Living Landscapes in Action

Why livelihoods, culture, and heritage matter for the people of the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape, Limpopo, South Africa

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This policy paper reports findings from the Living Landscape in Action (LLA) project, which is a multi-cited research project based at the Institute for Poverty Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), University of the Western Cape (UWC). The overall aim of the LLA project is to infuse biodiversity conservation with social and spatial justice. Hence, our findings in this policy paper do not lend themselves to conservation alone, but also to the broader societal issues that people living in and adjacent to cultural- and biodiversity-protected areas must deal with daily. This policy paper reflects on one LLA site – the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape – with a specific focus on Den Staat farm.

Key findings

- **Livelihoods and crop production**: Crop farming is one of the key livelihoods in the Mapungubwe cultural landscape. However, the free movement of damage-causing herbivores like hippopotamus and elephants hinders successful harvest for emerging commercial and subsistence farmers. This discourages many community members from considering crop farming as a viable livelihood. Although the government does provide compensation for damages, farmers highlight that the compensation does not meet the overall costs. In addition, many of the people who practise subsistence farming are unaware of how to initiate the compensation process.
- **Livelihoods and livestock production**: Livestock farming is a livelihood and a cultural practice in the landscape. Wild animals like elephants encroach on the farm and compete with livestock for resources, particularly during dry periods. In addition, herders cannot expand their grazing areas due to restrictions in protected areas.
- **Public-partnerships**: Where the state leases land to private farmers, there ought to be a concerted effort to partner with private enterprises that have demonstrable fair labour conditions.
- **Access**: Burial sites and sacred ancestral spaces are spread across the Mapungubwe cultural landscape, including private, state-leased, and state-owned land. However, communities often struggle to access these areas, which inhibits them from practising rituals and participating in hunting, both as a livelihood and a cultural practice.
- **Consultative exclusion**: There are several gaps in consultative measures taken by South African National Parks (SANParks), and the Department of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism Limpopo (LEDET) with the communities in the region. Only a select few people are invited to meetings or initiatives such as the Mapungubwe National Park forum. Consequently, only a few people can contribute to discussions about how to manage the park's biodiversity and cultural heritage. This exclusion invariably affects livelihoods.



Fig. 1: Mapungubwe Hill which is located in Mapungubwe National Park. Picture: Shoot the Breeze Productions for PLAAS.

Overview of research methodology and partners

Our research in the Mapungubwe cultural landscape (MCL) aimed to investigate how social and spatial justice considerations could be realised in cultural and biodiversity landscapes. Empirical evidence suggests that local communities' livelihoods are often sidelined in favour of biodiversity goals and heritage preservation. The research set out to understand local communities' livelihoods in the MCL, as a way to reverse the colonial and apartheid legacies of dispossession and interrogate Eurocentric visions of biodiversity and heritage preservation.

The project used a slow methodology, which entails an immersive, prolonged ethnographic approach that allows for deep relationship-building by being part of the local community's daily rhythms and interactions. The research was conducted using various participatory-research tools and approaches, such as "deep hanging out" (Walmsley 2018; Nair 2021; Snodgrass et al. 2024) and "go-along" (Kusenbach, 2003), as well as visual methods (Alfonso et al, 2004; Holm, 2008) that aided in exploring and communicating community experiences of conservation. The research team included a senior researcher working predominantly remotely from the field and an associate researcher who lived with the community for two years, employing the slow methodology. In addition to participatory-research tools, the project emphasised the importance of fostering trust and mutual respect. This was accomplished through continuous dialogue, transparency in the research process, and seeking the active involvement of community members in decision-making. Moreover, regular feedback sessions were held to ensure the research remained aligned with the community's priorities and to address any concerns or grievances promptly.

The LLA project also collaborated with Nkuzi Development Association as our civil-society partner. Together we organised a labour rights workshop for farm workers and dwellers living in the landscape. A second human rights workshop was hosted at Den Staat farm (see figure 2), planned and executed by Nkuzi Development Association and the South African Human Rights Commission. The former was also active in collecting life histories and providing legal advice to land claimants who have been denied access to their family burial sites on private farms.



Figure 2: Residents and community members from various farms in the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape attending a farm labour and farm dwellers rights workshop. The workshop was held at Den Staat farm. Picture: Maud Sebelebele (2 April 2023).

Research context and background

MCL is located in the Musina Municipality in the Vhembe District, as well as the Blouberg municipality, which falls under the Capricorn District Municipality in Limpopo. The landscape lies between Beitbridge and Pontdrift, the border crossings to Zimbabwe and Botswana, respectively. The Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape straddles the borders of South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Botswana at the confluence of the Shashe and Limpopo rivers (see figure 3). The closest towns, Musina and Alldays, serve as the main shopping and administrative areas.

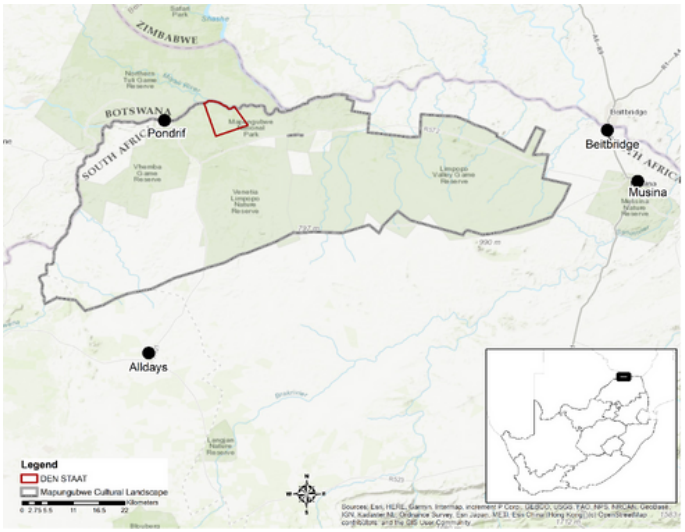


Figure 3: A map of the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape and Den Staat farm boundaries. The areas highlighted in green represent government and private land that is identified and inscribed for biodiversity and heritage preservation. Source: PLAAS (15 February 2023).

Land tenure distribution

The property ownership layout of the MCL and its existing tenure system remain shaped by colonialism and the legislative legacies of the Native Land Act (Act No. 27 of 1913). The Native Land Act of 1913 placed into legislation indigenous communities' dispossession of and subsequently stripped them of their rights to rent or own property, especially in designated white communities (Beinart, and Delius, 2014; Hall, 2014). Through the Act, 87% of South African's land and natural resources was formally allocated to the white minority population or owned by the state, while indigenous communities were left to share the remainder of the land. The ramifications of colonialism and the Native Land Act of 1913 extended beyond exclusion of land ownership - it also facilitated the privatisation of natural resources and restricted indigenous communities' access and ownership of natural resources.

Today, the majority of the land in the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscapes is divided between private commercial farmers, the De Beers Group, and the state. The main land use practices in the MCL includes mining, biodiversity and heritage conservation, game farming, commercial irrigated farming, and livestock farming, all spread out on a mosaic of private, state and communal land.

Colonialism and the Native Land Act of 1913 also significantly contributed to the establishment of exploitative labour practices within South Africa. In their paper, Marthinus van Staden (2024) reflects on how colonialism and the Native Land Act of 1913 not only facilitated dispossession of land from indigenous communities but also institutionalised systems where these communities were subjected to abysmal working conditions (van Staden, 2024). Many people were forced into dire labour arrangements that rendered them either unpaid labour tenants or low-wage labourers. The latter practices not only undermined the dignity and rights of indigenous people in South Africa but also perpetuated a cycle of economic disenfranchisement and social inequality, therefore, fostering a legacy of systemic oppression that would have lasting effects on the socio-economic of black communities (Hall, 2014).

Cultural and archaeological significance and preservation

The MCL is a unique region where cultural heritage and natural biodiversity conservation are intricately intertwined. The cultural significance of the MCL is also evidenced by historical sites such as sacred mountains, aquifers, caves, and rock art that are located within the landscape. The MCL is home to the Mapungubwe Hill, which housed the ancient Greater Mapungubwe Kingdom (K2). The Mapungubwe Kingdom is documented to be the greatest civilisation in southern Africa and was a thriving centre of trade between 900 and 1300 AD (Meyer, 2000). According to archaeologists, the people of Mapungubwe traded in ivory, copper, iron, and gold, with trading networks that reached as far as the Middle East, India, and China (Berger, 2009; Huffman, 2009).

K2 and the Mapungubwe National Park are legally protected through multiple legislations that include the National Heritage Resources Act (No. 25 of 1999), the World Heritage Convention Act (Act No. 43 of 1999), the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act (No. 57 of 2003), and the National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act (Act No. 10 of 2004) (South African National Parks, 2019, p.03; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2011). The above-mentioned Acts also govern the management, access, and conservation of the heritage sites, the biodiversity and natural resources that are located with the Mapungubwe National Park and its buffer zones (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2011).

World Heritage status and transfrontier biodiversity conservation

The MCL was declared a National Heritage Site in 2001 and later inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2013 (SANParks, 2019, p.70). In 2006, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Botswana signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to establish the Limpopo-Shashe transfrontier conservation area. The Limpopo-Shashe transfrontier conservation area was later renamed the Greater Mapungubwe Transfrontier Conservation Area (GMTFCA) in 2009 (SANParks, 2019, p.70). Through the MoU, a section of the MCL was incorporated into the GMTFCA. The recognition of the MCL as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and its integration into the Greater Mapungubwe Transfrontier Conservation Area also introduced multilayered governance on the access, use and management of natural resources and designated locations in the MCL.

Today, the legacy of the accumulation and privatisation of land and natural resources, historic labour injustices, and the introduction of the multilayered national and regional conservation laws in the area continue to impact the descendants of the landscape.

A microcosm of these broader challenges can be observed on Den Staat farm, which is located between the eastern and western sections of the Mapungubwe National Park. Reflections from this particular site are noteworthy because they highlight the tensions between actualising livelihoods, preserving culture (see figure 3), and conserving biodiversity in a world heritage site located along international borders.

Den Staat farm



Figure 4: An elephant walking past a board sign written Den Staat farm. The board sign is situated at the gate entrance into Den Staat farm. Picture: Shoot the Breeze Productions for PLAAS (19 April 2024).

One of the main sites of the LLA project in the broader MCL is Den Staat farm. Den Staat farm is a restituted communal farm located along the banks of the Limpopo River. In 1998, the Machete and Sematla families launched a land claim for Den Staat farm through the Restitution of Land Rights Act of 1994. The Regional Land Claims Commission declared the claim valid in December 1998 and returned the farm to the Machete community under the management of the Ga-Machete Communal CPA by 2020 (SANParks, 2019, p.20). The Restitution of Land Rights Act (Act 22 of 1994) was initiated by the Democratic government of South African with the intention to redress the injustice imposed by the the Native Land Act (Act No. 27 of 1913). Den Staat farm is home to members of the Sematla family, registered CPA members for Den Staat farm and their families, and a fluctuating number of seasonal and permanent farm workers who relocated to the farm seeking housing and employment opportunities in the region. The farm also accommodates a fluctuating number of Expanded Public Works Programme workers, who are hired through the SANParks Biodiversity Social Projects programme.

Culture, livelihoods, and biodiversity conservation

Den Staat farm exemplifies the bittersweet coexistence between people and nature, as well as the injustices experienced by communities living adjacent to protected areas and heritage sites. With its rich natural resources, Den Staat farm holds immense potential as a thriving communal enterprise. What makes the farm particularly unique is that it is also a cultural sanctuary for many people. Den Staat farm houses sacred hills and water bodies. It is home to a family whose lineage is deeply rooted in the landscape and who hold extensive knowledge of the area's history. Den Staat farm also serves as an oasis and refuge for people who have lost access to their ancestral lands. People that lost access to their old homesteads due to evictions stay overnight at Den Staat farm as they try to negotiate access to their ancestral lands with the current (mainly

white) landowners in the region. People also often visit Den Staat farm to reconnect with their heritage, reminisce, and show their children where their families originated.

As previously highlighted, Den Staat farm is sandwiched between the western and eastern sections of Mapungubwe National Park. Den Staat farm's proximity to Mapungubwe National Park entails that the legislative laws that govern, protect, and control biodiversity and natural resources within the Mapungubwe National Park also affect the community's control and access to those resources. Moreover, the dilapidated fence between Mapungubwe National Park and Den Staat farm also allows the farm to be a corridor for wildlife between the western and eastern sections of Mapungubwe National Par (see figure 5).



Figure 5: The dilapidated fence that separates Mapungubwe National Park and Den Staat farm. Picture: Maud Sebelebele (12 December2024).

The community values the presence of wildlife, but climate change and prolonged droughts have led to overgrazing and forage scarcity for both wildlife and domestic livestock on Den Staat farm. As a result, elephants displace livestock from their grazing fields and encroach on communal homesteads in search of food. Elephants also kill small stock animals like goats when they fear the goats will attract predators to their young. In addition, damage-causing herbivores like elephants and hippopotamus can easily access croplands and eat crops, thus causing livelihood setbacks for aspiring farmers (see figure 6).

Den Staat farm is home to two emerging crop farmers who market their goods in local towns and at the Beitbridge border (see figure 7). In addition to working on surrounding farms, most of the community members sustain their livelihoods through subsistence fishing, subsistence crop farming, and hunting for household consumption and trade within the community and neighbouring towns. The farm also hosts several sheep, goat and cattle herders, and livestock owners (see figure 8). A handful of community members also create floor mats and baskets from locally sourced cut grass and palm tree leaves to sell in surrounding farms and towns.



Figure 6: Two lines of maize crops that were eaten by an elephant overnight. The crops belonged to a Den Staat community member who was trying their hand at maize production. The crop was planted with the aim of providing enough maize meal for the community member's family to consume for the rest of the year, as well as a surplus to sell. Picture: Maud Sebelebele (05 December 2023).



Figure 7: Organised and arranged stacks of orange sacks filled with butternut squash fruit that were planted, harvested and packed by one of the two small scale farmers from Den Staat farm. The stacks of butternut squash fruit were ready for market and waiting for buyers. Picture: Maud Sebelebele (14 December 2022).



Figure 8: A herder and his companion dog directing cattle to one of the grazing fields on Den Staat farm. Picture: Shoot the Breeze Productions for PLAAS (19 April 2024).

Beyond intrinsic needs, Den Staat farm also serves as a rare access point to natural resources like fish, game meat, medicinal plants, and river water for those people who live within and outside the Mapungubwe landscape (see Figure 9). The latter is because most of the public roads (that lead to the Limpopo River) are securitised, surveillanced or gated by private farmers in the landscape. This means there are only a few people who can access resources like fish, game meat, medicinal plants, and river water in the landscape.



Figure 9: A woman from Musina who travelled to Den Staat farm to catch fish to provide protein for her and her family. Picture: Maud Sebelebele (16 March 2023).

Key findings

1. Unethical labour practices

Land use in the MCL includes private agricultural farms and game farms that employ people from the surrounding communities and from Den Staat farm. During our research, we observed that white commercial farms do not comply with fair labour conditions. Moreover, although the private farmers do involve state departments when they need them for labour disputes, state authorities like extension officers from the Department of Labour and South African Police Service officers find it difficult to enter or visit these farms because "their gates are always locked". The limited access to these farms means the Department of Labour is unable to enter, observe, build cases against, or regulate the unethical labour practices that occur on these border farms.

2. 'Invibilised' belonging

The Greater Mapungubwe Kingdom was historically inhabited by the people of the Shashe-Limpopo Basin, who thrived in a landscape without sovereign borders. Descendants of the landscape highlight how their parents used to share and how the landscape once fostered seamless interactions, shared traditions, and thriving trade networks between communities in what are now South Africa, Botswana, and Zimbabwe. However, the imposition of modern political boundaries and, later, the introduction of conservation, together with its rigid policies, has fragmented the region and disrupted these longstanding sociocultural connections.

Before the establishment of borders, the landscape was characterised by cooperative social structures and fluid movements of people, goods, and ideas. Clans freely traded livestock and agricultural products and intermarriages were a key element of strengthening ties between communities across the region. The development of international borders, coupled with strict border regulations and the establishment of the GMTFCA (as noted by Sinthumule, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020) has imposed restrictions that not only limit physical access, but also have an effect on access to livelihoods.

These restrictions have led to the erosion of cultural identity and the displacement of spiritual and social activities. Many clans lost their ancestral claims and deep sense of belonging within the landscape, which was once integral to their cultural and spiritual life. This "invisibilisation" is further entrenched by the selective commercialisation of heritage that focuses primarily on the period between 900 and 1300 AD. This limited historical scope disregards the continuing presence and contributions of indigenous communities over subsequent centuries. Exclusionary practices are perpetuated in the creation of biodiversity maps that do not include or capture the existence of local people who currently occupy the land. In addition, the exclusion of indigenous voices from conservation management and decision-making processes exacerbates tensions between heritage preservation and local community needs. A more inclusive approach that integrates livelihoods, conservation, and cultural preservation would help to address these challenges, fostering sustainable relationships between communities and the landscape they have inhabited for generations.

3. Access to natural and sacred spaces, and burial sites

Natural spaces are often perceived as spiritually untouched, pure, and clean. Consequently, the natural resources in these environments are believed to be free from dark spirits that might otherwise compromise their healing properties. The latter reason underscores why natural spaces like protected areas are sought after for various cultural and spiritual practices, including initiation ceremonies, religious gatherings, spiritual alignment, and ancestral rituals. The practice of appeasing ancestors is not only significant for the communities conducting these rituals, but also has environmental and conservation benefits. For instance, the Bakwena (who live in Den Staat farm) and the Vhangona (along with a number of various clans that laid claim to the MCL) play the significant role of summoning the first summer rains, which are essential for revitalising and bringing "krag" (power) back to the veld after the dry season. Therefore, ensuring these clans have access to their ancestral lands in the MCL – beyond just Mapungubwe National Park – is vital for maintaining these practices and securing the blessing of rainfall.

Secondly, appeasing ancestors often involves presenting traditional alcohol and edible offerings, such as fruit, to both the ancestors and totem animals that symbolise and embody the very community practising the ritual. This reciprocal relationship extends to prayers for divine and ancestral protection for the totem animals, who, in turn, safeguard their communities. These practices exemplify the deep connection between people and nature, highlighting the need for conservationists to explore the intrinsic and extrinsic values linked to access to sacred spaces and burial sites. Moreover, these examples highlight the intricate relationship between people, nature, and livelihoods. They also illustrate the nuanced connections between

cultural practices and indigenous ecological knowledge, emphasising the importance of fostering collaboration between communities and conservation practitioners.

Thirdly, people visit burial sites for various reasons, including: to reconnect with their deceased loved ones, to search for the feeling of home, to ask for blessings, and to introduce their children and grandchildren to their ancestral resting place. To these people, access to burial sites also forms part of a basic spiritual need that gives them a sense of belonging and a space where they feel deeply connected to their ancestors. In our interviews, it was noted that parks have restrictions and regulations in terms of people accessing certain parts of the protected areas. Moreover, communities need permission or a permit to enter and access the protected areas. Sometimes people are denied access to these areas because the person in charge of issuing permits is unavailable or rangers are unavailable and cannot accompany them. One of our participants reflected, "Sometimes you want to do a round trip to visit your grandfather's grave and then return to the city, or you saw in your dream that your grandfather wants you to visit his grave site immediately. It is not that linear because of the unfavourable terms and conditions that come with the permit systems." Such grievances were shared by people who needed access to certain medicinal plants and sacred spaces like streams, the top of a mountain, and waterfalls and aquifers to collect water for prayer, as well as access to burial sites.



Figure 10: An example of one of the accessible burial sites in the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape. The majority of the inaccessible burial sites do not have a tombstone (headstone) on them. This picture of the burial site of Moseri Mokwena who was one of the patriarchs of the local Bakwena community and is located in Mapungubwe National Park. Picture: Shoot the Breeze Productions for PLAAS (18 April 2024).

4. Governance and structural barriers

Most of the conservation practitioners (particularly those from Black ethnic groups) understand the need for communities to access natural resources in conservation spaces. In fact, some of the black and brown rangers and conservation practitioners that we interviewed and engaged with are from communities that are located next to or opposite protected areas. A number of the mentioned rangers and conservation practitioners shared that they have conflicting thoughts and feelings about the restrictive and outdated regulations they need to apply and feel these laws are actually marginalising the communities they come from. One of the rangers reflected: "All that person needed was to soak in the stream so that they can wash away the dark spirit that is following them, however, I cannot allow it because this is a protected area and bathing of any sort is not allowed." The latter reflection indicates how black and brown conservation practitioners also need platforms to strengthen their voices, particularly when it comes to balancing the restrictive conservation laws and their belief systems.

5. State and community engagements

Community engagement and consultation is one of the key management objectives of the SANParks management plan for Mapungubwe National Park. During our time spent in the landscape, the community insisted that the Mapungubwe National Park management follows a top-down approach and communicates and invites only elite members of the Den Staat farm community, Machete CPA members, and land-claimant beneficiaries to meetings and platforms like the Mapungubwe National Park forum. The latter approach is not fair because the decisions made in those structures affect the entire Den Staat community. Therefore, it is crucial that the park includes the broader community in all its development plans.

6. Education and infrastructure

Den Staat farm has a poor road that renders access to the farm nearly impossible during the rainy season, isolating the farm and stifling agricultural productivity. Access to schools for children living on the farm is equally limited, as government-provided transport supports only primary-school children. Families must independently find ways to send their children to high school, thus leaving many children without educational opportunities. Frustrated community members said it seems as if government priorities often favour spending millions on protecting nature and wildlife rather than addressing the needs of marginalised communities living near protected areas.

One of the land claimants expressed the following:

> "It is as if the government wants to slowly push us out of the land that we fought so hard for…". - Land claimant 1, Den Staat farm, 20 March 2023

Another participant explained that land restitution feels like an oxymoron to them:

> "Yes, it feels good that the farm is officially reinstated back to us, but we do not feel good because it is as if we are being punished for it… as if we do not belong here, but animals do… It is as if someone has given you shoes as a gift, however, the shoes have holes underneath them so you cannot do anything with those shoes… They feel useless because you are continuously pricked by a stone or daily pricked by those thick white thorns from an Acacia tree." - Land claimant 2, Den Staat farm, 18 April 2023

Although providing a school bus for high school learners from Den Staat farm and surrounding farms does not speak directly to heritage and biodiversity conservation, it is important because it affects the communities' livelihoods in the long term.

Recommendations

1. Enable communities to access their graves and spiritually significant sites located throughout the entire MCL. These include burial sites on private farms, Mapungubwe National Park, and Venetia Limpopo Nature Reserve. By integrating cultural heritage, social justice, and conservation, the MCL can serve as a model for sustainable, inclusive development that respects both biodiversity and human dignity.
2. Erect an electric fence around areas the Den Staat farm community uses for livelihood activities, subsistence, and commercial farming. The fences will help to deter problematic animals from destroying their crops.
3. Develop strict criteria for the selection of private companies that manage state farmland. For the MCL we propose that the following criteria need to be met by private companies: proven record of fair and just labour practices; an ethos of sustainable farming practices (not greenwashing); and, finally, a commitment to racial and gender transformation.
    - Develop a monitoring and evaluation framework for the above.
4. Legalise local communities' hunting and trade in meat as a legitimate and an important source of protein. Biodiversity economy should include community hunting practices as a form of restoration of their livelihoods and cultural practices.
5. Support the community to rebuild the fishing dams that were destroyed during the flooding in the early 2000s. The dams used to be a permanent feature on the farm, but are now seasonal and continue to disintegrate because of climatic shocks like flash floods. The fishing dams are an important feature of Den Staat farm because they support the emerging commercial farmers with easy access to irrigation water as well as access to fish for the community. In their prime (after good rains), the dams attract diverse species of wildlife and birds, as well as tourists to the farm.

Conclusion

The Den Staat farm case underscores the critical need for inclusive community development strategies in the MCL. This is important because there are more farms in the landscape that are the subject of land claims and earmarked for land restitution or redistribution. If the state decides to restore the earmarked land back to communities then the case of Den Staat farm is a case study, emphasising the need for the government to consider approaches that also involve serving communities who live next to protected areas. Improved infrastructure and community investment could possibly aid in transforming Den Staat farm into a model of coexistence, demonstrating how conservation and community well-being can thrive together. Addressing community livelihood challenges through improved infrastructure and community support, as well as recognising Black people's belonging in the landscape, could transform the farm into a model for sustainable coexistence and cultural preservation in the region.

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