

POLICY BRIEF

'Living with biodiversity'

Reflections on the Princess Vlei Conservation Area (PVCA)

1. Introduction

The Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape with Wageningen University in the Netherlands, the University of Cape Town and the Oak Foundation has launched a project entitled "Living landscapes in action"¹ to promote and implement a new approach to conservation called "convivial conservation". The concept adopts a political ecology lens in an effort to integrate biodiversity and social justice; and decolonise the idea of conservation through the creation of lived-in landscapes.

The initiative which entails training a new generation of conservationists and establishing a communications programme to promote the idea of convivial conservation or "living landscapes in action" also finds practical expression in the establishment of three on-the-ground field sites which will seek to put the new concept into action.²

As part of the training, which comprises a registered course on "Political Ecology: New thinking on integrating biodiversity and social justice",³ participants from South Africa, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Kenya who work in government, research and civil society undertook a field trip to the Princess Vlei Conservation Area in Cape Town on 17 August 2022.

The living landscapes project was established in response to the apparent failure of current conservation paradigms to halt the global biodiversity extinction crisis. This has been attributed in large part to the ways in which traditional conservation approaches tend to separate people and nature instead of identifying new ways in which people may live with biodiversity.

Accordingly, a number of more transformative conservation paradigms have gained ground in recent years, including in Southern Africa where the success of efforts to conserve biodiversity have not been accompanied by a comparable success in promoting environmental justice.

In other words, conservation efforts have tended to pay little regard to historically rooted race, class and gender inequities, including in relation to how disadvantaged groups may seek to use land earmarked for biodiversity protection. This disregard has necessarily led to socio-economic and political contestation over the use of land for conservation as group interests collide along the fault-lines of historical inequity.

Conservation in urban spaces, which was the topic of the field trip, offers its own challenges and insights particularly in the context of apartheid spatial planning and environmental inequity. In this context, urban areas, including in Cape Town, urgently need to reframe their concept of conservation through a political ecology lens and explore the notion of convivial conservation or creating living

¹ See Princess Vlei Conservation Area in Cape Town.

² Mapungubwe, iSimangaliso and Cape Town.

³ This five-day course was piloted in Cape Town from 15 August to 19 August 2022.

landscapes as an alternative to the inequity of spatialised forms of conservation. A core aspect of such an approach is to support nature to thrive, with people as a part of the conserved space, rather than fenced off from it. This is important because urban dwellers are losing intimacy with nature and have little understanding of their interdependency with other species, or of how to live with the living world in a way that is not merely exploitative and extractive.

2. Princess Vlei Conservation Area (PVCA) field trip

Against this background, 17 of the first cadre of conservationists being trained in the new convivial-conservation approach visited the Princess Vlei Conservation Area in Cape Town on 17 August 2022, applying a political-ecology lens to the past and present challenges faced by the area and interviewing key interested stakeholders, including a City of Cape Town official, a community representative, a Khoi representative, two members of the Princess Vlei Community Forum, and a pupil from Lotus River High School.

2.1 Situational analysis

The conservators described Princess Vlei as “a perfect example of a South African story, encompassing violence and dispossession as well as hope and healing”. Before the arrival of European settlers, it was a watering ground for early Khoi herders. Subsequently, the area became symbolic of the enslavement, murder and expulsion of Khoi and later Coloured residents under colonialism as recounted in the tale of the princess after whom the vlei (shallow lake) was named – a lone Khoi woman of royal descent who was abducted and killed by Portuguese sailors and whose tears continue to flow in the form of the waterways running through the marshland. From the early 20th century, the Princess seemed to enter a period of relative harmony, with residents of all races dwelling on or near its banks. Subsequently, the area offered a refuge from daily cares and a resource in support of subsistence livelihoods for Coloured residents who were exiled with their families to the surrounding Cape Flats area during the forced removals imposed by the apartheid government from the 1950s.

Accordingly, the area, which is surrounded by low-income as well as relatively affluent communities in Southfield, Heathfield, Elfindale, Lotus River, Retreat and Grassy Park, is laden with cultural and socio-economic significance, including as a sacred site for Khoi people and as a place of recreation and renewal in the memory and imagination of many local residents. These narratives are promoted on a website (princessvlei.org) produced by the Princess Vlei Forum, which was established in 2012 to protect the area from commercial development; and led to the declaration of the PVCA as a provincial heritage site in 2020.⁴

The Princess Vlei Forum also promotes a focus on the need to protect the wetland area’s wealth of biological resources, including thousands of indigenous plants and trees as well as a number of endangered flora and fauna such as the Western Leopard Toad.

⁴ An earlier plan to build a shopping mall in the area was resurrected in 2010. Despite a 2011 environmental impact assessment which described the harm that such a development would cause, the provincial government threw its weight behind the proposal in 2012. Only after the mobilisation of significant local opposition was the plan finally abandoned by the municipality in 2014.

2.2 Biodiversity or social justice?

It is noteworthy that the Princess Vlei Forum's focus on protecting and promoting biodiversity can tend to frame opposition to the municipal government's governance of the area as a matter of technical or managerial reform relating to such conservation rather than as a matter of community concern at the undemocratic and exclusionary nature of the control being exerted over the space.⁵ Similarly, although the Princess Vlei Restoration Project established by the Princess Vlei forum talks of a "whole society" approach, it clearly views ecological restoration as a goal in itself, albeit one that can produce some beneficial side-effects for local people such as low-paid jobs clearing litter and preparing the ground for planting.⁶

By contrast, it has been argued that the value of Princess Vlei in the local imagination extends far beyond notions such as "storm water retention", "improved water quality" or "animal habitat". The political content of the civic-led opposition to a plan to build a shopping centre at the wetland which resurfaced in 2010 referenced deep concerns about who controls urban spaces in post-colonial society and to what end. In this regard, the process of ecological rehabilitation to establish a genuinely inclusive community and heritage park on the site may require a new more democratic governance arrangement for distributing expertise and giving voice.⁷

2.3 Using Princess Vlei

In fact, interest in the welfare of the Greater Princess Vlei Conservation Areas (GPVCA) clearly extends beyond the professional concerns of independent biodiversity conservation consultants and local-government parks and water management officials. As an officially designated public open space (POS), the area is unfenced and available for the use of all local residents. In this context, it is used by a wide range of stakeholders and groups with varied cultural, religious, economic and recreational interests and needs.

The groups with interests in the area include the Khoi people; the Princess Vlei Forum; religious groups; fishers; volunteers; local businesses; and surrounding residents, including local youth.

The space has significant extrinsic value in terms of opportunities to provide:

- Environmental education that exposes pupils to the significance of ecosystem services and environmental rehabilitation processes;
- A green space which improves the local environment;
- Recreational activities;
- Birding;

⁵ See Victoria O'Regan, "Conservationists call for watertight wetlands management amid claims of Princess Vlei destruction", *Daily Maverick*, 19 May 2021. Accessed at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-05-19-conservationists-call-for-watertight-wetlands-management-amid-claims-of-princess-vlei-destruction/>

⁶ See <https://www.ser-rrc.org/project/princess-vlei-restoration-project-for-the-greater-princess-vlei-conservation-area-cape-town-south-africa/>

⁷ See Henrik Ernstson, "The political nature of urban wetlands: speaking from Princess Vlei Wetland, Cape Town", *Urban Studies*, January 2014. Accessed at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263212756_The_political_nature_of_urban_wetlands_speaking_from_Princess_Vlei_Wetland_Cape_Town

- A neutral zone for gangs;
- A place for cultural and religious groups and spiritual activities; and
- A sense of dignity and belonging.

The area also offers a number of intrinsic job and wealth creation opportunities, including in relation to:

- Work clearing invasive species and preparing ground for planting;
- Gathering flowers and plants for sale;
- Fishing to sell catches; and
- Providing a market place for small-scale businesses.

Given the wide range of interests in, and uses of, the area, it is recommended that the management of the area should take the form of a multi-departmental and multi-disciplinary approach integrating municipal officials, local residents and civil society representatives. Only in this way can a plan guaranteeing the area's sustainable development be forged and implemented effectively.

2.4 Khoi interests in Princess Vlei

The Khoi people represent an important group with an interest in the development and use of Princess Vlei and a representative of one of a number of Khoi groups was interviewed by the visiting conservationists.

She noted that Khoi people had a good relationship with the municipality, although mistrust persisted due to past wrongs. She talked of the Khoi people's cultural and customary connection to the Vlei while indicating that, in the context of a lack of recognition of Khoi interests by the municipal government, Khoi people had no say over the management of the area. She said that Khoi people welcomed religious and cultural groups to the Vlei. She recommended that the municipality permit the reintroduction of subsistence fishing at the Vlei and that a local fish market should be re-established there.

She raised the concern that the municipality was deploying its regulatory powers to prevent members of the Khoi community from practising their cultural and spiritual beliefs and performing their rituals at Princess Vlei, indicating a breakdown in stakeholder relations on this issue. She also decried a lack of consultation on efforts to develop the area and a lack of community engagement in its daily management.

2.5 Governance

Social injustice is the process by which certain groups in society are marginalised; spatial injustice is the process by which there is an unequal provision of services across space. The urban area around PVCA is characterised by both forms of injustice, in large part as a result of a legacy of inequity produced by the history of colonialism and apartheid in Cape Town and South Africa. In this context, patterns of governance in the city can perpetuate injustice, causing harm to communities, through unfair and uneven distribution of resources and the imposition of partial, restrictive forms of access to spaces.

In this regard, some of the disadvantages, as well as opportunities, for Princess Vlei are highlighted by a comparative analysis of the forms of governance at PVCA and the nearby Rondevlei Nature; and by

a comparison of the concerns expressed by members of the Princess Vlei Forum and by officials at the municipality's recreation and parks department.

2.5.1 Zoning and management

The PVCA is zoned as public open space (POS), and is managed as a conservation area under a biodiversity agreement signed with the Western Cape Nature Conservation Board (CapeNature), which protects it in perpetuity as a Critical Biodiversity Area. The area conserves two endangered vegetation types and an important aquatic component. The PVCA is legally owned and managed by the Recreation and Parks (R&P) Department of the municipal government. Its management takes place in collaboration with municipality's Catchment, Rivers and Stormwater Management (CRSM) Department. R&P is responsible for the management of the terrestrial site, including its recreation and social aspects; while CRSM is responsible for the maintenance and management of the water body. The R&P staff complement have only limited training in conservation.

By contrast, the nearby Rondevlei Nature Reserve (RNR) is protected under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance⁸ and the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act 57 of 2003. It is accordingly managed by the municipal Environmental Management department with a dedicated complement of trained conservation staff.

In other words, the economic status of the stakeholders engaged in the two areas are quite different and the form of their management, including in terms of the extent and kind of the resources available, differs accordingly. In large part, the distinction is a legacy of apartheid, with the relatively well-tended RNR standing within an affluent, advantaged community that has historically enjoyed the privileges of colonialism; while PVCA stands in a relatively densely populated and economically disadvantaged area which suffered the depredations of spatial segregation under apartheid. As a result, Princess Vlei was neglected for a long time and much of its biodiversity and cultural importance was lost.

To summarise some of the salient impacts of this legacy: PVCA, as a POS, is unfenced and features little in the way of structural development for tourism. In addition, it has experienced safety issues, particularly once the municipality removed security guards from the area without consulting the community.

Meanwhile, RNR which is fenced and now admits visitors for free has been developed and well-maintained as a tourist destination. It boasts infrastructure to support recreational activities, including an office at the gate; enclosed parking; ablutions facilities; paved walking trails; and bird hides. In general, it offers a safe and aesthetically pleasing environment, with helpful staff at the entrance ready to disseminate information and educational pamphlets.

2.5.2 Management perspectives

The kinds of concerns raised by the members of the Princess Vlei Forum and representatives of the municipal recreation and parks department were quite different, indicating their respective interests and also, potentially, a lack of integration in the planning and management of the area.

⁸ The Convention was adopted in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971 and came into force in 1975.

Members of the Princess Vlei Forum talked of:

- Deep historical distrust between the public and the municipality. It was noted that municipal processes were bureaucratic and that municipal decision-making took place without proper community consultation;
- Unequal representation of the different socio-economic groups within the Forum;
- A decline in local activism in support of Princess Vlei once the proposed mall development was blocked;
- The Forum's funding sources and concern around the issue of funding;
- How subsistence livelihood practices, such as foraging to fishing, were not possible; and
- The possibility of transferring legal ownership of the land from the municipality so that the site may be managed more effectively for the community.

of the municipal recreation and parks department talked of:

- The relatively low levels of funding earmarked for the PVCA as a Conservation Area compared with those made available to nature reserves;
- The vested interests of stakeholders in a range of municipal departments;
- The value of local efforts to promote biodiversity;
- A memorandum of agreement (MOA) drafted by the department for religious groups covering the practice of baptism in polluted water;
- The difficulties encountered by the department in its efforts to meet local community needs and adhere to municipal policies relating to issues of safety and health; and
- An Environmental Management Plan (EMP) which had been drafted for the area and which was being reviewed by various municipal departments; after which it would be presented to the Forum for comment.

2.6 Rehabilitating Princess Vlei

The visiting conservationists also noted a number of other particular concerns which were raised by stakeholders in relation to rehabilitating Princess Vlei:

- As a result of long-term neglect of the vlei, the lilies that used to be harvested and sold by local woman are no longer there;
- Security is a significant concern in the southern part of Princess Vlei. Greater resources are required to prevent the illegal harvesting of endangered plants. More broadly, there are quite high crime rates in the area;
- Pollutants in the ground water and fresh surface waters which flow into wetlands and accumulate in sediments there can be toxic to plants and animals; and
- Invasive plant species which compete for natural resources with native plants have affected the ecology of the area.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

Local stakeholders reported a lack of community consultation on the development of the Princess Vlei Conservation Area and a lack of accountability in municipal decision-making in relation to the area.

The Princess Vlei Forum mainly comprises middle-class participants with a range of agendas. Given the great diversity among the local community, there is, accordingly, a lack of socio-economic equity in the composition of the forum.

Planning policies and practices from the apartheid era continue to shape the way in which the various socio-economic needs of different communities are addressed, or not, as the case may be. Meanwhile, restrictive, elitists by-laws and policies determining the extent and kind of access to particular spaces have effectively criminalised local and indigenous communities – that is, those stakeholders who view natural heritage sites in their neighbourhood as a means and resource that may be deployed to cushion the economic stress they feel in their daily lives.

The present spatial development plan for Princess Vlei contradicts its cultural significance as a sacred site

3.1 Recommendations

A number of key recommendations emerged from the conservationists' analysis and their consultation with the relevant stakeholders:

1. The development of Princess Vlei should be undertaken through a process of convivial conservation in the spirit of ubuntu;
2. The municipality must adhere to the principles of spatial justice and provide equitable services to communities and people regardless of their location;
3. The municipal government (the City of Cape Town) must prioritise Princess Vlei in its integrated development planning and should allocate an adequate budget to support the operations and efforts of the Princess Vlei Forum, including by supporting the establishment of proper tourism facilities there;
4. Given the wide range of interests in, and uses of, the area, the management of the area should take the form of a multi-departmental and multi-disciplinary approach integrating municipal official, local residents and civil society representatives;
5. In this regard, there should be exploration of the possibility of transferring legal ownership of the land from the municipality so that the site may be managed more effectively for the community;
6. The Environmental Management Plan for the area should be revised in coordination with all interested stakeholders from the surrounding community;
7. The Princess Vlei Forum should strive to be inclusive, engaging a full range of stakeholders from the surrounding communities. Such efforts, which should address the unequal

representation of the different socio-economic groups within the Forum, may also help to resolve the recent decline in local activism in support of Princess Vlei;

8. Princess Vlei Forum should seek closer collaboration with relevant local organisations, including as sources of funding. This is a matter of particular concern given the relatively little funding earmarked for the PVCA as a Conservation Area compared with that made available to nature reserves;
9. Funds may be raised by encouraging the adoption of endangered plants and/or animals for particular sites of development in the area which may be renamed, for example, the “Rondevlei Spiderhead Bird Hide” or “Western Leopard Toad Way”;
10. The Princess Vlei Forum should identify ways of addressing how green developments within the park may be promoted without necessarily producing gentrification;
11. Communities should be incentivised to become involved at Princess Vlei, including by being allowed to harvest flowers; cut and collect wood; and engage in subsistence fishing. At the same time, greater resources and security are required to prevent the illegal harvesting of endangered plants; and
12. The municipality should recognise the spiritual value attached to Princess Vlei by Khoi people and stop deploying its regulatory powers to prevent members of this community from practising their cultural and spiritual beliefs and performing their rituals at Princess Vlei.

