

4. Using dogs for predator control



History has shown that when people clash with nature, both sides invariably end up losing. The conflict between farmers and wildlife is an ancient example of this tension. In South Africa, farmers lose precious livestock to predators like leopards while, in return, countless indigenous animals get killed or damaged as farmers seek to protect their livelihoods.

Not happy to stand by and watch the battle rage on, the Namaqua National Park, with funding from SKEPPIES – SKEP's small grants facility – has initiated a project which illustrates that when people work with rather than against nature, everyone benefits. Bernard van Lente, Park Manager at the Namaqua National Park, and his wife Elanza have together spearheaded a scheme to introduce the Anatolian shepherd dog to farmers in the Kamiesberg District as an alternative to trapping to protect farmer's livestock and reduce the impact of farming on indigenous wildlife. After three years of testing the project has shown that it can be a major success.

The dogs work like magic," says Van Lente. "Farmers with Anatolian dogs have seen livestock losses drop from around 100 per year to about ten and many report an increase of wild animals on and around their farms." Currently there are eight Anatolian dogs living and working on farms in the area, all of which were given to the farmers by the Namaqua National Park, free of charge, with the aid of funding from SKEPPIES over the past three years.

With each puppy having a market value of R3000 – R4000, this is no small gift. Van Lente maintains that the Anatolian breed – which originates from Turkey – is perfectly suited to its job. "At six weeks old the puppies are put with the sheep or goats and grow up with the flock. They have a strong protective instinct but unlike the other dogs that local farmers use, they are not good hunters so do not go out and kill everything in sight."

The Park has initiated its own breeding programme and currently has four breeding pairs that will be ready for mating very soon – it is hoped that this will reduce the costs of the project and increase the number of dogs in the area, making the project more sustainable in the long term.

Van Lente says the benefits of the project have been twofold. "Our primary intention was to protect wildlife but the farmers are benefiting too," he says. "Farmers target jackals and caracals but we find that countless other species – like honey badgers, aardvark and tortoises – get killed in their traps as well. There is a big difference between the numbers of these animals found inside the park and outside it, which shows that humans are having a negative impact on indigenous wildlife. "With these dogs we hope to see a dramatic reversal of the situation," explains Van Lente.

"The farmers are also extremely proud of their dogs and look after them very well, they are beautiful animals and more and more farmers are asking for them – which shows that they themselves now see the benefits of farming in harmony with nature."