

Living Landscapes in Action

Co-management: a failed promise for the Dukuduku and KwaNibela communities surrounding the iSimangaliso Wetland Park

Siphesihle Mbhele, Ayanda Madlala, and Professor Moenieba Isaacs

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In South Africa, the politics of parks is rooted in forced removals and a history of traditional communities situated in landscapes rich in natural resources and cultural significance being dispossessed of their land (Hansen, 2013). These removals led to the isolation and exclusion of traditional communities through policies and restrictions, preventing them from accessing their former ancestral lands, which were turned into protected areas (Madlala et al, forthcoming). This shift affected communities' access to natural resources and created challenges for the sustainability of their livelihoods. In the context of apartheid South Africa and the history of conservation, this exclusion was a reflection of broader policies, such as the Native Land Act of 1913, The Bantu Labour Act of 1964,^[2] Group Areas Act of 1950, and others, which already existed and were aimed at the oppression and exclusion of black people (Hauck and Sowman, 2005; Peer, 2022).

This policy brief reviews the implementation of co-management arrangements in the iSimangaliso Wetland Park (IWP) region. We draw on the experiences of the Dukuduku and KwaNibela communities, who continuously have to bear the brunt of social and spatial injustices caused by these agreements. The policy brief is based on findings from the Living Landscapes in Action (LLA) project based at the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), University of the Western Cape (UWC), where two associate researchers have been based in the communities for more than two years (see Madlala et al, forthcoming). The LLA project seeks to integrate social and spatial justice into biodiversity conservation that considers the historical injustices of land dispossession and the displacement of local communities for conservation, a practice also referred to as fortress conservation. We have also worked collaboratively with Masifundise Development Trust fisher representatives in the Dukuduku and KwaNibela areas. In this policy brief, the focus is on the governance arrangements put in place for the communities surrounding the IWP to implement.

Key messages

- The current approach to the management and governance of the IWP together with communities falls short in terms of the co-management agreement they adopted in December 2011 through support from the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA).
- Communities surrounding IWP, Dukuduku and KwaNibela criticise co-management policies as “only good on paper” and fail to consider important community needs as they have been developed without proper inclusive consultation, and have resulted in imposed decisions and regulations. A true co-management approach has not been followed.
- Conflicts over natural resource access for communities living adjacent to IWP, who rely mainly on nature for livelihood sustainability and income generation, continue to put strain on their relationships with IWP management.
- The often violent and brutal responses from park rangers towards natural resource users (such as fishers, grass cutters, traditional healers) when accessing the park to source their livelihoods make co-management of natural resources extremely difficult and hinder its success.
- The need for communities to spend time in the park to perform spiritual and traditional practices, including harvesting bulbs for traditional use and medicine, are often ignored. This is because of time-based regulations that stipulate that entering the park outside specified times means breaking the law.
- Small acts of taking away people's dignity and criminalising livelihood activities experienced by the Dukuduku and KwaNibela communities based on strict management regulations all led to a breakdown of relationships between IWP and the communities.
- The shooting and killing of fishers, or attacks by wild animals on people who enter the park “illegally”, has a negative effect on the co-management agreement with IWP.
- The contestation over unsettled land claims, as well as restrictions on land use and livelihood activities that communities are allowed to practise in the park makes the co-management decision-making process non-inclusive, top down, restrictive, and not beneficial to the communities.

A short history of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park

iSimangaliso Wetland Park, a public conservation area, was proclaimed a World Heritage Site in December 1999 (DEAT, 2009). This was because of the area's recognition by the United Nations Education Science and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) for its unique ecological and biological processes, superlative natural phenomena, and biodiversity.



Figure 1: Fisher walking along the KwaNibela lake shores, on his way to enter the lake. Photo: Siphesihle Mbhele

IWP was first given the name Rio dos Medos do Ouro, meaning River of the Gold Dunes, by the survivors of a Portuguese shipwreck (São Bento or Saint Benedict) in 1554 (Kloppers 2014). The park and region's long history shows several phases in the development of the area to what it is today. The key elements to track in the park's establishment include recognising the landscapes and their uses before "conservation", which necessitates understanding the landscapes under the Tembe and Maputo royal families (Kloppers 2014). These two tribes existed together in borderless and fenceless territories with structural forms of exclusion: British colonisation and the effect on the existing dynamics of traditional society in the region, as well as apartheid and its institutionalised racism through legislation and other policies. It is, therefore, important to recognise how these elements, including access to natural resources for people living in and around these landscapes, have all intersected and changed over time.

As with other parts of Africa, this portion of South Africa experienced colonisation under the British administration, which gave birth to British AmaThongaland (Klopper, 2014). AmaThongaland was divided into crown and trust land; crown land belonged to the British and trust land was allocated to the Mabudu tribe (Kloppers, 2014). The British later proclaimed St Lucia as a township, in 1822. In 1897, British AmaThongaland was merged with the Ingwavuma district of Zululand (Harries, 1983). It was later established by Van Warmelo (the government ethnologist) that 62% of the people of Ingwavuma, of which half comprised British AmaThongaland, were under the administration of Mabudu chiefs. "The Bantustan policies of apartheid, since 1948 entrenched Zulu control over AmaThongaland. The area became increasingly integrated in the structures of Native and later Bantu administration" (Klopper, 2014).

iSimangaliso, which means "a place of miracle and wonder", was once referred to as the Greater St Lucia, the first conservation park to be established in this region during the colonial period. Its rich history illustrates several phases in the establishment of the park, encompassing elements of land dispossession, displacement, and forced removals, affecting people's livelihoods.

To date, this protected area covers about 330 000 hectares, including both marine and terrestrial landscapes. Priority is given to the protection of fauna and flora species. This coverage comprises about 85 000 hectares of marine reserves – 9% of South Africa's coastline – stretching along the Indian Ocean from Kosi Bay (Mozambican border in the north) to Maphelane (south of the St Lucia Estuary).



Figure 2: Women fishers in St Lucia lake, fishing for subsistence. Photo: Ayanda Madlala

Governance structure: iSimangaliso Conservation Management Authority

The governance of the park is separated into two bodies of authority: Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (EKZNW) and iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority (IWPA). The IWPA is the nationally appointed management authority, in terms of the Protected Areas Act (2003), and is statutorily authorised not only to manage the park, but also to make conservation and management decisions while reporting to the national Department of Forestry, Fisheries, and the Environment (DFFE). Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife derives its authority and responsibility through its agreement with the IWPA and operates as the day-to-day conservation manager, which means implementing the IWP policies through law enforcement and management of the park's daily operations. The rights and responsibilities of IWPA, EKZNW, and the KZN Tourism Authority in terms of managing and developing the IWP are regulated through legislation and have been further elaborated through a management agreement signed in August 2001 by these parties. The agreement specifies that the parties will cooperate in meeting park management objectives.

The regulations proclaiming the iSimangaliso Wetland Park World Heritage Site also established the IWPA to manage the site through a board and executive staff component. The World Heritage Convention Act outlines the operating requirements for a World Heritage Site and is a guiding document. As such, the board is responsible for policy formulation and the formal direction of the executive.

The executive staff component, headed by a chief executive officer, is responsible for the operations of the Authority, including relationships with other organisations such as EKZNW, the KZN

Tourism Authority, and local government et cetera. Furthermore, the Act makes provision for the Authority to prescribe rules in connection with the World Heritage Site under its jurisdiction on such matters as the minister may determine.

The IWPA also has the mandate to enter into cooperative governance agreements with a range of institutions across all spheres of government, including local government. Key to these are the traditional authorities and land claimants (particularly in Dukuduku community), who are the descendants of the custodians of the land and natural-resource users.

Co-management of natural resources

Over the past 30 years, leading scholars, Jentoft in particular, led the fisheries co-management, gaining inspiration from the successful Norwegian co-management between fishers, unions, and the fisheries department (Jentoft, 2000), as well as the Japanese model of community fisheries management. These models are much cited and Scandinavian development agencies promoted its model in Asia and Africa. With the change to more democratic movements in Southern Africa, the fisheries co-management model was tested with funding from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) and Danish International Development (Danida). South Africa was one of the case studies. Hauck and Sowman (2003) led the fisheries co-management implementation process in South Africa, together with Hara (2000) and Njaya (2009) in Malawi, as well as Malasha (2003) in Zambia. All leading scholars in the field of co-management implementation in Southern Africa. In South Africa, when co-management was piloted, communities supported monitoring of the resources, but contested the rights allocations. In the rest of Southern Africa, the governments were reluctant to share actual management responsibilities (Normann et al, 1998; Hara and Nielson, 2003).

The transition to a more participatory democracy in South Africa post-1994 was driven by a transformative agenda that aimed at redressing the injustices of the past, particularly in terms of previously marginalised groups (Hauck and Sowman, 2005). This led to major policy reform, which also included the management of natural resources, resulting in the establishment of co-management arrangements.

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What is co-management?

Co-management is a collaborative institutional and organisational arrangement between a government and user groups for effective management of a defined resource (Hara, 2000). Co-management was introduced based on the evidence of failure of state-centric management approaches, particularly in Southern Africa, and a resurgence of interest in grass-roots democracy after apartheid, which gave rise to land claims; fishing rights; hunting; and the right to collect plants, bulbs, and roots for medicinal use. Communities were interested in local-level planning to improve and sustain their livelihoods. They also demanded more public participation around issues, particularly those concerning natural resources that affect them. As time passed, co-management was also referred to as cooperative management, collaborative management, joint management, or participatory management (see figure below). Co-management is a partnership arrangement between government, natural-resource users and other key stakeholders to manage resources in a holistic approach. This allows greater participation and representation of different voices in formulating an approach towards managing natural resources.

The concept of co-management by design and envisaged practice shows a promising and hopeful relationship between different stakeholders working in conservation (Thakholi and Büscher, 2021). The elements proposed for an effective co-management system include participation from all concerned parties; empowerment of local communities, where their voices form part of the decision making; and that power be decentralised with regards to accessing natural resources. Structures that are an assumed good representation of different voices and contributors to nature conservation are assembled to form part of a decision-making body.

Why do we have co-management agreements in South Africa?

After 1994, managing natural resources shifted to an approach in which communities' voices, input, and participation should also be part of the management and decision-making. This process sought to improve the management system, but also to ensure the state was viewed with legitimacy by its users. Co-management was the regulatory system used for communities to participate in regulations and management. However, the state was never going to share decision-making with communities and meetings became



Map of IWP in 1971



Map of IWP in 2022

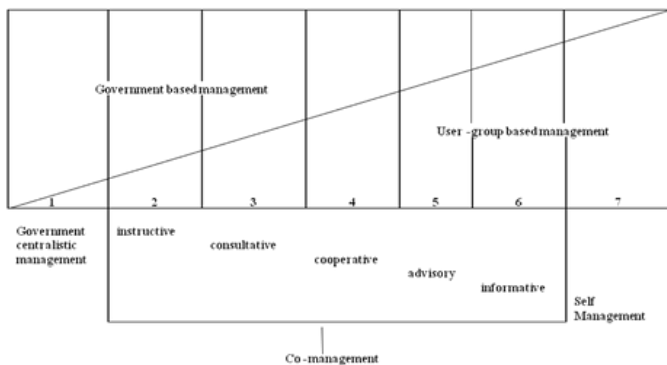


Figure 3: A ladder of co-management arrangements (adapted from Arnstein, 1969; Berkes, 1994)

consultative, pertaining mostly to sharing information and discussing new permit regulations. No management scheme will work unless it has the support of those people whose behaviour it intends to change or influence.

Even though some progress has been made in terms of legislation and the recognition of customary rights for indigenous people through the small-scale fishers' policy, co-management, and land-

reform programmes, there remain many challenges with the implementation of these policies and frameworks.

Marginalised communities continue to be left out of the planning and decision-making processes and, when included, have limited contributions, with less power to influence decisions (Sowman et al, 2023). Hall and Ntsebeza (2007) state that this change usually results in the less powerful actors being granted only restricted access and without a voice on how these resources should be managed.

This report shows the challenges in the implementation of co-management in the iSimangaliso region. It does so by presenting evidence that demonstrates how communities and marginalised groups (women and youth) have been excluded from the management of natural resources and decision-making on policies and frameworks that affect their livelihoods.

What needs to be in place to implement a successful co-management agreement?

- *Deciding where on the scale of the ladder of shared responsibilities co-management will take place:* This might be determined by the ability, capacity, and willingness of the two partners.

It is further complicated by the fact that such capabilities might have to be evaluated issue by issue and, as a result, the sharing of the responsibilities might vary for different issues.

- *The scope of issues that the co-management arrangement will deal with for consultation and sharing:* There are a whole range of issues that management usually has to deal with. For example, determination of policy, distribution of rights and quotas, enforcement of regulations, et cetera. It needs to be decided which issues will be included for co-management.
- *The timing of consultations in the arrangement also matters:* At what stage do you consult with each other? At the planning, decision-making, implementation, or feedback stage? This is important if both parties will be allowed to influence decisions.
- *Level at which co-management takes place:* The arrangement might take place at different administrative levels, such as national, regional, or local, to enable the partnership to have maximum impact. This may also vary according to which issue is being dealt with.
- *User group and stakeholder representation:* What is the range of representation? Is it going to be direct users only or will it include all other stakeholders? If it is fishermen only, the issue of functional and locational representation arises. Having determined the question of range, the next question concerns who is going to represent the user groups. How are the representatives going to be chosen? and what are procedures for dealing with these various issues?

The research

This research was conducted using a slow processes research methodology. This encompasses strong relationship-building techniques established through forming part of communities' daily rhythms and interactions; consistent communication; playing a participatory observation role in community activities; and stakeholder engagements. This is how the two associate researchers gained entry into the community, together with some reliance on local-language use and understanding of the communities' cultures.

The researchers formed part of the daily lives and activities of communities, which then paved the way for relationship-building while studying how communities living close to conservation spaces connected to nature. This methodology also included their participation in community meetings, protests, and in some instances, being first respondents in situations in which external support within their ability was required. Additionally, this involved using various participatory research techniques to help to showcase and communicate community experiences, challenges, and perceptions of conservation as a concept and practice.

Cases

Dukuduku area

Dukuduku is situated in the southern part of IWP, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The area has a history of land dispossession, forced removal, displacement, and the introduction of commodification through tourism activities in the name of conservation. Communities in the area used to live in and with nature, depending on it for livelihood sustainability, with activities including fishing, hunting, grass harvesting, firewood collecting, harvesting plants for medicinal use, and field cropping, to name only a few.



Figure 4: Women grass harvesters in the KwaNibela community cut the qumbe grass using isikela. Photo: Siphehile Mbhele

This is as illustrated by the map showing the 1970s early stages of conservation emerging in IWP with less demarcation and some movement for natural resource users. They now refer to themselves as “abasuswa”, which could be loosely defined as “those who were removed”, but conveys a deeper meaning because a lot of their belonging and dignity, including parts of themselves, remain on those sites. Even though there were different stages of redress in the area as a way to address the injustices of the past, this community still struggles to access natural resources and make informed decisions on land that once belonged to their ancestors. These are some of the changes that the community has had to adapt to (with some level of resistance):

- The introduction of a permit system for entrance to the park and extraction of natural resources. These permits come in different forms and most often require a fee (direct or indirect). Different permits include those for fishing, grass harvesting, plant harvesting (indigenous), visiting ancestral graves, and so forth.
- Separation of humans from nature through rewilding, fences, locked gates, security cameras, and field rangers. Human-wildlife conflicts come into effect.
- Resettling in confined spaces that do not allow for agricultural activities at small scale.
- As a result of the reallocations, the Dukuduku community finds itself at the face of climate-related effects, which, in turn, perpetuates climate injustice.





Figures 5 and 6: Fishers in KwaNdoniyana preparing fish for the local market.
Photos: Ayanda Madlala

The co-management of natural resources

After the land was earmarked for protection, because of its biodiversity, an arrangement for locals to continue using its resources was introduced. This was slightly different from how communities previously accessed resources in the Dukuduku area. An example of the *incema* (thatch) grass found in wetlands will be used as an illustration. This type of grass is used to make traditional mats (which are commonly used in weddings and funerals in Africa and thus hold cultural significance) and other crafted items. When the area where this grass grows was enclosed, a new system of permits and times for harvest was introduced. In St Lucia and surrounding areas harvest time is usually in May every year and each person is required to pay a R10 entry fee. This resource is predominantly harvested by women: below is a quote from one of the women grass harvesters.

“At first this was a local resource and members of the communities would line up to access it. As the years went by, people from as far as Durban and other big cities also joined in. This is where locals, I felt, lost the last form of ownership they had [of] the resource. Moreover, when Covid-19 hit and lockdown restrictions were in effect, entering into the park to harvest grass through the permit process was discontinued. It has not been clear since, whether there will ever be a reopening for *incema* harvesting inside the park.” - Woman grass harvester in Dukuduku, 2023.

The following example provides another layer to the failure of the so-called co-management system in iSimangaliso, focusing on the involvement of different stakeholders and their roles. The lines have become somewhat blurred, because roles and responsibilities have not been clarified. The co-management arrangement was initiated between IWPA and former residents of Bhangazi after the settlement of land claims through the Land Restitution Act of 1994. It was agreed that the IWPA would work alongside a trust (a legal entity consisting of former residents who had claimed the land). On paper, the trust has a seat at the decision-making table and is at the forefront of receiving profits from recreational activities in the park. The fine print in the agreement states that the people cannot go back to their land for any reason. Interviews with locals who have some connection to this so-called ‘settled’ land had the following to say:

“We have been refused access to our ancestral graves.” - Fisherman and former resident of Bhangazi, KwaNdoniyana, February 2023.

“I am a beneficiary of a land claimant, my father being the land claimant, but I have not benefited in any way from the land. There is a programme led by IWP of cutting alien trees inside the park and that is the only time where I have witnessed when the authority engages with members of the trust. Claimants are then seasonally hired to remove alien plants and are given R150 a day. How can I be called a land claimant when I am denied the right to say what should or should not be done to the land? This is not what our fathers fought for.” - land claimant descendant, Dukuduku, March 2023.

“There is no use for these local structures apart from dividing locals and perpetuating corruption. If the park officials have observed that a local leader who is part of these structures is making a lot of noise, they find a way to shut him [or] her up in the form of a bribe.” - Young respondent, Dukuduku, April 2023.

From the voices above, it is clear that the locals interviewed have lost all hope in the co-management system approach. It seems to be a good practice on paper, but proves to be non-existent in practice, particularly in the above case.

Co-management agreement in Dukuduku

The introduction of a co-management system was as a result of numerous conflicts in the area over land rights (ownership), tenure rights, and access to natural resources, leading to legal action against the state. When it had been established that the settlement agreement regarding lodged claims in IWP did not mean land redistribution and resettlement, a co-management arrangement was introduced. This meant that the land, sea, and other natural resources would be used mainly for nature conservation, while drawing international attention to “preserve” the parks’ UNESCO values. This required that a formalised legal entity representing claimants as well as ordinary members of the community - Dukuduku Trust - be part of a co-management structure. The process was facilitated by CoGTA, with representatives from Mpukunyoni traditional leadership, local municipalities, land claimants, and

beneficiaries. The points listed below formed part of the co-management agreement.

Access

- Access rights to the park for Indigenous people and other members of the community, for any reason, will be through a written agreement (consent) between the park authority and the trust. This must be planned well in advance. It must also align with the regulations and values that govern the day-to-day management of the park.
- The Dukuduku community committed to forward this written request to the park authority or follow an agreed process relating to all entry and access into the park. This request would need to provide detailed information including date, time, number of people expected, route that will be taken while inside the park, and mode of transport, together with other relevant information.
- This right of entry should not interfere with the day-to-day functionality of the park, nature protection, and tourism-related activities. The park must be able to retain its status as a World Heritage Site.
- Rights of entry into the park should not cause any harm or interfere with protected species, business of the day, or tourism activities occurring inside the park.

Complying with these imposed regulations has multi-faceted consequences for the livelihoods of those families dependent on natural resource access for numerous reasons (subsistence, income generation, spiritual, cultural et cetera). Some of these effects include social and economic factors. Examples gathered from our field research are listed below:

“Asivumelekile ukuthatha lutho, siyaseshwa uma singena kanjalo noma sesiphuma” (“We are not allowed to take anything from the park as we are searched going in and going out”). These are the words of a woman who used to work seasonally in the IWP as part of the co-management agreement, through which claimants were given what the park authority called “employment opportunities” to work inside the park for a month each year as one of the “benefits”. She says it breaks her heart that natural resources they previously had access to, lands that they grew up in and learnt so much from (something that their children will never experience), are now enclosed by fences and tight security systems (human and surveillance cameras). - Woman grass cutter and former seasonal employee from Dukuduku (May 2023).

“Imvelo isetshenziswa njengesikhali sokuthi silwe sodwa” (“Nature is being used as a weapon for us to fight among each other”). This is a quote from a representative of the Dukuduku Trust, sharing frustrations about its dysfunctional structure when its purpose was meant to improve people’s living conditions while ensuring the protection of nature. He further says the parks authority fails to communicate with the local structures that form part of the co-management body to the extent that he doesn’t remember when last a meeting was called to discuss issues laid out in the co-management agreement. All he has left is a written document with no proper plan

and no implementation as per the initial agreement. “How do I protect nature when the instigators of this nature protection are keeping their distance?” he asked during the interview.

The conditions under which this agreement was founded demonstrate that the communities, and this structure in particular, were being set up for failure. Some of these conditions are stipulated below:

- To secure funds for the exploitation of local development initiatives to be undertaken in the Dukuduku area
- Make land available for the delivery of municipal and any other infrastructure services in the Dukuduku area
- Secure funds for the promotion of the development of residential opportunities in the Dukuduku area



Figure 7: Military techniques are used in conservation spaces to enforce separation between humans and nature. Photo: Ayanda Madlala

The above key points illustrate that not only did the state want power and ownership of natural resources, but it also wanted to shift responsibilities to this structure (Dukuduku Trust). The conditions of the agreement reflect that of a business model and are not inclusive of different forces working together. The trust is expected to come up with business plans to develop their community, but the capacity and instruments to execute these plans is overlooked. Nowhere in this agreement does it address issues that were initially raised by people, it is couched as a business transaction.

To date, conflicts around land have resurfaced as a result of remedial action with intentions not of serving community interest but instead, perpetuating its failure. “The struggle for land was never about the money, but always has been about the land. Our fathers’ objective was to get back land so we can sustain ourselves and build a future for generations to come,” stated a land claimant beneficiary from Dukuduku in April 2023, whose father lodged a land claim. “We are made slaves in our land,” said another land claimant in Dukuduku in June 2024, expressing frustration about the “employment opportunities” provided by the park.

The KwaNibela community

The KwaNibela community is situated in the northern part of IWP. This is a fishing community surrounded by the St Lucia Lake, which falls under the jurisdiction of the IWP and its marine conservation component.

This community's history is characterised by violence and a brutal process of land dispossession and their removal from ancestral and cultural landscapes to make way for conservation. With the last wave of forced removals occurring in the 1970s, KwaNibela residents are descendants of indigenous people who were forcibly removed from the KwaNkhlozi and KwaMabila areas, which are now under the IWP and form part of its conservation and heritage site. Presently, the main sources of livelihood in the KwaNibela community include fishing (which has a sophisticated value chain connecting it to other communities); *incema*, *ikhwani*, and *qumbe* grass harvesting; hunting and agriculture.

Some of the effects of forced removals include KwaNibela's soil is less fertile for crop production and livestock, negatively affecting livelihoods and disrupting access to natural resources by park regulations. This community also has a strong presence of traditional healers who use herbs and plants from the KwaNibela indigenous forest to heal patients and connect with their ancestors.

In 2003, the KwaNibela community and others in the region living adjacent to the IWP submitted a memorandum - "The Cape Vidal Memorandum" - through the IUCN World Parks Congress to the Isimangaliso Wetland Park, calling for their rights to be recognised as well as the right to co-management, outlining key priorities of livelihoods and access to natural resources (Thomas Nkuna et al, 2020). This is a document that DFFE Minister Barbra Creecy in 2022 noted as "a living document" that aims to foster better co-management through current policies such as the co-management framework, the NEMA Act and the Restitution of Rights Act (Minister Barbra Creecy, Ninth People and Parks National Conference, 2022).

In reality, there is a strained relationship between IWP and the KwaNibela fishing community arising from the governance of natural resource management and its impact on community livelihoods.

Currently, there is a community conservation area that the park said they want to do together with the king here in the community. We did not know about that, but only heard of it when Isimangaliso had visited. We do not know any details about that initiative, but it is something the king and a select few decided with the park. (Mr Nkuna, 2025)

Resistance to top-down management of natural resources

Co-management agreements came with the introduction of permit systems in the area, which resulted in access restrictions and controls on natural resource extractions. This meant a huge shift for KwaNibela communities from open access to the lake to none at all, not even through customary rights. Part of the latter could also be associated with the presence of a weak and fragmented traditional authority, which then poses a challenge for fishers and resource users wanting to access natural resources based on customary practices. Besides restrictions on the lake, the communities are also prohibited from traditional hunting, such as small bucks for food, and cultural practices of harvesting herbs and plants. Mr Ntshangase reiterates why they do not want to accept the permit conditions of IWP:

"Even with those permits, many of us here do not want them because they do not give us what we want, which is to fish inside the lake. If we accept any permit they give us, that will be the beginning of our problems, so we do not want any permits from them, but all we want is to be left alone to fish in our lake." - Mr Ntshangase, 2023.

This is a common sentiment shared by indigenous people of the KwaNibela communities who have had the chance to observe the full operation of co-management agreements, as well as have themselves been affected by policies, and violent and oppressive regulations and responses to their entry into the park from its authorities. This has seen KwaNibela fishers entering the lake at night, fishing in groups, and using traditional methods to fish while risking possible harassment by park officials.

The IWP is supposed to be in constant consultation with communities. Although co-management frameworks and agreements exist, there are more limitations on people's ability to sustain themselves. These agreements hardly give communities what they require, which is access to nature on their terms. Therefore, the only experience of the park that many community members have is through violence and regulations that prevent them from practising their livelihoods. In the KwaNibela people's rejection of prejudice and exclusion from the park, many community members reiterate that this is a testament to the historical aspect of ownership of the lake and how this is tied to the current dynamics of resistance towards regulations on access to the lake and management approaches that place the community and natural resource users at the periphery.

"The lake is our firm: there are no jobs or work here";
"We were given this lake by our ancestors: it belongs to us." - Mrs Gina, 2024.



Figure 7: Men and women from KwaNibela village in the early morning along the KwaNibela lake shore, cleaning fish before it is distributed to other communities. Photo: Siphesihle Mbhele

Based on communities' experiences and fractured relationship with IWP, there have been outright rejection of fishing permits as well as participation in cooperatives by some community members and natural resource users in the KwaNibela community, mainly because they do not believe in the current management models and community consultations used by the park. They believe that this is characterised by dishonesty, which is evident through the ongoing issues of violence in the KwaNibela Lake.

The KwaNibela community reiterates that they will only conform to a co-management agreement if they have full access to the lake for food, livelihoods, cultural and spiritual practices (harvesting plants, bulbs for traditional and general healing and wellbeing). The KwaNibela community wants full representation, participation, and to have a voice in the decisions on the harvesting, use, and access to natural resources in co-management committees. Co-management should go beyond consultation with community elites, traditional authorities and IWP. The roles and knowledge of local fishers, grass harvesters, and traditional healers in harvesting natural resources sustainably should form a core part of the consultation.

After 30 years of democracy, the state's engagement with rural communities has been poor. This is evident in both Dukuduku and KwaNibela communities when it comes to co-management. The process is often in favour of local elites and traditional authorities time, language, participation and inputs. For the local fisher groups, grass harvesters, and traditional healers who reside adjacent to the IWP.

Our research found that the selective consultative approach to co-management where traditional elites and leaders are cherry-picked from the KwaNibela community contribute to exclusionary decision-making. The IWP's centralised management practices to implement co-management lack full consultation with communities and resource users. Information and decisions about restrictions and regulations on access to the lake for fishing and natural resources are made in centralised committees between IWP and selected leaders and traditional elites linked with the royal family. According to a fisher from KwaNibela on co-management:

"There are many conversations that we had with Isimangaliso, the traditional authority and other individuals in the community, but we as natural resource users are not involved in that process. According to us, there are no agreements between us and the park, but we know that there are discrete relationships between them and the kingship, which do not always result in good outcomes for the community." - Mr Nkuna, 2025.

They experience the following barriers:

- Announcements of community participation processes are often shared online and without consultation with community leaders and natural resource users.
- These are also often far from most of the affected people and do not occur in each specific community in order to address specific needs.
- This shows a lack of consideration for the rural context and socio-economic factors.

- Most of the documentation and communication is written in English and creates a barrier to understanding, which prevents community members from actively engaging in the processes that will decide on the fate of their livelihoods.
- Some key information, such as the zonation map, is not shared with the communities.
- Frequent and accessible communication of key information in understandable terms to community members and natural resource users is not functional and does not reach the broad scope of affected communities.

The IWP's ineffective consultative practices lead to greater exclusion of communities when informing decisions and result in an unchanging system of injustice and challenges for sustaining their livelihoods. One cannot speak about how communication is critically important when attempting to create co-management arrangements that speak to community livelihood needs, cultural and traditional practices. Such communications are to be conducted in their mother tongue and meetings should be set during the times they are available. It is also important that their voice, knowledge systems and practices are considered, and their inputs are included in the decisions on access, livelihoods, rules, regulations, and other factors that affect them.

Youth participation and the co-management of natural resources

The youth population is an important stakeholder in communities surrounding the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, given its role in the livelihood activities across the communities. The youth are among the fishers and harvesters of natural resources and, therefore, access the park almost daily. In addition, some elderly fisher people often use these young people as a workforce who enter the lakes, using the former's tools (boats and nets) to fish and then sharing the profit made from the fish.

Young people should be part of discussions on natural resources because, by entering the conservation territory, they encounter similar challenges of access and violence in law enforcement, therefore making them an important stakeholder in the broader societal struggles for social justice.



Figure 9: Young fishers preparing their nets along the KwaNibela lake shore before entering the lake to fish. Photo: Siphesihle Mbhele

However, the current co-management arrangement and criteria fail to rightfully recognise the need for the protection of the rights of young fishers in rural fishing communities and, therefore, their ability to access natural resources. This is through the requirements of the minimum age requirement of 18 years and having 10 years of experience in fisheries for one to be recognised as a small-scale fisher, as per DFFE registration guidelines. These limitations have led to many young people not having rights allocated to them and, therefore, not being able to form part of important community structures such as co-ops, depriving them of the opportunity to engage with park authorities on their challenges and having their voices heard. The current approach to co-management cannot be considered just and fair in its allocation of rights if it excludes certain groups who are historically vulnerable: this needs to be revised.

The failed promise of co-management and rural communities

Current management approaches based on centralised government interventions have proven inadequate to deal with the present management of natural resources and cannot meet its objectives (Nielsen et al, 2002), which aim to improving participation from all concerned parties, empower local communities by having their voices form part of the decision-making, and decentralise decision-making power regarding governing access to natural resources. The spirit of collaborative work and inclusion is not holistically implemented: this is evident in the case of iSimangaliso communities and the inadequate implementation of co-management strategies even in policy-making processes, such as developing an integrated management plan.

The existing park regulations enabled by policies such as the integrated management plans still do not speak to needs of communities surrounding the park in terms of access to resources that they use for livelihood purposes. This involves areas of the park that they need to enter as well as giving permission for and recognising traditional methods of using nature and natural resources. Announcements of community-participation processes are often shared online and without consultation with community leaders. This shows a lack of consideration of the rural context that does not have access to online connectivity. This results in non-attendance and no attempts at consultation with communities in the policy-making process. These soft practices lead to greater exclusion of communities from informing how decisions are made and subsequently result in an unchanging system of injustice and challenges for sustaining their livelihoods.

Way forward

Inclusion: The current co-management model has several loopholes, resulting in key information and decision-making powers resting only in the hands of community elites, rather than the wider community. The inclusion of communities in the context of the IWP region means ensuring a holistic approach in which equal representation in decision-making processes is achieved. This begins by ensuring that communities are not ad-hoc or seasonal partners, but are a part of the running of the park to ensure equity in benefit distribution through consultation and continuous involvement.

Access: Access to natural spaces for various reasons (spiritual, cultural, health, and food) is what communities residing in IWP and surrounding areas want and need. This includes having fishing zones

designated for fishers, with a revised number of fish to catch per day and revisited fishing time; areas in and around the park that can be allocated for grass cutting; access to visiting ancestral grave sites without strict administrative processes that seem to prioritise tourism activities; the extraction of plants for medical reasons and others. Currently, members of the community are labelled as poachers who practise illegal entry and are criminalised for engaging in these activities.

Integrating local and traditional knowledge systems: An integrated, inclusive approach towards conserving nature needs to be incorporated in the biodiversity implementation plan. This means integrating ways in which communities know how to conserve natural resources by collecting, documenting, and using these as part of their daily practice and management of the park.

Social justice in biodiversity: Ensuring meaningful, active, and informed participation of communities living in and around conservation areas in decision making - especially women - is not just a box-ticking exercise. Communities should be heard in their local languages. There needs to be equitable redistribution of wildlife and marine resources, free prior and informed consent in decision making about new protected areas, their uses and infrastructure development. Communities' rights should be restored, as well as their access to land and marine resources of which they were dispossessed. Fines, gear confiscations and other barriers by authorities and other interested parties that are used to stop people from accessing resources should be removed. People living next to protected areas should not be further displaced, excluded, violated or treated with brutality, and there should be equitable organisation, control, and allocation of conservation land.

It is important that co-management facilitates an open and transparent flow of information between community groups and the government.

Recommendations

- It is essential to regularly review and refine co-management agreements to ensure that policies continue to represent the socioeconomic needs and aspirations of the people who depend on natural resources.
- Access rights should be linked to a tenure system that combines user rights on land and at sea, so communities can harvest for a combination of livelihood activities, such as grass cutting, fishing, traditional and medicinal use, hunting, and crop production. This could be through preferential and exclusive user rights and through the promotion of multi-species.
- All people using and depending on natural resources for survival must be included in the decision-making process. Parks should carry out regular consultative processes, including mass

consultations with communities. Traditional authorities are only one “important” component of agrarian communities.

- There should be clearly defined roles and responsibilities of structures involved in the co-management structure:
 - Legal entity
 - Traditional authority
 - Government structures (national, provincial, local)
 - Local businesses
 - Ordinary members of the community
- The park authority needs to establish new ways of communicating information and reaching rural communities for important notices about its decisions, which affect communities’ access to livelihoods.
- Power regarding access and the use of natural resources should be decentralised to:
 - eliminate violence in and around the park;
 - promote poverty alleviation;
 - and pave way for participation of marginalised groups (women, youth).
- The balance between sustainable livelihoods, sustainable management of the resource, and local economic development must be found.
- Policies that exclude young people, their voices and their experiences are directly affecting the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and skills, as well as the preservation of culture and heritage. These acts of exclusion pose a threat that drive young people and their interests away from interacting in policy and political processes and, therefore, puts their futures and livelihoods at risk. Young people should be at the centre of the decision-making processes.

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Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences
University of the Western Cape
Private Bag X17
Bellville
7535
South Africa

plaas.org.za | +27 21 959 3733 | info@plaas.org.za

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Authors: Siphesihle Mbhele, Ayanda Madlala, and Professor Moenieba Isaacs

Design: Deshnee Subramany

Text edit: Theresa Mallinson