



Case study: Local government and civil society

Urban conservation in Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality

A community partnership involving the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality, various local civil society and non-government organisations and the private sector, has successfully worked to reclaim the Baakens Valley. The Baakens Valley Community Partnership has taken advantage of shared resources to improve the management, safety and recreational use of an important green space within the city. In doing so, the partnership has also helped to create jobs and boost the local economy through the many events now held in the area. The partnership has encouraged similar action around other open spaces identified in the municipality's recently gazetted bioregional plan.

Background

Although it does not stand out from the skyline, the Baakens Valley with its steep gorges is a central landscape feature in the city of Port Elizabeth. It forms a 2 000 ha green belt that follows the course of the Baakens River for 20 km through the city. It plays a role in flood control, is a refuge for wildlife in the city, and has major potential as an outdoor recreational area. The Baakens Valley forms part of the Port Elizabeth Mosaic, a Key Biodiversity Area identified within the Maputaland–Pondoland–Albany Hotspot. The area is an ecotone that represents features of five different biomes, including Thicket, Nama-Karoo, Forest, Fynbos and Grassland. Because of the diversity of vegetation types, the area hosts a rich variety of endemic and threatened plant species, especially succulents and geophytes.

Prior to 2009, there was increasing concern over the neglect and deterioration of the Baakens Valley. As with other urban open spaces, the area was threatened by urban encroachment, dumping, pollution and infestations of invasive alien plants. Not only this, the area had become a dangerous hideout for criminals and a hotspot for muggings. So much so, that recreational use of the area had decreased to almost nothing and even municipal staff members tasked with managing the area were hesitant to enter the valley.



Action

The Baakens Valley Community Partnership was established to restore the Baakens Valley as a functioning ecosystem and a resource for recreation and tourism. The programme was co-implemented by the Wildlife and Environment Society of Southern Africa (WESSA) and the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality (NMBM), but had significant support from other environmental organisations, and community based organisations. The participation of civil society has been a strong driver in the turnaround of the Baakens Valley, providing both the impetus for change and the staff and volunteers that support the work of the partnership.

To create the institutional structure that would maintain proper management of the area, the programme worked with the NMBM on updating and enacting its policies. The NMBM comprehensively revised its Metropolitan Open Space System (MOSS) in 2009 using systematic biodiversity planning. The result of this process was the identification of 28 Critical Biodiversity Areas, including the Baakens Valley, that are important for the preservation of species, habitats and ecosystem services. The plan was developed primarily by the municipality, with WESSA, Custodians of Rare and Endangered Wildflowers (CREW) and the provincial Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency as long-term partners of the process. Through consistent advocacy and lobbying by the partners, the MOSS and its associated action plans were developed into an official bioregional plan for the municipality.



Baakens Valley rangers

One of the first actions was the deployment of five rangers to address security within the valley. The rangers patrol the valley, providing visible security, while working closely with the South African Police Service to reduce criminal activity in the area. The rangers also conduct conservation management, such as alien plant clearing, litter clean-ups, and monitoring for sewerage leaks and vandalism. They have been trained in bird-guiding, tree identification, river ecology, photography, self-defence, personal management and stress counselling, and have become capable guides for walking groups and school tours of the valley. The Coca-Cola Fortune Company has been a highly appreciated private sector funder of the rangers since 2010. The presence of the Baakens Valley rangers has been one of the most effective ways of reclaiming the valley.

Achievements

Due to the immense amount of public support and goodwill received, the Baakens Valley Community Partnership has shown impressive results at a local level. Visitor numbers to the valley have risen from only 200 in 2008 to more than 22 500 in 2014. In 2014, 34 school visits were recorded, 66 public walks, 40 church services, 10 large events and 10 sporting events. Many different groups are now using the valley as a recreational area, including sports such as cross country running and mountain biking. Notably, the big events staged in the valley have contributed an estimated R6 million to the local economy. The improved security of the area has also allowed other organisations to begin working in the valley, including initiatives by the Expanded Public Works Department and the employment of 50 Wildlands Conservation Trust waste-preneurs. The success of the partnership has inspired similar initiatives around other urban open spaces in the municipality.

Influential high-level policy achievements and municipal capacity building have mirrored the success seen at a local level. Following the appointment of a new reserve manager, a constructive working relationship has evolved in which community groups' work closely with municipal officials to achieve mutual benefits and success. The municipality is conscious of its own limited resources, and understand that by working with civil society they are able to achieve so much more. The municipality has been able to access the extensive local knowledge that is held by community groups about their local areas. By maintaining open lines of communication, the civil society is able to assist in monitoring the area and identifying new problems as they arise. Through the work of the partnership, the municipality has been better able to deliver on its mandates for safety and security, provision of recreational urban open spaces and biodiversity conservation.



Nelson Mandela Bay Bioregional Plan

The National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act (10 of 2004) enables the development and publication of bioregional plans, the purpose of which is to inform land-use planning and decision-making by a range of sectors whose policies and decisions impact on biodiversity. A bioregional plan includes a map identifying Critical Biodiversity Areas and is accompanied by land-use guidelines. Importantly, bioregional plans are legally enforceable under the Biodiversity Act.

The NMBM Bioregional Plan was gazetted in 2015, the first such plan in South Africa to come into effect. It was developed simultaneously with the municipality's Spatial Development Framework and Integrated Development Plan, in order to balance biodiversity conservation with the needs of other sectors. The plan will place development restrictions on land surrounding the 28 Critical Biodiversity Areas that were identified, and provide guidelines on land use management.

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