

## Cooperative agreement with KNP AND PARTNERS

Working and living in the Kruger National Park was such a privilege; every day one looked forward to new adventures and helping to conserve what Stevenson Hamilton, the first Warden of the KNP called his "Cinderella in the process of becoming a Princess". As a researcher, wilderness trails ranger and senior section ranger, one's days were so focussed on what one was doing daily and knowing that you were in one of the most iconic national parks in the world. One did not have much time to think of what was happening outside of the borders of the KNP.

Article and photos: Bryan Havemann

As KNP employees, we almost felt that we were in a separate world to those around us, and we would enjoy the utopia of our closed, conservation republic. The danger of this 'island conservation' mentality, and using fortress tactics to oppose those outside the borders, was highlighted when I started engaging with the communities outside the park, in specialised forums that had been set up to open dialogue. It was through this close engagement that I first realised that we need to think of the bigger picture.

The millions living on the borders of the KNP, many of whom had been displaced by the establishment of the park, needed to be part of the plans of the future. Africa as a continent, was also reeling under the intense poaching pressure on many of its iconic species, and the bush-meat trade was thriving where anything that moved would be considered fair game or fast food.

It was against this back drop that landscape conservation was a way to unite countries in Africa and bring about the changes that would not only be positive for biodiversity conservation *per se*, but also give tangible, sustainable benefits to the communities living in and around protected areas. African Parks and the Peace Parks Foundation were two private NGOs that had already recognised the need for thinking outside the box, and were venturing into the African continent, setting up private/public/partnerships with governments where protected areas were in dire straits and desperately in need of help.

In 2002, President Joachim Chissano of Mozambique, President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe signed an International Treaty for the establishment of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park (GLTP) in Xai-Xai, Mozambique. This allowed for the formal proclamation of the GLTP and provided a platform

for the future development and implementation of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area (GLTPCA), which included various land uses around the core Protected Areas, varying from communal areas to private reserves.

Transfrontier Parks (TFPs) and Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCAs) are established when the authorities responsible for all conservation areas, which border on one another across international boundaries, agree to manage those areas as one integrated unit. These areas may include ecological corridors, private game reserves, communal natural resource management areas and hunting concession areas. The mission is to remove all human barriers within the Transfrontier Park or Transfrontier Conservation Area so that animals can roam freely within the local ecosystem.

The purpose of these parks is to employ conservation as a land-use option to the benefit of local people. This initiative constitutes some of the most exciting and ambitious conservation projects in the world today. These projects aim to establish large areas for conservation by integrating vast landscapes and re-connecting ecological systems. The benefits to local communities are achieved through the establishment of cross-border tourism and socio-economic development programs, while the projects in their entirety promote peace and stability in the region.

SANParks through the Kruger National Park has long realised the importance of expanding the Protected Area network and has used this international treaty as the foundation to turn this dream into a reality. South Africa has an obligation through international commitments to expand its protected area footprint in line with international standards. The Associated Private Nature Reserves (APNR), made up of the Umbabat, Klaserie, Balule, Timbavati and Thornybush



private nature reserves, adjoining the KNP on the western side, are now part of this vast open system. In the early 1990s there were still fences between the APNR and the KNP, but through intense negotiations between the private sector and the government departments, these fences were dropped, allowing for the free movement of wildlife.

During that time there was a loose arrangement and meagre documentation that guided the cross-border partnership. Through the National Environmental Management Protected Areas Act (NEMPAA) No. 57 of 2003, there needed to be regularisation, with certain criteria a prerequisite for a more comprehensive agreement that would foster cooperation and collaboration between the public and private entities and set a clear plan for future management and expansion. Part of what is needed is for the land to be declared a protected area, title deeds need to be endorsed, a management authority needs to be appointed and management plans need to be approved. As per the NEMPAA requirements, this all needs to be approved by the provincial MEC within set time frames after the cooperative agreement has been signed.

After many years of hard work and stakeholder engagements, history was made on 5 December 2018 in Skukuzi, KNP where the cooperative agreement was signed between the KNP and the neighbours in the Greater Kruger Area. This was truly a landmark day in the history of the lowveld, and one which would have made those early pioneers very proud of what has been achieved. The cooperative agreement vision of expanding Greater Kruger into the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area for resilient ecosystems and communities was being realised.

The purpose of this cooperative agreement is to enable an integrated development approach that establishes collaborative and cooperative partnerships amongst the parties. The cooperative agreement sets out how the Greater Kruger Conservation Area Parties will co-operate to facilitate the successful implementation of the GLTFCA Vision. The focus of this will be to engender cooperation in managing landscape-level ecological issues, unlocking sustainable benefits, growing resilient and responsible economic development, and promoting compatible land use practices within the GLTFCA. The cooperation agreement provides the basis for norms and standards, and best practice guidelines, which are operationalised through over-arching management frameworks, protocols and standard operating procedures.

Greg Martindale, the Director of Conservation Outcomes, summed up as follows: 'The cooperative agreement is essential to ensure a uniform framework for the protection, management and socio-economic beneficiation of the open system of the GLTR. It will

address several current and anticipated risks that the open system faces. Importantly, it will ensure that landowners within the open system are able to continue to enjoy the current use of the land in perpetuity, creating a legacy for their families and the region in general. It will address key risks and unlock significant opportunities and benefits for landowners, management authorities and communities living within the GLTFCA'.

The continent of Africa is under threat from a fast-growing human population that will need more and more habitat for this expansion. Having protected areas like the GLTFCA where wildlife and man can live in harmony, and where there is a mutually beneficial relationship, will secure economic growth and ecological viability. The ecosystem services that flow from protected areas that are carefully managed, allowing the natural processes to provide benefits to all, cannot be measured in monetary terms alone, although this is substantial. One of the values that can be singled out is the ecological value, which allows ecosystems to function naturally with minimum anthropogenic input. Things like biodiversity corridors become essential for the free movement of the wildlife, especially in areas of human habitation.

Another value is the aesthetic value which helps to re-charge our collective souls when we spend quality time in a pristine protected area. Beautiful scenery, spectacular wildlife viewing, and sunsets and sunrises that take your breath away, all help to enhance the aesthetic value. There is recreational value, which can be in the form of a wilderness walking trail, game drive in an open vehicle, fishing or even sustainable utilization of wildlife by ethical hunting practices. This has been practiced since time immemorial, and if it is controlled and managed then this recreational benefit is a key component to the success of the open area.

The spiritual value of being in a wild area is one where you appreciate creation, and this helps to foster humility in most people, when considering the bigger picture and where we fit in the greater scheme of things. The small but important part we play as individuals needs careful consideration and comes with immense responsibility on how we wield our collective powers. Humility, in the spiritual realm, is seen as the greatest strength of all. The economic value is one which needs to be carefully considered but not at the expense of the other values. Some things are priceless and natural, fully functioning ecosystems within a protected area need to be sacrosanct.

Wise use of these resources can provide economic sustainability through job creation, resource use, various tourism ventures etc. The cultural value of these areas must also be considered and protected. Just looking at the plethora of San Rock art, burial

sites of local communities and cultural ceremonies that take place in these wild areas, also highlights the importance of this value. Thinking in terms of global climate change, the importance of oxygen generation and carbon sinks that these vast protected areas have, has local and international benefits.

One of the biggest threats we are facing in southern Africa and possibly the continent is the notion of short-term gain at any cost. There is a feeling amongst some that if I don't exploit the environment

This generation cannot afford to allow the rhino to go extinct, after bringing it back from the brink of extinction less than 60 years ago. A collective security foundation which is called the Greater Kruger Environmental Protection Foundation (GKEPF) has all the stakeholders as members and this is just a small way in which the members can make a big difference. Shared intelligence, joint operations and shared resources will help focus efforts in defeating a common enemy. It is imperative that the governments



first then my neighbour will, so let me get out what I can before somebody else does. A prime example of this is the rhino poaching scourge which has become an international crisis and is being manipulated by crime syndicates the world over for monetary gain alongside human trafficking, drug trade, gun running and the like. The Greater Kruger Area has most of the world's black and white rhino population under its protection and through this agreement that has been signed, a collective and more effective counter to the poaching can be formulated.

of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique work together to fight this threat. Elephant poaching for ivory is on the rise and despite having a very healthy elephant population across the Greater Kruger Area this also needs to be curbed. Other countries in Africa have lost up to 75% of their elephant populations.

Mining for minerals and the chopping down of hardwood forests also rank very high up on activities that can destroy a natural area in a very short time. The Greater Kruger Area that extends into the GLTFCA across countries should be untouchable with regards to mining and logging activities. All three countries



have strong environmental legislation that prevents this type of exploitation; however the political will must be there to enforce it. Corruption needs to be fought at all levels, not only at ground level with the local communities but all the way through the field rangers and judicial system right to the top structures of the political ruling parties.

Some of the overarching objectives of the GLTFCA and all the partners working together that signed the cooperative agreement are to foster trans-national collaboration and cooperation among all the Parties which will facilitate effective ecosystem management in the area comprising the GLTFCA:

- To promote alliances in the management of biological natural resources by encouraging social, economic and other partnerships among the entities, including the private sector, local communities and non-governmental organizations;
- To enhance ecosystem integrity and natural ecological processes by harmonising environmental management procedures across reserve and international boundaries and striving to remove artificial barriers impeding the natural movement of wildlife;
- To facilitate the establishment and maintenance of a sustainable sub-regional economic base through appropriate development frameworks, strategies and work plans;
- To develop integrated ecotourism in the GLTFCA including trans-boundary eco-tourism as a means of fostering regional socio-economic development;
- To establish mechanisms to facilitate the exchange of technical, scientific and legal information for the joint management of the ecosystem;
- To support the development of community-based biodiversity management initiatives and improve benefit flows to people in and around protected areas; and
- To recommend sustainable and responsible resource use, e.g. animal off-takes, support and promote compatible activities within and adjacent to protected areas.

This is a very ambitious undertaking, and currently where doom and gloom is the order of the day in the international, social and broader media platforms, we are all super-excited to be part of such a bold and life-changing initiative. The broader dream in the region has been in the pipeline since the signing of the treaty; however, the process began in earnest more than three years ago and after extensive stakeholder engagement and consultation the final version was agreed to and signed on 5 December 2018 in Skukuza in the KNP, by all the participating entities. The effects of this collective step taken by brave men and women will be felt in perpetuity. Future generations will

celebrate the fact that there were such thoughtful visionaries from all walks of life that took the future of our planet seriously and secured the GLTFCA in this responsible manner.

One of the biggest dangers are the radical groups that are seeking to undermine the process in any way they can, to push through their own agendas by using emotional blackmail. Animal activists use the anti-hunting banner to try and stop sustainable utilization practices. The hunting protocol that has been developed over the years is a protocol that we all can be proud of and has all the necessary checks and balances in place to ensure that there is strict compliance. Others might push a mining agenda and say that the coking coal in the northern part of the KNP needs to be mined.

The Protected Area status is so important to prevent exploitation and these natural areas have the necessary legislation that will keep them in custodianship, not only on a national level but also at an international level through the treaty that was signed. Indiscriminate agricultural practices can also change natural areas and the slash and burn techniques practiced across Africa for charcoal production and then short-term monoculture crop production in those cleared areas is not sustainable.

Natural protected areas need to get the status they deserve, and governments need to recognise that the ecosystem services they provide are priceless and irreplaceable. Change is something that is resisted when it takes people out of their comfort zones, but we are living in times where our generation is deciding the future well-being of our planet. The signing of this cooperative agreement that came about out of necessity in being compliant with national environmental legislation is a very positive step in addressing the ecological and economic challenges of the Greater Kruger Area.

Working smarter collectively on a landscape scale makes so much more sense than working by yourself on a postage stamp-size farm in relation to the bigger picture. It is the bigger picture mentality that will bring viable, sustainable solutions for the region and for the African continent. Rather than be left behind let us get on the bus and be part of the solution and not exacerbate the problem.

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