

Stewardship case study

Creating incentives: Rates rebates support Conservation Stewardship in the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality (NMBM)

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The NMBM is the first municipality to offer landowners a rates rebate to encourage conservation on private land. The enthusiastic response has driven the rapid establishment of a stewardship programme. Key lessons learnt include:

- ***Basing the programme within the municipality made it more influential and flexible.***
- ***It was important to know which sites were of high biodiversity value and what the rates implications were.***
- ***Effective communication is essential especially when you are not quite ready to implement.***
- ***Specialised capacity is required to evaluate sites and service legal agreements.***
- ***Institutionalizing a stewardship programme requires significant capacity development.***
- ***A range of options facilitates the involvement of a broader range of participants.***

In 2004 the new Rates Act allowed municipalities to levy rates on rural properties. Previously municipal rates had been applied only to properties falling within the municipal boundaries. Most municipalities immediately granted large rebates for agricultural land (90% is not uncommon). However, owners of land not converted to agriculture had to pay high rates and were effectively penalized for conserving natural vegetation. This perverse incentive launched a spate of lobbying and research by conservationists.

The Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality was the first municipality to actively use rates rebates to encourage the protection of priority conservation areas. This case study describes how they set up their biodiversity rate rebates with the NMBM's Rating Policy, and discusses some of the lessons learned.

IDENTIFICATION OF PRIORITY AREAS

The Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality (NMBM) had already established its Metropolitan Open Space System (NMB MOSS) which identified priority areas for conservation. This was based on a scientific systematic conservation planning exercise and identified large tracts of land where functional processes, as well as structural and compositional elements, can be conserved. The initial NMB MOSS was undertaken by the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA) and presented to the Municipality in 2000. However, its effect only became significant once the Municipality made specific appointments to drive its implementation.

Although the NMBM was formally committed to conservation, the implementation of policy was dependent on local Spatial Development Framework (SDF) committees. Requests to address environmental issues were often dismissed as "creating extra work". The municipality then appointed a MOSS Coordinator whose role included sitting on all land management planning committees to mainstream the NMB MOSS Principles. With conservation requests now being presented internally, supported by additional capacity to get the job done, the planning committees became far more accepting of the municipality's environmental mandate.

ESTABLISHMENT OF A PILOT STEWARDSHIP PROGRAMME

In 2007 a volunteer stewardship programme was funded by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) through WESSA. This pilot programme was based in the Greater van Stadensberg area to the West of the MNB Municipality. A projects officer was employed to implement the work programme. Once the project came to an end, the officer was employed by NMBM to continue implementing the action plan developed as a deliverable of the project.

The objectives of this project included :

- Establishing contracts with priority landowners (including outreach, site surveys, negotiation, organizing the signing of contracts, and subsequent support)
- Identifying mechanisms for mainstreaming stewardship incentives into the Rates Policy of the NMBM
- Developing an action plan to roll out voluntary stewardship in the NMBM
- Investigating the possibility of creating a web-based stewardship support programme

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- Co-ordinating an exchange programme with leading conservation stewardship practitioners to allow for skills transfer and capacity-building opportunities
- Developing and supporting a Friends group for the Van Stadens Wildflower Reserve.

ESTABLISHING MUNICIPAL BIODIVERSITY RATE REBATES AND EXEMPTIONS FOR CONSERVATION

One of the objectives of the pilot project was to mainstream biodiversity rate rebates and exemptions into the municipal budget. Having project staff based within the Municipality greatly facilitated the integration of conservation into municipal activities: it was relatively easy to schedule a meeting with the Municipal Treasury to discuss a property rates mechanism to promote conservation. The Treasury granted an initial rebate of 20% for land falling within the Council approved NMB MOSS. The Botanical Society Financial Incentives project, co-financed through the C.A.P.E. partnership, established the implementation requirements.

This conservation-related rebate was immediately included in Rates Policy information distributed to the public. Unexpectedly this led to hundreds of applications. Some people applied because they were having difficulty paying their rates. However, on investigation it was found that they did not have sufficient natural habitat on their land to contribute significantly to conservation. This type of application was not eligible for participation in the stewardship programme. All applications therefore needed to be carefully evaluated.

As there was insufficient capacity to address each application immediately, it became critical to maintain momentum through good communication. The first step was to hold a public meeting to inform potential participants of the requirements of the conservation stewardship programme. Whereas most other rebates are granted immediately, on the basis of a simple application form, the conservation rates rebate requires a far more complex application and evaluation process:

The first criterion is that the land needs to conserve high priority biodiversity. This is determined by the position of the land in relation to the NMB MOSS, and has to be confirmed by the municipality through a site inspection.

Secondly, the landowner needs to be prepared to commit to medium (5 years) to long-term conservation of this important biodiversity. This commitment includes appropriate land management.

Finally, formalization of membership of the stewardship programme requires the signing of a legally binding contract. This contract specifies how the land must be managed.

IMPLEMENTATION REQUIREMENTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The municipality was unprepared for the very high level of interest in the rates rebates and did not, have sufficient capacity to respond. In retrospect, the immediate advertisement of rates rebates for conservation was premature, as there was no stewardship programme in place. However, the outcome was ultimately positive as the level of interest created enormous pressure which will ensure the rapid development of the stewardship programme in the new financial year.

The initial implementation of the stewardship programme required constant adjustment, and a process of adaptive management is now in place to manage and continuously improve the system. The programme's location within the municipality has been ideal, facilitating considerable flexibility to respond to new insights and opportunities.

The municipality is currently concentrating on institutionalizing the stewardship programme through:

- creation of appropriate posts
- development of a strategy and implementation plan
- improvement of stewardship tools.

Capacity Development

The NMBM stewardship programme was initially run by a temporary coordinator based within WESSA. This provided important bridging capacity. The position has now been moved into the Municipality as a permanent post at senior ranger level

“Driving implementation from within the municipality has been very effective.”

as a significant degree of personal maturity and conservation experience are required.

Conservation in the NMBM is currently managed by three reserve managers, supported teams which carry the responsibility for conservation in each of the three regions. These existing staff will need to take on stewardship duties in addition to their existing workload. Some of them already perform stewardship-related duties, but these will need to be formally included in their official job descriptions.

Staff with new stewardship duties will also need appropriate training. A stewardship and extension training course was developed and offered through the C.A.P.E. programme in 2008 and was very successful in building capacity. The course was taken up by Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University with a number of students subsidised in 2009 through the C.A.P.E. partnership. In future years conservation agencies and local government will need to fund their own staff members' training.

In order to optimize their existing capacity the municipality will initially focus on a few priority areas. These areas have been identified by the NMB MOSS as being irreplaceable for long term conservation.



More flexible application of the NMB MOSS

Initially, in order to qualify for the stewardship programme, a property had to be identified in the NMB MOSS as being a priority for meeting conservation targets. The NMB MOSS is a GIS¹-based systematic conservation plan which identifies a selection of sites which would need to be conserved to reach agreed conservation targets. Some sites, such as those containing the only population of rare species, are irreplaceable, whereas other sites, such as those conserving upland lowland gradients, are flexible in location. The NMB MOSS does not therefore include all land which is worthy of conservation but rather identifies the most efficient subset required to meet minimum conservation targets.

If an alternative area, not initially identified by the NMB MOSS as a priority, is made available by a willing landowner, the conservation plan can be recalculated to include its contribution. The resulting revised NMB MOSS will require more land but will still meet its target of conserving a representative percentage of all habitat types and maintaining key processes and species.

It was therefore decided to remove the rigid requirement of being part of the original NMB MOSS and replace it with the more flexible requirement of conserving important biodiversity.

Creating a range of options

It is important for the stewardship programme to include a range of options to capture different contributions:

Increased rebates for long term commitment

The biodiversity rates exemption provides support for landowners committing to set aside land for conservation for 30 years or longer. At present the rebates for agriculture are still higher than those secured for medium term conservation and the NMB MOSS coordinator, Abigail Kamineth, is continuing to engage the Treasury to address this situation. She has requested that the agricultural and biodiversity rebates are set at the same percentage to improve the attractiveness of the biodiversity rebate. The municipality agreed to consider this, and requested a report on the potential financial implications of increased biodiversity rebates for a medium term conservation commitment.

The Environmental Services Department has therefore identified properties which are conservation priorities for the next 5 years. They have calculated the financial implications for the municipal rates base if these properties do not contribute rates. They are able to make these calculations fairly rapidly, facilitating interactive engagement, because this information is available in digital format. If the tiered rebates are granted it would make possible a range of options for landowners within the Stewardship Programme.

Support for landowners

Landowners receive professional advice and support through extension services. A detailed management plan is drawn up for each site signed up for the stewardship programme. This identifies important biodiversity and details how it should be managed. These landowners also receive preferential assistance for sound land

management in the form of support for alien clearing, fire management and erosion control.

A long term plan is to have an interactive website where local ecologists can respond to individual queries from landowners. Although possible, the technology required to support this system is expensive and the cost would have to be shared with other municipal departments.

Volunteer programmes

It is not only landowners who can make a contribution to conservation. Volunteers play an important role in supporting the many local nature reserves. 'Friends' groups, coordinated by reserve managers, are actively engaged in activities such as alien clearing. Through their support, an indigenous nursery has also been re-established as part of the Greater van Stadensberg Stewardship Project.

Conservancies

There are several conservancies in the area which play an important role in conservation. Although a landowner may be a member of a conservancy, he or she needs to join the stewardship programme as an individual. There are conservators within the municipality who specifically support conservancies. WESSA is also currently initiating a conservancies and stewardship-support project in the area. Additional tools need to be developed to capture the collective potential for involving conservancies in stewardship.

FUTURE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

NGOs played a critical role in getting the stewardship programme off the ground. The presence of a supportive municipal manager has also been vital. He made stewardship part of the official municipal "Go Green" initiative that aims to creatively and visibly communicate initiatives which contribute towards conserving the environment for the future.

Having supportive managers in government structures is critical for the long term sustainability of a stewardship programme. Such people play an invaluable role in the mainstreaming of conservation.

For the full potential of the stewardship programme to be realised, conservationists will need to continue to build bridges with civil society.

Date: June 09

Key Words:

Stewardship, private landowners, Nelson Mandela Bay Metro, property rates, capacity development



¹ Geographical Information Systems