



case study

Ratelgat Farm and the Consolidation of the Knersvlakte Conservation Area

#4

Indigenous culture and conservation



Iconic Ratelgat tourism and cultural learning centre along the N7.

Ratelgat is a 9 000 hectare (ha) historical Griqua farm on the Knersvlakte and home to many indigenous succulent plants. The Knersvlakte is an extensive dry plain in the center of the Succulent Karoo hotspot bounded on the east by the Bokkeveld Mountains, and falls into one of SKEP's eight priority areas.

As part of government's land reform programme the Ratelgat property (9,600 ha) was handed over to the Griqua National Conference (GNC) on 1 May 1999. The GNC has represented the Griqua community since 1914. At the time, the GNC consisted of 85 Griqua beneficiaries who agreed to make Ratelgat available for development that will benefit the entire South African Griqua community.

Griqua presence at Ratelgat dates back to 1920 when the paramount Chief, Die Kneg, A.A.S. le Fleur I (1867 – 1941) led his people to escape English Colonialism and to foster their Griqua culture at Ratelgat. The Griqua's are direct descendants of the Khoi and San with their first leader being Adam Kok I.

The Griqua Development Trust is the present owner of Ratelgat, which holds the land in trust for the benefit of the Griqua people. Their aim is to have Ratelgat as a sacred place for their sacred festivals and traditional events, and also to allow visitors to experience the culture of the Griqua by means of sharing stories, traditional dances and songs.

Supporting a matrix of harmonious land uses

The Griqua communities, some of whom are based in Vredendal, Western Cape, use Ratelgat for cultural, economic and educational purposes.

Subsequent funding and the establishment of ecotourism ventures have enabled the GNC to start developing four activity nodes at Ratelgat. This has taken the form of a living cultural and tourism centre, chalets, a memorial area housing a monument in honor of A.A.S Le Fleur and a traditional Griqua Kraal.

Environmental educational activities are collaboratively facilitated by CapeNature's Knersvlakte Conservation Area staff and members of the GNC, in which school learners from the surrounding areas are exposed to the unique quartz patches, dwarf succulents and unique flora vegetation of the Knersvlakte. After having been used for moderate commercial small stock farming for several decades, the Ratelgat farm is now subject to a low grazing intensity and small stock farming is practiced on the farm.

Ratelgat farm has also facilitated research activities. BIOTA Southern Africa which is a joint interdisciplinary biodiversity research initiative between South Africa, Germany and Namibia, are assisting the Griqua Development Trust in restoring degraded land, whilst researching climate change and land use impacts on biodiversity at Ratelgat. The main focus of research at this site are the phytodiversity patterns which are driven by small scale soil patterns as well the effects of climate change on biodiversity which are also investigated by experimental approaches. Major research activities are presently conducted by botanists and soil scientists.



Sacred area with grave of Paramount Chief AAS le Fleur II.



Environmental education activity at the Knersvlakte with learners from the Maskamsig community in Vanrhynsdorp, July 2011.



Ratelgat Day cultural activity, May 2011

Expanding protected areas and improving conservation management

The GNC announced that the Luiperskop (1800 ha) section of Ratelgat holds no historical value for them, and have therefore put Luiperskop up for sale to WWF-SA through the Leslie Hill Succulent Karoo Trust (LHSKT).

Luiperskop is the eastern portion of Ratelgat and falls within the core reserve zone of the proposed Knersvlakte Conservation Area. This transaction aims to benefit the conservation agencies and the GNC, as this purchasing agreement could see the remainder of the Ratelgat property being declared a Contract Nature Reserve through a stewardship agreement with CapeNature. This would then go a long way in ensuring greater protection of the region's quartz patches and associated endemic succulents. The proposed stewardship agreement will also aid the consolidation of the currently fragmented southern and central conserved portions. In turn, the GNC will benefit from the continued assistance in habitat management by CapeNature, as well as marketing exposure, attracting tourists, researchers and allow environmental educational activities to take place at Ratelgat, coupled by their conservation status.

Lessons learned

The Ratelgat case study is demonstrating the importance of involving local landowners to create conservation areas. The presence of Ratelgat has increased local and international awareness of the Succulent Karoo. It has also stimulated research and is bridging the gap between culture and conservation.

When considering a 'region', conservationists tend to think of biophysical resources such as plants and animals and their habitats, whereas the Griqua may tend to think that their history, culture and traditions are of more importance to them to practice at Ratelgat.

Due to land restitution, the GNC now protects a large portion of the Knersvlakte area. Through the GNC's willingness to sell their land to conservation, the GNC have demonstrated that by conserving biodiversity they are also able to conserve their culture.

Human belief systems in the form of organized religion or other forms of spirituality are often the most powerful drivers their human behavior. In the Griqua community these beliefs and their accompanying rituals at Ratelgat display their commitment towards the biodiversity at the Knersvlakte.

Human cultures and societies are defined by the biological and physical environments in which they live. People use their environments and resources for sustenance or recreation, develop cultures, economies, and lifestyles that reflect proximity to and dependence on those environments and resources. The human use and conservation management systems which are developed should be constructed to provide for the sustainable use of these environments, resources, human cultures, economies, and communities.

These differing thoughts yield very different 'maps' of the world. Since conservation involves human behavior, we need to begin to draw our 'maps' based on people's behavior coupled with the biophysical resources which they value.

The GNC has made many strides since acquiring the Ratelgat property in 1999 as well as their role in aiding CapeNature and WWF's conservation efforts in the Knersvlakte. Some may consider Ratelgat's development to date as unhurried but most would agree that the Griqua's combining their cultural experience with the Knersvlakte's conservation efforts is a recipe for success.

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