



Case Study: Protected Environment

Mountain Zebra Wilderness Corridor

The Mountain Zebra Wilderness Corridor Project recognised the importance of landscape connectivity for ecological processes, species migration and climate change. For this reason, the project aimed to link the existing Mountain Zebra and Camdeboo National Parks through the privately owned land located between and surrounding the two national parks. This is an example of a Protected Environment, a biodiversity stewardship type that can be declared across multiple properties that allows some forms of production on the land. Through this project, an area of over 260 000 hectares is earmarked for a Protected Environment that will carry the same legal status as a state-owned protected area.



Background

An opportunity existed to consolidate and expand the protected area estate around the existing Mountain Zebra National Park and the Camdeboo National Park. Both are large, established national parks run by South African National Parks (SANParks). The Camdeboo National Park covers 19 405 ha and surrounds the town of Graaff-Reinet, in the Eastern Cape. At a distance of 120 km to the east, lies the Mountain Zebra National Park, a 28 412 ha national park. The broader region surrounding the parks is significant for a number of reasons. It contains the recently identified montane floral hotspot, the Sneeuwberg Centre of Endemism. As such, it is not only a haven for charismatic threatened mammals, such as mountain zebra and cheetah, but also contains high numbers of endemic plants.

The region forms part of the Maputaland–Pondoland–Albany Hotspot, and was identified as a Key Biodiversity Area because of its importance for movement of species, including the Endangered Cape mountain zebra. The region was also identified as one of the top three priorities for formal protection of the Grasslands Biome, one of the country's least conserved biomes. Finally, the area covers an ecotone where the biomes of Thicket, Fynbos, Succulent Karoo, Nama Karoo and Grasslands meet. For this reason, the area is important as a potential corridor for climate change adaptation, through which habitat shifts may occur under climate change.



Action

The Mountain Zebra Wilderness Corridor project focused on a broad area of 530 000 ha surrounding and linking the two existing reserves. The land is largely privately owned, with a mix of privately run game farms and commercial agriculture. The Wilderness Foundation entered into discussion with these landowners to establish a Protected Environment in the region. The vision of the corridor project is:

'To maintain the current landscape in terms of its scenic, biodiversity and landscape value through collective action by the private landowners and to protect the area from detrimental developments.'

Protected Environments are a flexible type of biodiversity stewardship agreement that can be declared across multiple properties. Protected Environments can allow for some forms of production on the land, as long as this is integrated into an approved management plan. Protected Environments have the same legal standing as state-owned and managed protected areas, and contribute to South Africa's protected area estate. Thus, Protected Environments were the most appropriate biodiversity stewardship type to encompass the many properties within the corridor linking the two existing national parks.

A landowner management committee was set up to manage the Protected Environment with a common vision of creating a conservation corridor. This was combined with an initiative aimed at improving the management effectiveness within the existing national parks to create conditions conducive to developing an effective Mountain Zebra Wilderness Corridor.



Achievements

A remarkable 69 landowners have been directly involved in the corridor project, an overwhelming endorsement for the project concept. Protected Environments also provide a certain level of protection against mining prospecting in areas less suited to extractive land uses. This was significant in the region, as landowners were concerned about consequences of proposed shale gas development. Landowners were in favour of a low environmental impact alternative for the region, such as conservation or livestock grazing.





An area of 268 428 ha has been included in the proposed Mountain Zebra Camdeboo Protected Environment. The regulations for the Protected Environment were gazetted in December 2014, indicating that the declaration is well underway. The formal establishment of a Protected Environment lays the basis for further land parcels to be added in the future. Through the management committee, there is improved collaboration between the two national parks and the surrounding landowners. This improves opportunities for ecotourism expansion and job creation.

For more information about this project, please contact:

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This project was funded by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund as part of its investment in the Maputland–Pondoland–Albany Hotspot, implemented by Wildlands Conservation Trust.

Grateful thanks to the Wilderness Foundation for providing the photos that illustrate this case study.

Citation: SANBI and Wildlands Conservation Trust. 2015. *Case Study: Protected Environment: Mountain Zebra Wilderness Corridor*. Compiled by Botts, E.A. for the South African National Biodiversity Institute, Pretoria.

Editing and design: SANBI Publishing, 2015.

