Stewardship case study

Boer and Brit: Promoting stewardship in a culturally diverse landscape

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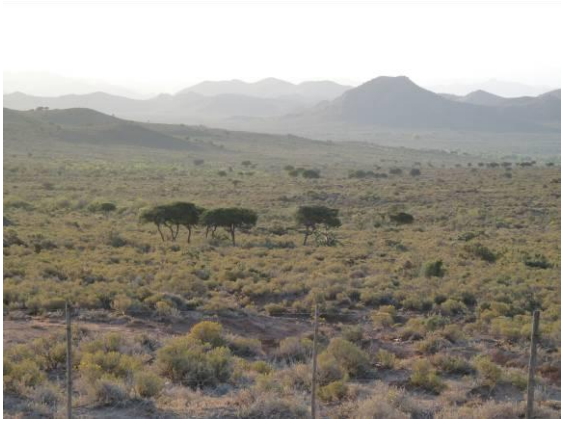


In the Little Karoo there is an influx of new landowners buying land for tourism, for their own recreation and for retirement. This change in ownership is associated with a change in land management and has led to large scale restoration as stocking levels are reduced and control of 'pest species', such as predators is ceased.

Although this benefits conservation, it has accelerated the decline in farming by increasing land prices, decreasing economies of scale and increasing conflict between the remaining farmers and 'pest species'. This can lead to tensions between traditional farmers and the new immigrants.

In our case study, reaching an agreement on stewardship was complicated by co-ownership of land by new English-speaking immigrants and a traditional Afrikaans farmer. This was resolved by through independent mediation and clear communication in the mother tongues of all parties.

The cultural landscape in South Africa is as varied as its biodiversity. This diversity of peoples and values has a profound impact on landowner attitude to conservation and therefore to stewardship. Stewardship extension officers need to establish a relationship which reveals and transcends these differences. This case study explores the differences in landowner attitudes towards conservation in the Little Karoo, and discusses the impact of these differences on conservation work.

CHANGES IN BROADER LITTLE KAROO LANDSCAPE

Land Ownership and Management

Since the mid 1800s the Little Karoo has been farmed by small, close-knit Afrikaans communities. The peak population density occurred during the early 1900s when there was an ostrich boom which brought unprecedented financial security to the farming community which, until then, had largely functioned at a subsistence level.

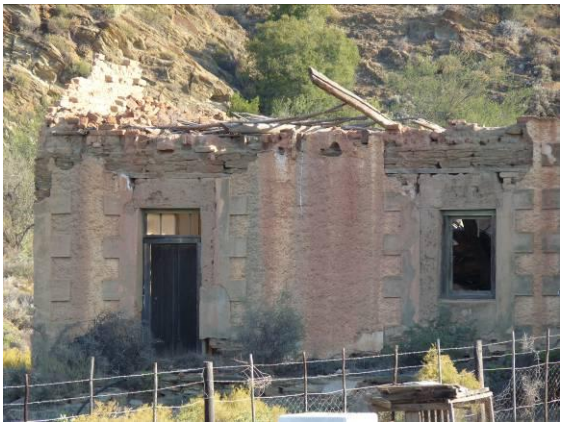
During this period most farmers had an area of arable land close to the village, which was used for crops. They also had rights to graze their livestock on a clearly specified section of the surrounding mountains. Often this mountain land was owned by several landowners and managed as commonage. Labour was provided by large extended families, and over time the farms were subdivided to provide land for each new generation. The introduction of the first significant commercial product, the ostrich, made it possible for people to make a reasonable living on a very small area.

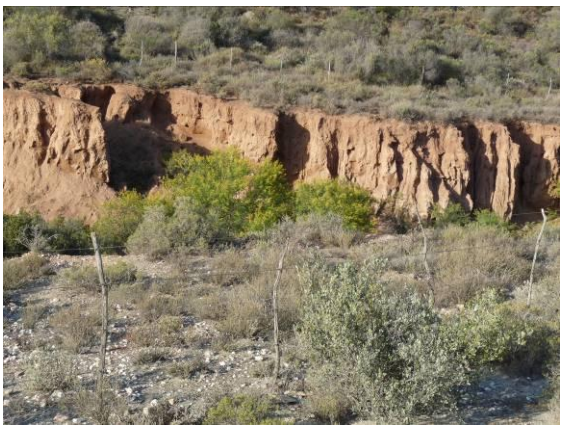
The intensive farming of ostriches and small stock such as goats in this semi-arid area caused significant degradation of the veld. The most intense degradation occurred during the early 1930s when the depression, combined with drought, led to serious overstocking. As desperate farmers left the land for the cities, they often abandoned stock, including draught animals which could not be sold. The Calitzdorp district was particularly badly affected, and today is still one of the most degraded in the Western Cape.

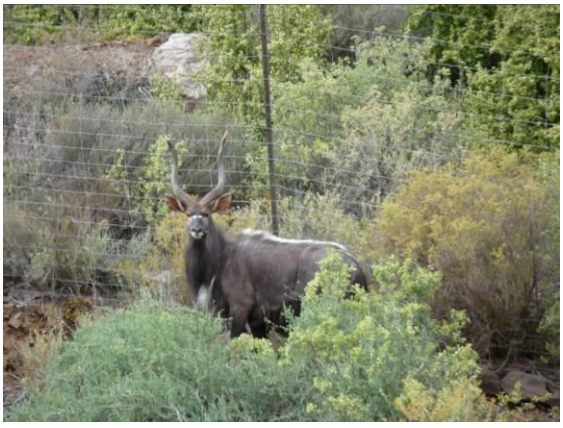
Since the 1930s the region has experienced steady depopulation as farmers have continued to leave the land for the city. In the remote villages of the Ladismith District, depopulation has accelerated during the past ten years and very few traditional farmers remain. Traditional social structures, such as the church, are barely functional, and there are fewer transport options for goods or people.

In 1996, there were 42 farmers in the local farmers' association; by 2008 only six remained. Recent surveys show that most of the remaining farmers in this area are battling financially, as input costs rise and the decreasing number of farmers make economies of scale difficult to achieve. For example, buyers no longer come out to the region to collect goods, and the farmers must consequently transport their own produce to larger centres for sale. In addition, many farmers have sold off portions of land to survive external shocks, such as floods and drought, and many farming units are now too small to be economically viable.

Over the past ten years there has been a new wave of immigration as city people have moved into this remote area. These new landowners are attracted to the peace, and to the beauty and diversity of the natural environment. The majority of these people are not seeking to make a living from the land, and would like to promote the conservation of the plants, animals and landscapes that attracted them to the area. Most of them have alternative sources of income and many are involved in tourism. Land prices have increased to three times their agricultural value, and the remaining farmers are therefore no longer able to expand and consolidate their holdings.







Many of these new immigrants are English-speaking and find it difficult to communicate with the remnants of the traditional Afrikaans farming community. This has led to a lack of integration into local social structures and the development of an alternative community of "newcomers". There remains a strong sense of "us" and "them" between the two communities. There is also a high percentage of absentee landowners who are only present for a small portion of the year: This has further reduced the community size and viability, leading to a sense of loss and alienation for the remnants of the traditional Afrikaans farming community. As one elderly farmer explained, "People will no longer remember the old place names, or the stories of those who lie buried here".

Ecological Impact

Changes in land management associated with a decrease in farming, and an increase in tourism, have led to a significant improvement in the ecological condition of the land. This is due to reduced stocking rates and decreased pressure on predators.

Many areas are no longer grazed by domestic livestock and are slowly recovering. Time series photography indicates that many parts of this district have experienced significant improvement in vegetation cover.

In the past, the control of 'pest species' such as predators (leopards, jackal and caracal), baboons and porcupines was actively encouraged by state incentives. This led to community hunts and the erection of subsidized jackal-proof fencing. These subsidies have now been removed and instead there are strict state restrictions on how species such as leopard may be controlled.

This change in regulatory environment, coupled with a reduction in the number of active farmers, has reduced pressure on predators and other pest species. The numbers of 'pest species' in the region has therefore significantly increased. This has led to increased conflict with the remaining farmers. Many farmers now use alternative approaches, such as Anatolian sheepdogs, to protect stock against predators. Others have changed from small stock, such as sheep and goats, to cattle which are less vulnerable to predators. They also avoid growing crops which are particularly attractive to baboons. These approaches are more compatible with conservation.

CASE STUDY: NEGOTIATION IN A COMPLEX SOCIAL CONTEXT

The Gouritz Initiative was established in this region to promote the establishment of a living landscape in which people use the region's biodiversity in a sustainable manner. The Initiative targeted specific corridors whose conservation will secure the ecological function of the whole landscape. CapeNature is focusing their stewardship programme in these key corridors. Stakeholders in the region have recently agreed to embark on a public participation process around establishing a Gouritz Biosphere Reserve.

Mr and Mrs "Brit" bought land in one of these corridors in 1994. Their objective was to retire from academia and to live self-sufficiently on the land, while conserving its biodiversity and restoring areas which had been degraded. They therefore approached CapeNature regarding stewardship options, as they wanted to conserve the land they had bought, in perpetuity. The land they owned was deemed to be important for conservation, and therefore suitable for the establishment of a contract nature reserve, as it:

- adjoins an existing government conservation area. Its conservation would therefore significantly improve the connectivity of the landscape.
- forms an important upland-lowland link for nectivores.
- contains eight different veld types, including representatives of threatened veld types, which occurred here in unusually good condition.
- protects several threatened species.
- had a low management burden, as it was undeveloped and largely free of invasive alien plants.

The land bought by Mr and Mrs Brit has two separate title deeds. The first title they own outright. The second title comprises 4/5 undivided shares, the other 1/5 share belonging to a local farmer, Mnr "Boer". A stewardship agreement was quickly

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signed regarding the land which they own outright, creating a contract nature reserve that will conserve the area in perpetuity.

The situation regarding the title for the undivided shares was more complex: Although initial negotiations had taken place with Mnr Boer, little progress had been made. When a new stewardship officer was appointed to the area in 2007, she immediately became aware of a high level of conflict. Mnr Boer felt that "die Engelse", were not recognizing his rights to 1/5th of the shared title and that CapeNature, as representative of the government were siding with them.

In recognition of the delicacy of the situation, instead of arguing the point, the stewardship officer arranged a meeting with a local lawyer who explained the concept of undivided shares of land. Undivided shares are very common in this region, particularly in the mountain land which was previously used as communal grazing. In most areas involving undivided shares, no permanent structures are constructed. However, Mnr Boer's father had constructed a fence, dividing off a portion of the undivided shares, which he then used as grazing. This usage pattern had created the impression of outright legal ownership which was, in fact, not the case.

The intervention of an independent, third, party helped to diffuse the tension, and Mnr Boer agreed to re-open negotiations once he understood that participation in a stewardship agreement would still allow him to continue use a portion of the shared title for sustainably managed grazing.

The next hurdle became apparent when the stewardship officer came with a contract written in English, to discuss with Mnr Boer. It was clear that there was a very real language barrier, with Mrs Brit being unable to speak any Afrikaans and Mnr Boer not comfortable in English. The stewardship officer immediately agreed to have the contract translated, and all stewardship material in this predominantly Afrikaans area is now available in Afrikaans. This contract was then explained to him in Afrikaans, by a lawyer. Indeed, once Mnr Boer had a contract he could understand, he was even comfortable with signing the English version.

Fortunately, the stewardship officer was fluent in both English and Afrikaans as her role in promoting communication between the two parties was critical. Indeed, the fact that she was of Afrikaans descent helped Mnr Boer, who had been very distrustful of the process, to trust her. She has noted that farmers in the area often visibly relax when she starts the negotiation process in fluent Afrikaans.

In contrast, the fact that Mrs Brit does not speak any Afrikaans has limited her social interaction. The Brits do not participate in the more traditional village festivals and activities. Her potential to play a leading role in the local conservancy has also been limited by her inability to communicate in Afrikaans. They have, however, made friends with other like-minded people in the local village and Mrs Brit plays a supportive role in the conservancy.

Managing the Land Together

As the land was undivided, both landowners had to agree on all aspects of the contract. For this reason, although the title which Mr and Mrs Brit owned outright was committed in perpetuity as a contract nature reserve, the land co-owned by Mnr Brit only has a 30 year contract, as this was the maximum Mnr Boer was comfortable with.

Once the land was contracted as a stewardship site, a management plan was drawn up. As there was still a high level of tension between the two landowners it was critical that all potential areas of conflict were clearly resolved in the management contract.

The key issue has been the maintenance of fencing to prevent the Nguni cattle belonging to Mnr Boer from escaping onto the rest of the property. Mrs and Mr Brit regard the land lying on Mnr Boer's side of the fence as being severely degraded, and feel that the seed-bank maintained on their land is critical for maintaining the long term potential for restoration.

CapeNature has supplied a team who removed the few aliens on the property. They also removed all internal fencing, except for that separating the land grazed by Mnr Boer's cattle. Mr and Mrs Brit have also planted a few trees to help restore the river courses.

During the first year the stewardship officer was called out frequently to help resolve disputes. Each time she referred both parties back to the principles outlined in the management plan. As a consequence, for the last year they have been better able to resolve their disputes themselves.

Lessons Learned

- Landowner personality, perceptions and background will influence decision making. It is therefore important to understand people's context and what is important to them. In this case Mr and Mrs Brit, and Mnr Boer, had very different priorities. It is important to understand and respect all perspectives.

- Where there is a high level of conflict, independent, professional mediation may be a worthwhile investment. This can protect the stewardship officer from having to take sides, as this would negatively impact on his/her long term relationship with the landowners. In this case, the lawyer provided this function, ensuring that Mnr Boer felt that his rights were not being undermined and that his concerns were respected.

- Communication in mother tongue is essential. Even when parties can undertake basic communication in another language, it is unlikely that they will truly feel comfortable undertaking legal commitments which they do not fully understand because of language differences. For the same reason, language in contracts should be kept as simple and jargon-free as possible.

- Patience and honesty are critical in stewardship negotiations. It is important to recognize that landowners are making a long term commitment. It may take them some time to feel sufficiently comfortable to make this decision. They need to feel that their concerns, raised during the negotiation process, are respected and addressed where possible.

- It is important that all issues which are important to the landowners are addressed in the contract. Where there is co-ownership it is critical that all potential areas of conflict are addressed, both in the stewardship contract and in the management plan.

In this case a positive outcome for conservation was achieved, despite there being high levels of conflict initially. The key was developing a positive relationship with both landowners. Even though the stewardship officer knew that Mnr Boer was incorrect in his understanding of the legal ownership of the land, she did not fight with him directly over this issue. By respectfully listening to his views and getting a respected third party to explain the issue, the problem was resolved. This positive interaction and the trust thereby engendered between them, led to Mnr Boer giving the stewardship officer the go-ahead to proceed with the stewardship agreement and laid the foundation for a gradual improvement in relations with Mr and Mrs Brit over the management of the land.

Date: November 2009

Key Words:

Stewardship, conflict resolution, language barriers, cultural differences

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