

Case study: Local government and civil society

Greater uMngeni Biosphere Reserve

A biosphere reserve has been proposed to help coordinate the work of civil society, local government and private sector stakeholders in the mid-reaches of the uMngeni catchment. Through better landscape management, the biosphere reserve aims to achieve both sustainable development and biodiversity conservation. The planned Greater uMngeni Biosphere Reserve is working to identify common goals between civil society and municipalities. Numerous shared benefits include improved communication networks, opportunities for sustainable development, access to research and improved law enforcement.



Background

The proposed Greater uMngeni Biosphere Reserve is found at the hub of a popular tourism route known as the Midlands Meander, which is focussed on beautiful natural landscapes amid agricultural settings, with local arts and crafts, outdoor activities and scenic accommodation. The area has cultural and religious significance, and, coupled with a colourful history, the rural character of the area is central to its tourist economy. The logo designed for the biosphere reserve pays tribute to the popular waterfalls of the area, the Karkloof Blue butterfly as a representative of other threatened species, and ultimately the reliance of the human population on the ecosystem services provided by the land. The biosphere reserve is also found within the Maputaland–Pondoland–Albany Hotspot and is habitat to a number of threatened species of plants and animals, including the Oribi antelope. It also has a number of Important Bird Areas that host many threatened bird species, such as the iconic Wattled Crane.

Rampant, poorly planned development, aging municipal infrastructure and increasing levels of pollution threaten the natural character of the area and its ability to provide ecosystem services to people. The Midmar and Albert Fall dams, both on the uMngeni River, are major sources of water for people living in the region and the major economic centre of Durban downstream. As well as regular water supply problems, the poor sewerage infrastructure and increasing industrial and agricultural pollution are threatening water quality. However, it has been shown that water quality significantly improves as it flows along stretches of the river that run through the remaining natural ecosystems.

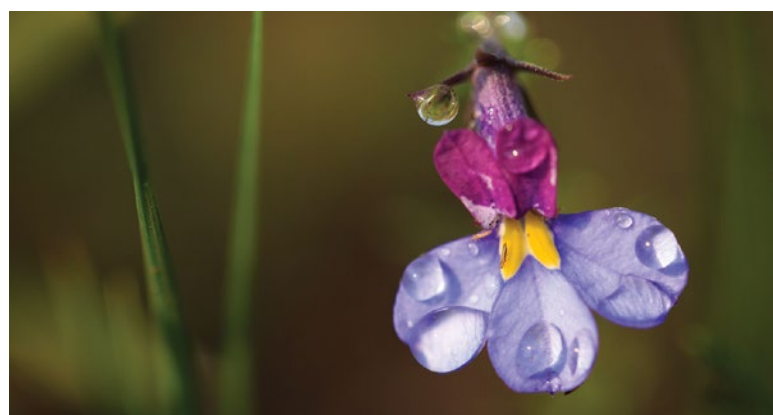
Action

Integrated planning and coordinated management is needed in the area to limit impacts in sensitive areas and maintain nature's ability to improve water quality. A biosphere reserve was seen as a good solution to getting agreement between various stakeholders for sustainable development and conservation actions towards an agreed vision. To this end, the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA) proposed the Greater uMngeni Biosphere Reserve. The vision of the reserve is to 'improve ecosystem services of the core area and to promote the value of the natural environment to support the socio-economic and biophysical environments'.

Biosphere reserves are an international initiative, which will ultimately be beneficial to gaining wider recognition of the value of the region. However, they also require much effort towards gaining local support and facilitation in order to meet the initial requirements. Biosphere reserves are voluntary, and they rely on strong support from a range of local stakeholders. Most important are the local communities, landowners and municipalities, supported by non-government organisations. Municipalities are important partners due to their role in land-use planning, but there are also many ways that a biosphere reserve can benefit local government. For this reason, WESSA has been conducting workshops with municipal officials to identify the common goals and benefits that can be shared through the creation of the biosphere reserve.

Biosphere reserves

Biosphere reserves are an international initiative run by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). There are over 600 biosphere reserves globally and eight in South Africa. Biosphere reserves have three main functions: conservation of biodiversity and ecosystems, socio-economic development and logistical support, which includes research, monitoring and education. They are structured around a zonation system, with a central core conservation area, a surrounding buffer zone and a broader transition zone in which the focus is on sustainable development. A common misconception is that biosphere reserves are fenced reserves filled with game animals. While this may be true for some of the core conservation areas, the aim of a biosphere reserve is to balance human needs and socio-economic development with ecological sustainability.





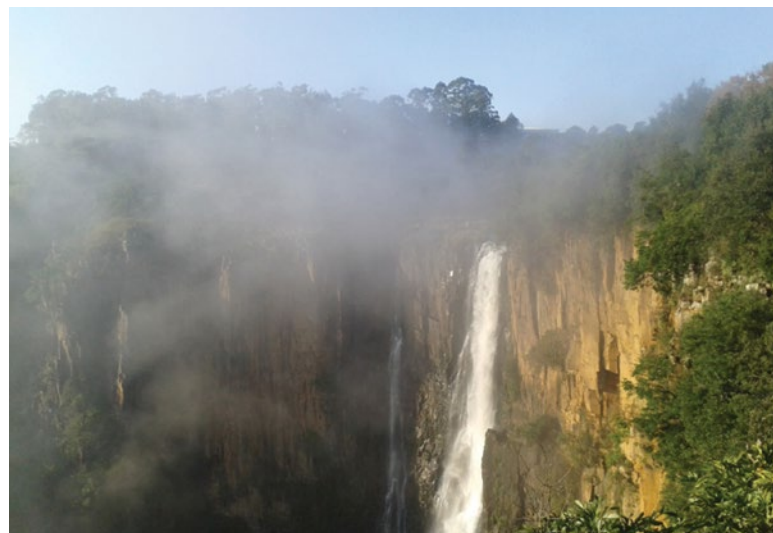
Workshops with municipalities

The aim of these workshops, in addition to the main consultation process, is to promote the Greater uMngeni Biosphere Reserve as a valuable land-use management tool. Municipal officials attending the workshops helped to highlight most important issues that are priorities to their municipalities. Some of these included poverty alleviation, provision of potable water, pollution control and waste management, urban sprawl, crime, health and unemployment. Some of the many ways in which biosphere reserves can help address these issues and benefit municipalities and other stakeholders were identified:

- Networks and communication that enable improved public participation and collaboration.
- Development of green economy opportunities that support sustainable development and job creation.
- Improved monitoring and law enforcement.
- Protection and restoration of ecological infrastructure that provides vital ecosystem services.
- Improved research, education and awareness of important biodiversity within their area.

Achievements

The Greater uMngeni Biosphere Reserve has secured support from the key uMgungundlovu District Municipality and uMngeni Local Municipality, and has presented the concept to other neighbouring local municipalities. The original area for the biosphere reserve has also expanded significantly to include other areas proposed by stakeholders, including conservancies, government officials, land owners, other non-governmental organisation and members of the private sector. Although support for the concept has been positive, ongoing interaction is still





required to ensure that the biosphere reserve is relevant to local government and that it supports municipalities in tackling many of their current challenges.

Should the Greater uMngeni Biosphere Reserve be registered with UNESCO, it will be the first biosphere reserve within the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Such international recognition will potentially boost interest in the area from tourism and funding perspectives. However, the real value of any biosphere reserve is in the voluntary cooperation of

its supporters towards a vision of sustainable development. The true potential for the biosphere reserve's achievements is therefore dependent on the combined efforts of its local supporters – the communities, non-government organisations and government.

For more information about this project, please contact:

Chris Galliers of WESSA
✉ chris@wessa.co.za

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 Chris Galliers and WESSA for providing the photographs that illustrate this case study.

Citation: SANBI and Wildlands Conservation Trust. 2015. *Case study: Local government and civil society: Greater uMngeni Biosphere Reserve*. Compiled by Botts, E.A. for the South African National Biodiversity Institute, Pretoria.

Editing and design: SANBI Publishing 2015.

