that we will try to play it becomes a drop in the ocean because of the state of poverty in the area.

Given that the communities under study are exposed to extremely high levels of poverty, from the perspectives of the CLOS, the UDP's efforts to foster community development were less likely to be evident. This view is shared by many community members, who consider the park's influence on their socioeconomic situation to be minimal.

All CTLs were critical of the limited UDP's contribution to the growth of their communities, believing that the UDP was capable of doing much more. For example, the Royal Natal Hotel², which used to employ 250 members of the com-

² In 1947 the Hotel hosted the British Royal Family during a State visit, which earned the Park and the Hotel the right to be called the Royal Natal National Park and Royal Natal National Park Hotel. The hotel is owned by the Natal Parks Board, who leased it to private operators.

munity, was shut down in 2002. According to the interviewed CTLs, the UDP largely prefers to hire people from other towns and provinces rather than similarly qualified locals. One of the reasons for their dissatisfaction with the UDP's involvement in the development of communities is structural: most development levies raised by the UDP and intended to be used directly by the communities are transferred to the Ingonyama Trust, which governs the UDP, but owing to the lack of transparency, this money seldom reaches the intended recipients. The following comments illustrate the problem.

There are some problems. As far as I can say, nothing is happening in terms of assistance from the UDP.

We are not satisfied with how UDP operates... they closed the Royal Natal Hotel that used to employ 250 people from our community...now there are a lot of young people who have matric and diplomas but are unemployed. Most of these young people are now resorting to substance abuse.

No. When there are job opportunities at the park, people from around here in the community are not involved. Its people from outside the community... who get those opportunities. Some of them are managers today but they are not from our community.

As can be seen, the UDP's efforts fall short of what is required to improve the communities' situation. The fact that management activities are conducted by the Trust makes it more difficult for the UDP to communicate with the community directly.

5. Discussion

Insights from the interviews indicate that the communities seldom benefit from the existence of the national park in their vicinity. While some authors like Saayman and Saayman (2010), Strickland-Munro, Moore & Freitag-Ronaldson (2010) and Rogerson and Rogerson (2014) argue that national parks provide a number of benefits to local communities, such additional revenue and opportunities for employment, there is little evidence of this happening in the communities analysed in the study. Employment opportunities are limited and when they do appear, members of the local communities are often overlooked in favour of candidates from other cities and provinces. While it can be argued that other benefits such as environmental education, cultural preservation, community engagement, and

conservation of biodiversity exist, they are all intangible. As long as the revenues from the park are not fairly shared with the communities, their livelihoods cannot really be improved.

Since the UDP mostly follows the so called preservation or ‘fines and fences’ approach (cf. Muhumuza and Balkwill, 2013), the locals’ use of natural resources within the park is largely restricted. This means that members of the local community are not allowed to undertake any activities unrelated to tourism in the park and their traditional conservation ideas are not taken into account. This approach differs greatly from the idea of multi-disciplinary collaboration between communities and stakeholders suggested by Imanishimwe (2022), which aims to combine conservation activities with efforts to improve the communities’ wellbeing.

This situation gives rise to conflicts between the conservation authority and the communities. In addition to restrictions on the use of park resources, the communities derive few financial benefits from tourism in the park (Yang et al., 2021); it is therefore not surprising that they are disappointed with the status quo and feel that the national park could do more. It is worth noting at this point that according to park authorities, their efforts are only perceived as insignificant because of extreme levels of poverty in the communities. However, as the interviews indicated, the situation was, to a large extent, due to ineffective and bureaucratic communication between the national park and the communities, which takes place via community leaders. The result is a lack of transparency, which Yang et al. (2021) considers crucial for building trust and getting the communities more concerned about the conservation areas.

6. Recommendations

The authors recommend setting up community-based tourism structures within these rural communities, which will enable them not only to lobby for their welfare but also negotiate a meaningful stake, participate in tourism activities within the park and have a greater share in revenues from tourism. This change of approach to conservation should enable the communities to obtain controlled access to the park’s natural resources, which they have long relied on to engage in their traditional activities such as fishing, hunting, wood collection, and herb harvesting. Given that national parks are located on land that communities used to collectively own, land tenure rights on the current land communities occupy could be guaranteed or improved upon.

Another recommendation concerns communication between parks and communities, which should become more open and direct to ensure transparency and trust building. In addition, conservation authorities ought to prioritise local communities when it comes to employment, business, product or service supply opportunities that arise in national parks. Finally, conservation authorities should enact policies that encourage greater involvement of local communities in conservation by implementing some of their traditional mechanisms that have proved effective.

7. Conclusion

This study has revealed the roles, aspirations, challenges, and shortcomings of national parks in their conservation mandate with regard to the development of surrounding communities. While there are other studies that have highlighted this problem, this particular study focuses on poor rural communities surrounding national parks and provides perspectives of the conservation authorities on the hand and the communities as represented by their leaders on the other. While national parks in general contribute to the socio-economic situation of countries at large and regions in particular, their contribution is hardly felt by the impoverished rural communities closest to them. This generates frequent conflicts over restrictive conservation policies and poor benefit sharing mechanisms; moreover, because of poor communication strategies the communities are not aware of development and empowerment schemes that might be available.

The study fills a knowledge gap left by previous studies on the relationship between the conservation mandate and community development, particularly in rural impoverished communities surrounding national parks. The article also contributes to the literature on different perspectives that conservation authorities and community leaders have regarding roles, mandates, aspirations, and challenges associated with biodiversity conservation and community development. The authors argue that these two perspective are not necessarily mutually exclusive provided that the recommendations made in this article are taken into account by all stakeholders.

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Związek między polityką parków narodowych a rozwojem sąsiadujących z parkami społeczności lokalnych w Republice Południowej Afryki

Streszczenie. Artykuł analizuje związki między działaniami na rzecz ochrony przyrody prowadzonymi przez parki narodowe a rozwojem sąsiadujących z parkami wiejskich społeczności lokalnych. Analiza opiera się na danych jakościowych zebranych podczas pięciu wywiadów z osobami pełniącymi funkcję łączników między władzami parku uKhahlamba Drakensberg (UDP) a społecznościami lokalnymi oraz z tradycyjnymi liderami społeczności żyjących na terenach wokół parku. Wypowiedzi respondentów świadczą o braku koordynacji działań w zakresie rozwoju między organami odpowiedzialnymi za ochronę przyrody a społecznościami. Problemy te wynikają z ograniczeń finansowych, skrajnego ubóstwa, które dotyka wiele społeczności, niedostatecznej komunikacji i zbyt dużego uzależnienia społeczności od administracji UDP, jeżeli chodzi o podział dochodów z turystyki. Autorzy sugerują zmianę podejścia w kierunku turystyki opartej na większym udziale społeczności lokalnych, która wykorzystuje praktyki zrównoważonego rozwoju, i argumentują, że działania rozwojowe nie mogą być skuteczne bez ścisłej współpracy między władzami parków a społecznościami.

Słowa kluczowe: rozwój społeczności, turystyka wiejska, turystyka środowiskowa, zrównoważony rozwój turystyki, uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park



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