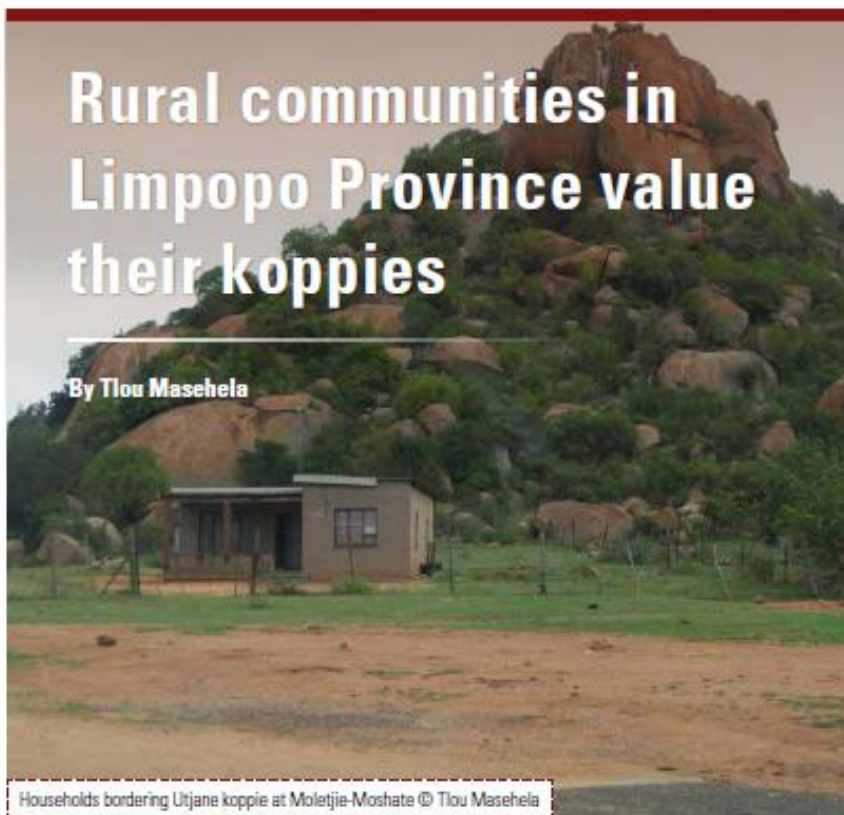


Rural communities in Limpopo Province value their koppies

By Tlou Masehela



Households bordering Utjane koppie at Moletjie-Moshate © Tlou Masehela

For most of us, koppies (granite outcrops) are majestic protrusions of rounded granite boulders with sparse to dense vegetation, interspersed through the landscape. We admire their uneven spread and beauty as they break up the undulating plains with their myriad sizes and shapes. One can at times easily make out the breaks in vegetation between the koppies and their surrounding vegetation matrix, which is mostly a mixture of open or closed savanna vegetation. Remarkably, these iconic features have been observed to act as refugia for both fauna and flora - but what does this mean for the rural communities nestled among these magnificent structures?

To the rural communities of Moropo (Ga-Mamabolo), Maribe (Ga-Mothapo), Utjane (Ga-Mashashane), Tibanefontein (Ga-Matlala) and Moletjie-Moshate (Moletjie), the topographic and species diversity is overshadowed by the intrinsic value of the

koppies, such that many of them are named after the respective villages. You might also be aware that in most instances, rural communities get to depend daily on the little natural resources they have, and these are not often sufficient to sustain healthy lifestyles.

High levels of unemployment, resulting in poverty, make it difficult to afford basic households supplies. A simple walk around these communities paints a clear picture of the realities of daily life. However, this does not stop residents from living a *normal life*, and it is in such instances where indigenous knowledge, and the principles of making the best of what you have, become important.

Initially intrigued by the vegetation composition and topography of the koppies, I made time to visit and chat to some of the community members about the amazing granite structures. Interestingly, residents knew quite a lot about different plants present on koppies, and bird species that come and go as seasons change. Important community events associated with koppies include prayer meetings, rituals, and the taking of wedding photographs.

Of particular interest was the plant uses. These were primarily used for medicinal purposes, construction material and for harvesting wild fruits. Among others, *Aloe marlothii* (Mountain Aloe), *Clerodendrum glabrum* (Tinderwood), *Lippia javanica* (Lemon Bush) and *Vangueria infausta* (Wild Medlar) were commonly used plants.

Then the rocks! Here, most residents cannot afford tombstones. After laying their loved ones to rest, rocks are collected from the outcrop to properly house the resting place of the departed.

The use of koppies as focal points of prayer and rituals is also common. Residents describe the experience as cleansing, peaceful and rejuvenating. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment of 2005 acknowledges these as less tangible services relating to cultural values, and aesthetic or spiritual qualities of landscapes.

This also extends to shelter and drinking puddles (from rocks) for domestic animals (goats) that occasionally forage on the koppies. The hunting of small mammals like the Rock Dassie/Hyrax *Procavia capensis* is also common, providing bush meat for some of the household.

It so happens that these activities somewhat resemble those observed in Western Australia.



Mountain aloe with cut leaves – harvested for various uses ©Tlou Masehela

Granite domes (as they are called) were used by Aboriginal people living on the western surrounding plains as focal points for the activities of ancestral heroes who journeyed throughout the landscape.

Granite domes also provided water for the arid interior, a function that continues to be crucial for many Western Australian towns. In other parts of the world (such as Brazil), outcrops attract tourists due to their topographic

variation that make the landscape more interesting. Hikers also climb outcrops for the view and rockface challenge.

Occasionally, acts of resource exploitation and fire incidents do also take place on the koppies. However, residents remain adamant that they have measures in control to deal with perpetrators. This goes to show that sometimes we invest so much in top-down conservation approaches when solutions for conservation may come from the communities themselves.

To date, there are no formal management or conservation priorities for these landscapes due to low concerns about threats. It would be ideal to actively involve communities in any planned (future) biodiversity assessments in the area so not to exclude the values and practices associated with the koppies. Also, communities have so far managed these areas well. This should be a good example and acknowledgement of 'informal' resource management and conservation practices.



Rocks collected from koppies and used around burial sites (graves) ©Tlou Masehela



Bark stripping of a Marula tree *Sclerocarya birrea* for possible medicinal use ©Tlou Masehela

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