



case study

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Building Biodiversity Stewardship Capacity in the Bokkeveld



Lauwrence Dworkin, first land owner in the Northern Cape to sign a biodiversity stewardship agreement.

The Bokkeveld Stewardship project was funded by the Critical Ecosystems Partnership Fund (CEPF) to the value of \$274,827.00, and led by the Botanical Society of South Africa (BotSoc), in close partnership with the then Northern Cape Department of Tourism, Environment and Conservation (DTEC). The department's name later changed to be the provincial Department of Environment and Nature Conservation (DENC).

Formally conserved areas are not adequate to conserve critically important biodiversity areas and lack connectivity with one another. Biodiversity stewardship creates a mechanism for establishing and expanding protected areas and creating connectivity across landscapes, thereby securing ecological corridors through partnerships with communal and private landowners. Government is unable to purchase enough sites with high biodiversity value and with more than 80 % of biodiversity located on privately owned land, landowner participation in conservation efforts is crucial to conservation. The biodiversity stewardship model provides a new cost-effective way for government to fulfill its mandate in partnership with civil society by entering into contractual agreements with landowners. These landowners then commit to conserving and managing the biodiversity on their land.

Located in and around the towns of Calvinia and Nieuwoudtville, the Hantam-Tanqua-Roggeveld is one of the nine SKEP priority areas, and encompasses both the Bokkeveld and Roggeveld escarpments. The Hantam-Tanqua-Roggeveld, together with four other SKEP priority areas falls within the Namakwa District of the Northern Cape Province. It is from this aesthetically exuberant priority area that a tone for biodiversity stewardship in the Northern Cape would be set.

Commenced in October 2005, the project "Building Stewardship Capacity in the Bokkeveld" was catalyzed as part of the first phase of implementing the SKEP strategy.

The Bokkeveld Stewardship Project

This project subsequently became known as the Bokkeveld Stewardship Project (BSP), and at its core is the promotion of a collaborative and multi-stakeholder stewardship programme, interacting with government departments and landowners to promote the legal protection of critical biodiversity areas. Making biodiversity stewardship a functional programme in the Northern Cape and using the Bokkeveld Plateau as a pilot site for biodiversity stewardship were BSP's main aims. Before the onset of this project there was no conservation extension services, and no awareness raising about biodiversity matters with commercial farmers in the area.

The project area is considered a marginal farming area and farmers who used their veld for grazing cannot afford to set aside large tracts of land for sole conservation purposes. Any biodiversity stewardship agreement has to include sustainable utilisation as its main focus, with a management plan focusing on best practice and not excluding agricultural activities from protected areas.

Entering into a Level of Agreement

The selection of biodiversity stewardship sites is guided by systematic biodiversity planning. The urgency for protection and landowner willingness are critical criteria in the selection process. In the Northern Cape the concept of stewardship was new and was untried and untested. Little to no conservation extension had been done in the project area prior to this project.

Two mapping workshops were held with stakeholders and researchers who had worked on the Bokkeveld Plateau. A critical biodiversity priority map was developed which guided the identification of priority properties to be approached for stewardship agreements.

Protected Environments provide a relatively high degree of site security, and provide a suitable option when the biodiversity importance of the site is high but where a range of other land-use types, in addition to the conservation management is in place.

Nature Reserves on the other hand provide the greatest degree of protection, and are of longest duration, but they place the greatest restrictions on land-use options and take a longer time to be finalized. Nature Reserves should only be declared on land of the highest biodiversity importance.

Conservation Area biodiversity stewardship agreements provide for informal, quick-established agreements which can be applied in a wide range of circumstances where the biodiversity importance of the land is relatively low. They allow flexible and non-binding recognition to landowners who conserve or manage their land in biodiversity-compatible ways.



Cliffs of the Bokkeveld escarpment

Twenty four landowners were then interviewed to assess willingness to participate in the conservation project and of these, ten landowners were approached regarding biodiversity stewardship contracts. Of the ten landowners, six landowners who were interested in the longer term commitments were approached with draft contracts for entering into legally binding protected area agreements - on a total of approximately 6 000 hectares of land in the Bokkeveld SKEP priority region.

This could take the form of setting aside a portion of their land to be declared as a provincial Nature Reserve, or declaring all their land as a Protected Environment. Most of the initial farmers approached are still interested in entering into Conservation Area biodiversity stewardship agreements.

Of the six properties that were initially approached to enter into biodiversity stewardship agreements, two of the properties are commercial farms, another two are owned by small-scale rooibos tea farmers with alternative income, and the landowners of the other two properties do not reside on the property and have other sources of income. Two landowners in the BSP area (adjoining properties totalling 2 314 ha) and one in the Springbok area (1 205 ha) have signed consents to declare a Nature Reserve. These documents are currently at the office of the MEC (Northern Cape) for departmental approval.

The longer term biodiversity stewardship agreements were the priority for the BSP due to limited initial project funding, time and resources. For this reason, a Protected Environment may prove to be a more appropriate vehicle for biodiversity stewardship for the other four properties and for Bokkeveld area in general, as it enables multiple land uses within the property or properties included, and does not require the detailed cadastral surveying needed to separate a portion of the property as a Nature Reserve.

Embedding Protected Areas Expansion Partnerships

CSA in the Kamiesberg, Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) and its Riverine Rabbit project are DENC's main partners. A Northern Cape Stewardship Forum (NCSF) was also initiated by the BSP in order to encourage collaboration with the NGOs in the province who are doing stewardship work with landowners. Meetings are held every three months to align priorities, share information and engage in problem solving between the different projects.

DENC has displayed its sense of commitment to stewardship through the creation of a stewardship programme and the appointment of stewardship facilitators. Stewardship extension officers were appointed for the Bokkeveld and Springbok areas by DENC, which is a significant achievement in terms of building on the CEPF investment in the project and embedding the work locally with local funding. The stewardship facilitators continue to maintain relationships with the landowners to ensure that the stewardship agreements are finalized and that conservation projects take place in the project areas. DENC has committed to ensuring that all processes that are necessary for the declaration of the properties will be completed once the landowners have signed the legal agreements.

Biodiversity Stewardship Incentives

To make biodiversity stewardship more attractive to landowners, the conservation sector has facilitated the development of incentives and other mechanisms to support landowners who enter into these agreements. A key factor in promoting participation in biodiversity stewardship by the landowners is that the implementing department or NGO attempts to generate incentives for participation. The extent of the applicable incentives to a particular landowner depends on the degree of security of the biodiversity stewardship agreement. More secure agreements with a higher level of commitment and cost from the landowner qualify for more incentives.

In the Northern Cape, incentives are limited due to limited staff, funding and resources within the department.

Nationally, income tax deduction incentives for Nature Reserves have proved less significant than in-kind assistance with management activities on the farm as an incentive for stewardship. Accessing resources to provide this kind of assistance is an ongoing challenge.

Lessons Learned

Many landowners were initially very interested in entering into Protected Area agreements, and several withdrew once the nature of the contracts became clear. Where legal advice was sought by one farmer, he was advised against entering into servitude on his property, which the Nature Reserve status requires.

All of the consulted land owners stated that their main reason for participating in the BSP is to improve conservation management on their farms. During interviews held with landowners, most described themselves as conservation-minded. Improving the veld for grazing is a priority and a good motivation for biodiversity conservation. National past experience has shown that effective biodiversity stewardship work depends on building up trust relationships between landowners and conservation agencies or NGOs, often over a long time period. For this reason, establishing Conservation Areas, though not providing the legal protection, may nevertheless be a good starting point. Over time, increasing levels of commitment may become possible.

A very positive outcome of the BSP project is that a number of related conservation projects have been initiated and the landowners have willingly participated with their time, knowledge and making their properties accessible to researchers. Annually the area is a flower tourist centre during August and September. Several of the farms have developed guest houses and tourism activities on their properties, which also serves as a motivation to the landowner to conserve natural areas. A similar trend to the Bokkeveld was experienced in the Kamiesberg and the Springbok area by Conservation South Africa (CSA). These areas are also marginal farming areas and landowners who initially appeared very keen to participate withdrew when faced with intimidating legal documents and the idea of a long-term binding commitment. However, they are still interested in working with the conservation projects and NGOs in the area.

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Conclusion

The expansion of the protected area network is a key strategy in stemming the loss of biodiversity, and to retain ecosystem functioning in order to reduce the impacts of climate change. The biodiversity stewardship model provides a hierarchy of conservation strategies to landowners wishing to conserve land of biodiversity importance on their properties by entering into contractual agreements with conservation authorities. It is preferred that a landowner enters a biodiversity stewardship agreement at the appropriate highest level, but in the BSP it became apparent that most of the initial landowners were most willing to enter into the Conservation Area biodiversity stewardship category.

Fiscal incentives for biodiversity stewardship in South Africa are currently limited. The innovative income tax deduction for private landowners is only applicable to the biodiversity stewardship conservation category the landowner has entered into, which does not include Conservation Areas, the option landowners in the BSP opted for. A strong incentive, especially to commercial farmers is receiving assistance with sustainable land management, and the implementation of management plans which are required for certification of certain agricultural products.

What the BSP has indicated is that there are willing participants in biodiversity stewardship programmes in South Africa. Numerous factors motivate landowner's decision when entering into a biodiversity stewardship agreement. Once the biodiversity importance of the land has been understood by the landowner, there is an interest in protecting it. This recognition helps the landowner in branding their product or area, such as the annual flower tourism in the Bokkeveld region. The BSP has also demonstrated the resource-intensive nature of biodiversity stewardship. The agreements must continue to be serviced by DENC. The stewardship extension officer will have to continue providing ongoing support to the landowners. Challenges remain to increase human capacity, financial resources and maintaining biodiversity stewardship relationships in the BSP.