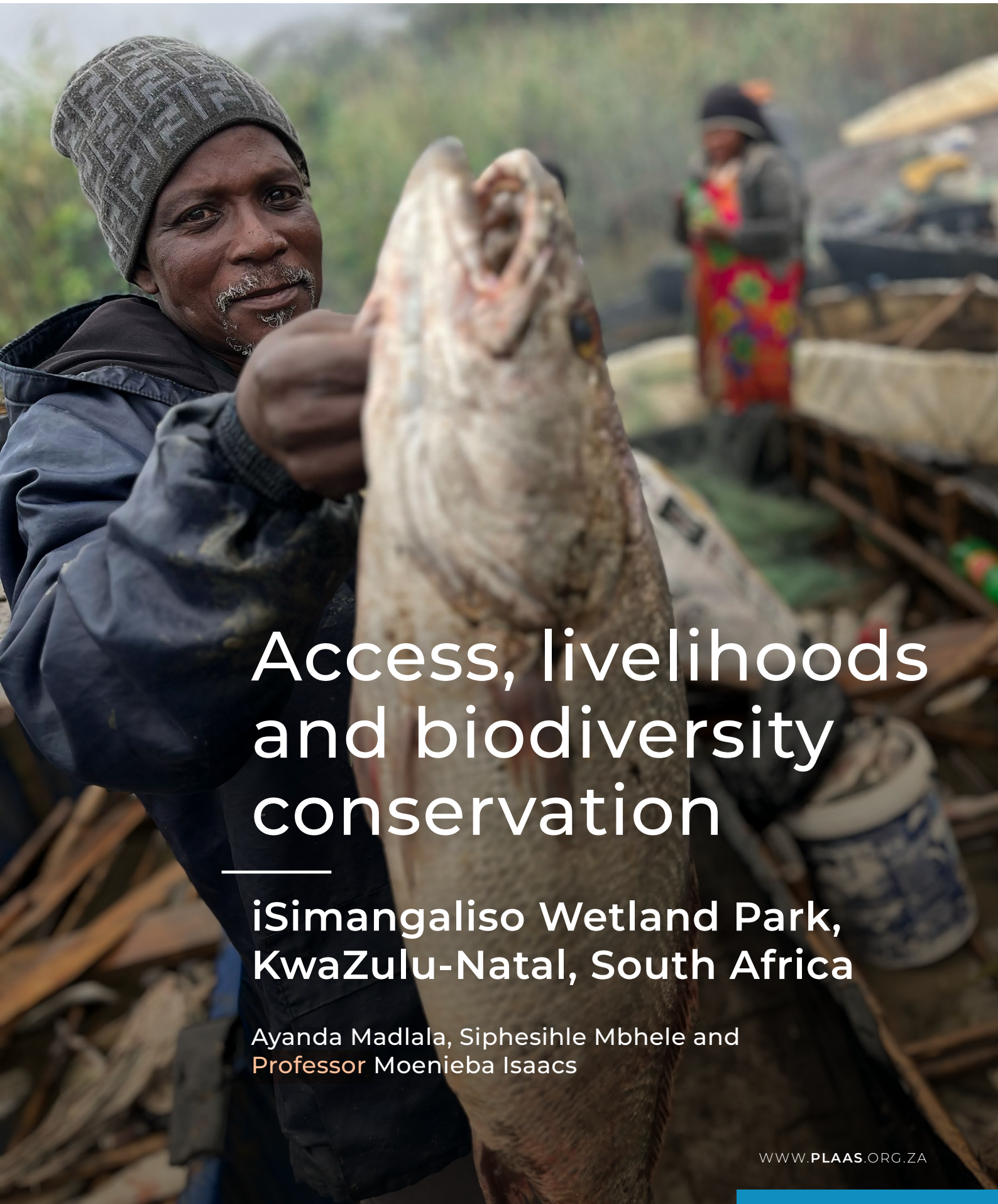




Access, livelihoods and biodiversity conservation

iSimangaliso Wetland Park,
KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Ayanda Madlala, Siphesihle Mbhele and
Professor Moenieba Isaacs

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research report was made possible by the PLAAS Living Landscapes in Action project (2022 to 2024). The authors are grateful to all participants in the research, in particular those from the stakeholder communities. All views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors.

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Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies Research Report number 62
December 2025

HOW TO CITE THIS REPORT

Madlala, A., Mbhele, S., and Isaacs, M. 2025 *December*. Access, livelihoods and biodiversity conservation in iSimangaliso Wetland Park, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. PLAAS Research Report 62, PLAAS University of the Western Cape.

ISBN print: 978-1-0492-4508-9

ISBN digital: 978-1-0492-4509-6

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Cover photo: Ayanda Madlala
Inside cover photo: Natalie Gabriels

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1. Introduction

South Africa is ranked 6th in the world for its rich marine and terrestrial biodiversity and is one of the world’s 17 mega-diverse countries (SANBI 2024). However, it is also characterised by deep inequalities, social and spatial injustices arising from colonialism and apartheid, as well as displacement of communities from their land for conservation purposes (Armitage *et al.* 2020; Hansen 2013a). Founded in 1926, SANParks (South African National Parks) is mandated to protect South Africa’s mega-diversity of flora and fauna. Interestingly, of the 20 national parks, three World Heritage Sites, 10 marine protected areas, and two protected areas currently under the management of SANParks, none are located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). The iSimangaliso Wetland Park (ISWP) World Heritage Site is located in uMkhanyakude District Municipality, falls under the jurisdiction of the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment (DFFE) rather than SANParks, and the land is governed by the Ingonyama Trust and Zulu Kingdom of northern KwaZulu-Natal.

‘iSimangaliso’ is an isiZulu phrase meaning (a place of) ‘miracle and wonder’. The ISWP comprises of 13 separate but contiguous conservation units which comprise 85 000 hectares of marine reserve constituting one-third of KZN’s coastline (9% of the entire South African coastline) and approximately 330 000ha of terrestrial reserve stretching for 220km along the Indian Ocean from Kosi Bay, just south of the Mozambican border, to Maphelane, south of the St Lucia Estuary (DEAT 2009). The terrestrial and coastal areas consist of coral reefs, long sandy beaches, coastal dunes, lake systems, swamps and extensive reeds and papyrus wetlands, which provide critical habitat for a wide range of marine, wetland and savanna species.

On 1 December 1999, UNESCO (the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization) recognised the ISWP as South Africa’s first marine World Heritage Site because of the park’s three outstanding universal values – unique ecological and biological processes, superlative phenomena and biodiversity. Driven by a growing need for conservation, South Africa asked Mozambique and Eswatini to make some of their land available to create a Trans-Frontier Conservation Area (TFCA). Mozambique committed to donating 1.3 million hectares of its coastal area and 80km of marine territory to the TFCA, while Swaziland committed to donating two of its game reserves. These negotiations were paused when the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. In June 2025, the process of bringing the ISWP and the Maputo Nature Reserve in Mozambique together into a TFCA was restarted and a so-called consultative process for impacted communities took place. PLAAS participated in one of the community meetings organised by iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority (Isaacs 2025).

The ISWP is a political and economic instrument with aims that combine conserving the environment with socio-economic development. However, state interventions in the name of conservation have had negative impacts on indigenous people (Hansen *et al.* 2015). This has been accompanied by restrictions on people’s access to nature and natural resources for purposes that include generating a livelihood, the harvesting of medicinal plants, and indigenous practices and observances that have spiritual and cultural dimensions. The livelihoods of most African indigenous populations depend on access to land and its associated resources, i.e., land is central to natural resource governance (Musavengane & Leonard 2022). Indigenous people and their indigenous knowledge systems are essential for a sound understanding of how to manage biodiversity due to having had centuries of experience and interactions with nature for a variety of purposes.

The protection of rich biodiversity-protected spaces allows for exclusive, luxury and adventure tourism, which has the associated impacts of further alienating local communities from their land and preventing them from accessing reserves to generate a livelihood, as well as food, spiritual and cultural practices."

Understanding indigenous knowledge in relation to nature and conservation should include looking more deeply into taboos and totems, customs and rituals, rules and regulations, metaphors and proverbs, traditionally protected areas, social institutions, local knowledge of plants, animals and landscapes, and indigenous resource management systems (Sinthumule 2023).

In the last 15 years there has been an increased emphasis on managing nature through approaches such as reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries (REDD+) that includes activities like the conservation and sustainable management of forests, expansion of forest carbon stocks, payment for ecosystem services (PES), and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) that advocates for the '30 x 30' target (a politically driven framework that emphasises the expansion and protection of 30% of earth and ocean resources by the year 2030). The protection of rich biodiversity-protected spaces allows for exclusive, luxury and adventure tourism, which has the associated impacts of further alienating local communities from their land and preventing them from accessing reserves to generate a livelihood, as well as food, spiritual and cultural practices. Stopping people from accessing nature while regulating entry to private and public conservation spaces depends on using fences, security personnel with weapons, and surveillance tools such as cameras and drones. There has been an exponential resurgence of 'fortress conservation' practices across southern Africa.

To better understand the dynamic between nature and people; and the social and spatial injustices that are the result of mainstream conservation practices, the Living Landscape in Action (LLA) project at the Institute of Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), University of the Western Cape used a slowed down process methodology which allowed the researchers to form an organic part of the daily rhythms of local communities. Through this process we were able to study local politics that govern access to natural resources, gender dynamics, and the impacts of some brutal exclusionary conservation practices, securitisation and militarisation on local communities when they enter protected areas for livelihood, cultural, medicinal and spiritual purposes.

During the first phase of the LLA project, we placed four associate researchers to live in affected communities for a period of two years in three study locations – the rich biodiverse landscapes of the City of Cape Town (Cape Flats dune strandveld fynbos biome); the UNESCO World Heritage iSimangaliso Wetland Park popularly known for its rich wetland, terrestrial and marine biodiversity; and the UNESCO Mapungubwe cultural landscapes in South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe. It is through the slow process methodology that researchers have built strong relationships and trust by using deep ethnographic tools such as deep hangouts, night halts, eco-walks, photo voice and counter mapping to deeply understand research

sites while collecting evidence, and grounding the collection of evidence for the LLA project in lived experience. The project is now in its second phase.

This report is written at a time where the world is witnessing a resurgence of fortress conservation, a commonly practised conservation method that prioritises biodiversity protection over people's livelihoods and is deeply rooted in colonialism and hunting for wildlife. We used critical political ecology in the project to ask key questions about who owns, controls and holds power and governs communities' access to, and use of, natural resources in the study areas. We started with the history of conservation in the region by illustrating the long-term impacts of the colonialism and apartheid eras in South Africa. Then we moved on to the governance structures involved in conservation management in northern KwaZulu-Natal, their roles and responsibilities, together with the laws governing the day-to-day operation and management of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park. We use this report to present:

- Evidence that shows the continuation of colonial and apartheid tactics in conservation which have led to violence, discrimination and exclusion of communities from participating in decision-making processes.
- Research findings demonstrate the importance that communities in the northern part of KZN place on nature and natural resources as well as their uses such as generating livelihoods, and the medicinal, cultural and spiritual use of nature. This is to emphasise that the value of nature goes beyond consumption of resources, it is also spiritual and ancestral.
- Existing ways in which people interact with nature and what that entails, including looking into indigenous practices and sustainable livelihood methods and how these could inform better governance and more inclusive approaches in the iSimangaliso Wetland Park.

Data used in this report comprises archival information, secondary (desktop) literature as well as findings from research conducted through the LLA Project. The research focuses on six case studies of communities who depend on natural resources for their livelihoods i.e., for fishing, farming, forestry and tourism. The rationale behind the selection of particular case studies is discussed in detail below. In conclusion, this report highlights the historical actions and decisions that continue to have an impact on people's lives and livelihoods through change in ownership, access and utilisation of natural resources over time. It also illustrates how private and public conservation areas continue to be the breeding ground for violence against local communities.

The global discourse surrounding the need to expand land and ocean spaces under conservation in terms of instruments like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework has given rise to a series of justifications for excluding and displacing people living in and using areas targeted for conservation, including the risk to natural systems that could lead to humanity's extinction. Agrawal and Redford (2009) remind us how nature is placed on higher moral ground on the grounds that it needs to be protected from people, communities and livelihood generation activities. The logic here is that we need to separate people from nature by removing people from the land through involuntary dislocation and physical separation from their land and homes (Agrawal 2009). It is important to highlight the involuntary nature of such actions in order to adequately measure the impacts of displacement on affected people.

Fairhead *et al.* (2012) further unpack the displacement in conservation through their 'green

grabbing’ concept, which sees displacement as the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends. The consequence is frequently the complete alienation of traditional resource users from access to their land and its natural resources and the replacement of existing and natural resource management systems by new authorities which impose restrictions on access to livelihood resources or to prohibit access to any livelihood resources at all. The term ‘grabbing’ is associated with David Harvey’s ‘accumulation by dispossession’, which builds on the Marxist theory of primitive accumulation, namely the enclosure of public assets by private interests resulting in the change in ownership and control over these resources centralised in private hands or entities (Benjaminsen & Bryceson 2012). Some ways to conceptualise the struggle for access to natural resources is understanding displacement as the capture of common properties, which leads to the exclusion of communities to which these resources belong (Hansen *et al.* 2015).

Displacement and dispossession form part of the core elements of South Africa’s history. The use of force and violence are the foundations on which apartheid and colonisation were based (Walker 2015). This dispossession and exclusion of black people was taken further during this period, as far as the institutionalisation of marginalisation and dispossession of black people through the Natives Land Act of 1913 which prohibited black people from owning land outside the 7% set aside for black people in the bantustans, and later legislation that limited the movement of black people to urban areas and prevented them from accessing what were then termed ‘whites only’ areas. Black people living in many communal areas set aside for conservation purposes have been dispossessed, displaced, subjected to new tenure arrangements, subjected to new systems for governing natural resources, and their access to such areas restricted. These restrictions include regulations on when they may enter natural spaces, the introduction of permits that limit what can be extracted (fish, grass, plants, etc.), and that prohibit certain activities, e.g., hunting, gathering firewood, and harvesting traditional herbs. The systems of power put in place rely solely on restrictive and violent control over who can and cannot access natural resources, and at which time.

The contemporary debate on conservation and conservation-induced displacement has given rise to some key developments in the drivers of conservation – the advancement of conservation areas and the associated change in management and control of natural resources to a more market-responsive model. Researchers such Hansen (2013a) and Dressler and Büscher (2008) argue that models of conservation are responding positively to the process of neoliberalising access to natural resources.

1.1 Theoretical underpinnings

To help situate research findings from the research conducted in iSimangaliso Wetland Park, we draw on the concept of political ecology (PE) which encompasses a holistic view of challenges centred on conservation. The term political ecology was coined in the 1970s (Robins 2012; Acheampong 2020; Schubert 2005; Watts 2000), and is broken down into human ecology (including aspects of culture and the environment) as well as political economy (politics and economics) as Watts (2000) explains. Using the PE lens helps answer questions of who has *access* to what resources, who has *control* over these resources, and historical and present *governance* of these resources. This approach emphasises that culture, a phenomenon that is usually overlooked, is as important as fauna, flora as well as other natural resources within the landscapes (Impey 2002). This is observed through indigenous practices that may

include ritual processes, song, dance, and sometimes things found within the community which present rich repositories of indigenous knowledge about the environment (Impey 2002). PE emerged as an approach to human-environmental interaction that draws close attention to how humans shape the world and how humans are, in turn, shaped by it (Adams & Hutton, 2007). We lean on the theoretical work by Acheampong (2020) who both criticises the limitations of using the PE lens and who introduces the concept of ‘critical ecosystems’ which emphasises the importance of intentionally including ecology. Acheampong (2020) defines PE as a framework to describe and understand the geography of nature-society/ human-environment interaction.

The concept of PE has come under scrutiny. While both ‘political’ and ‘ecology’ are made to be of equal significance in PE, the concept has been criticised for making politics its primary focus while making ecology an add-on or secondary focus (Walker 2015; Acheampong 2020). Furthermore, PE has been criticised for its lack of emphasis on political economy. While PE has helped to raise questions of perception and cognition, it pays almost no attention to the ‘social contractedness’ of the environment and environmental issues. Using the political ecology lens helps raise critical (political) consciousness by going beyond environmental issues to integrating society and land-based resources within societal classes and groups. Wolf (1972) and Hetch & Cockburn (1990) who come from different disciplines coined the term ‘political ecology’ in order to allow for in-depth investigation of the question of *access* and *control* over natural resources (Watts 2000). Schubert (2005) and Benjaminsen & Svarstad (2018) describe the concept of political ecology as consisting of three major approaches:

1. a post-structuralist, mostly deconstructivist approach that questions predominant discourses of environmental change and policies;
2. the analysis of concepts of ‘people’ and ‘nature’, mainly the analysis of gender as a constructed category defining human-environment interactions; and
3. a more rights-based body of research concerned with questions of access, rights, entitlements and environmental justice.

These are the three descriptions of political ecology which are concerned with questions of power and control of natural resources seen through access, gender and policy lenses. However, the current research will focus on access, people’s connection to nature, and how biodiversity policies implemented in the Global South agenda results in limited control of and access to natural resources (Ribot & Peluso 2003, Peluso & Ribot 2020; Agrawal & Redford 2009; Büscher 2011, Büscher 2025; Nixon 2011; Dunlap & Fairhead 2014; Sikor & Lund 2016). To help respond to the broad questions raised through the political ecology lens, this literature review selects a number of key themes that present how the access of communities in and around iSimangaliso Wetland Park to natural resources for food, livelihoods, cultural and traditional practices has been restricted. We have identified *access* as a result of the displacement and dispossession of indigenous people, criminalisation of livelihoods, social, spatial and environmental injustices as the main themes that bind other emerging themes. These themes are elaborated below with reference to examples from the research findings.

1.2 Access

Access to natural resources in enclosed conservation spaces has become a key umbrella theme emerging from the LLA research in all three sites. To help us unpack what this concept means and what it entails, we draw from the work of Ribot and Peluso (2003) who critique

the inability of other scholars to truly unpack, theorise and define the concept of access. This term is usually used in the literature to include property rights and other means of beneficiation from natural resources. Access is defined as the ability to derive benefits from 'things', i.e. a bundle of rights versus a bundle of power (Ghani 1995). It is through these 'bundles of power' that resource controls result in struggles for access. They are seen as relations of power, linking theoretical ideas of both access and political ecology (Blaikie 1985; Watts 2000; Mann 2009). Unpacking this concept assists in answering political ecology questions that look at *who benefits, through what process they benefit, who gets and does not get user rights to what resources, when and in what ways*. (Benjaminsen & Svarstad 2018; Robins 2012) The term 'use' in this context does not ultimately mean enjoyment, but emphasises the fact that while some people and institutions control these natural resources, others are forced to maintain close relationships with those in control in order to have access.

There are shortcomings in only analysing access through property rights and this is the reason for separating property from access (Sikor & Lund, 2016). The distinction between these concepts is that access is associated with the 'ability to' and links with *power* while property is associated with 'rights to' and linked with *ownership*. Even though there are clear distinctions between the two, the term 'benefits' is common in both concepts. This locates property as one thread of factors in a large pot of socio-political, institutional and economic relationships. Therefore, it is important to analyse access beyond just its association with property to create a more holistic view that takes account of illicit actions, relations of production, and entitlement relations and their histories. Using political ecology as a lens helps us understand access control and access maintenance while unpacking mechanisms that make up and shape the theory of access in the context of conservation, and more specifically in the ISWP site under study.

There are two main mechanisms of access: those that are sanctioned by law, custom and convention, which are *right-based forms of access*, and *unlawful or illegal access*, in which rights define the bounds of illegal activities (Coolsaet *et al.* 2020; Ribot & Peluso 2003; Hansen *et al.* 2015). Other mechanisms include open access – a form of access where no one owns the resource which means there are no boundaries, exclusions, or sanctions (Ostrom 2008;) This system exists primarily in communal settings where freely available resources are shared amongst members of the community for members to cultivate or harvest according to their needs. Rights-based access in the iSimangaliso context is directly linked to the nature of the local structures and in the case of the current study, it is through the formalisation (registration) of local structures into cooperatives, legal entities and community-based organisations (CBOs) – an action encouraged by the bodies of the state to enable registered members to gain some form of controlled access. This comes with its limitations, and is another form of resource and access control, as every action needs to align with retaining, protecting and preserving nature in its unspoilt form – creating the feeling of wilderness (Gumede 2009), but mainly for tourists.

1.3 Institutional governance necessary to support access

We lean on the concept of the commons and institutional governance of the commons as promoted by the work of Ostrom (1990) to understand and interpret both the so-called formal and informal institutional arrangements in our research context for the management and facilitation of access to natural resources. We also use this framework to analyse how certain

institutional arrangements perpetuate exclusion and limit access to natural resources in the South African context of dispossession and multiple tenure regimes in a single location.

This concept of 'commons' understands common pool resources as a natural or human-made resource system that is naturally large, which makes it costly to exclude beneficiaries from obtaining benefits from its use (Rose 2020; Hess & Ostrom 2005). These are governed under systems of resources and resource units, where resource systems are stocks of variables that are capable under favourable conditions of creating maximum quantity (e.g., fishing grounds, grazing fields, water bodies etc.), and resource units that are what individuals appropriate or use from the resource systems such as fish, *incema* grass, traditional medicine. These institutional arrangements are present in systems where communities self-organise effectively and manage common resources through indigenous structures and institutions without external dependencies, as long as they are guided by the eight key principles of managing the commons sustainably (Ostrom 1990). These principles are the presence of clearly defined borders, rules that match local needs, collective arrangements, effective monitoring tools, graduated sanctions, conflict management systems, minimal rights to organise, and nested enterprises.

Within complex and contested commons, especially open access areas, there are systems, 'enforced and voluntary' that facilitate the use of natural resources by communities. These are either done within community settings through 'information institutions and community arrangements' which are indigenous systems overseeing the use of natural resources through setting rules and facilitating relationships (Ostrom 1990), or 'formal institutional' arrangements imposed by external bodies onto communities through processes of dispossession, green grabbing or militarisation of conservation areas. These 'formal institutions' and conservation authorities, either private or public, lead to the privatisation and enclosure of the commons (Robins 2012; Lunstrum 2014). These systems of privatisation and enclosure increase excludability in resource appropriation by instituting a system of property rights that shifts access rights to certain groups (Partelow *et al.* 2019) who are often wealthy tourists. They introduce regulatory policies based on permits, fences and fines to control access to natural resources and further exclude the indigenous and most marginalised people. These are not just social, but also economic exclusions against the background of a history characterised by dispossession and forced removals which has broken existing institutional arrangements, creating limitations of access to nature through regulation and external institutional arrangements which affect indigenous people's ability to sustain their livelihoods and therefore interact with nature and some of their identities (Agrawal & Redford 2009).

Ostrom's work is a response to the powerful lobby for privatisation of the commons through allocating private and individual rights to natural resources. Authors like Fenell (2011) and Vaccaro and Beltran (2019) have argued for linguistic precision in the concept of commons to mitigate the risk of misunderstandings and the attendant risks to the rights of resource users. This section will categorically unpack different common governance systems and how they relate to communities.

Cousins (2009) elaborates on the close ties that must be maintained in customary land tenure contexts in order to maintain access to commons primarily through social relationships and membership of various social units i.e. family, households, kinship groups, neighbourhoods and communities. However, these remain problematic in some contexts and may lead to excludability.

In South Africa these layers of excludability in nature have been characterised by scenes of decades of growth of both public and private conservation areas accompanied by restrictions on indigenous people accessing certain portions of their ancestral land for livelihood, medicinal, spiritual and other purposes (Hansen *et al.* 2015). These are public institutions which further legitimise themselves through the implementation of skewed regulations which prohibit the harvesting of certain resources and restrict access to certain parts of the park which contain resources necessary for community livelihoods. Often, these also lead to the destruction of existing traditional institutions which facilitate people's engagement with natural resources by imposing centralised decision-making committees and institutions with bureaucratic barriers that do not consider community needs. Although the region of the ISWP is largely traditional, such actions may undermine and delegitimise traditional authority.

Furthermore, diverse tenure arrangements exist with characteristics that are different to property rights that are mostly associated with holding registered title to an affected piece of land, for example, use rights to certain types of resources, sometimes at particular times of the year. Such tenure arrangements help fulfil a variety of livelihood purposes with varying degrees of tenure security. While conservation under the management of the state has been imposed, traditional leadership plays a certain role in the certain decision making operations of the ISWP. In addition, local structures have been elected to represent the community and give them a voice in decision making, but there is a level of dissatisfaction with its functioning in practice. Ordinary natural resource users have differing levels of access to resources for generating a livelihood. The governance of the ISWP's land and natural resources is managed by several institutional structures: rural formal traditional authority; rural quasi-formal authority (state-led, donor-driven local co-management structures); formal state authority – SANParks through the ISWP; and private formal high-end conservation lodges and establishments.

Attempts to integrate these complex tenure realities are affecting people's experiences on the ground. Apart from representing obvious expressions of conceptual dualism (Hornby *et al.* 2017), terminology used to distinguish between formal and informal ways of governing natural resources seems to legitimise and give privilege to modern, formal, statutory and legal forms of tenure over informal, customary and, at times, illegal tenure arrangements (Toulmin & Quan 2000). A reduced understanding holds that tenure is a matter of legal form rather than one that incorporates social and institutional relationships (Cousins 2009. Hornby *et al.* (2017) express three main reasons where the use of these terminologies may be found problematic and sometimes misleading. The manner in which these terms are used tend to privilege formal tenure systems over informal/ traditional arrangements. This suggests that formalisation and legalisation of tenure arrangements is the only solution; that secure tenure can only be achieved through registered title.

Moreover, informal arrangements seem to insinuate disorder, disorganisation and even chaos. We found informal tenure systems that are complex, well-organised and regulated sets of rules and procedures, diverse and heterogeneous systems that vary from place to place and context to context. When tenure relationships are not formalised, to many researchers, donors, state agencies, they are invisible or, if they are visible, they are criminalised. Most of South Africa's tenure landscapes lie on a continuum between customary and exclusive ownership (Cousins 2009; Wicomb 2024).

1.4 Women's access to natural resources: Invisibility, struggles and resistance

The role of women in conservation has largely been invisible and excluded from view for reasons that include capitalist societal and cultural norms (James *et al.* 2021; Armitage *et al.* 2020; Jones & Solomon 2019). Entrenched patriarchal systems place gendered divisions of labour and patriarchal power dynamics at the centre of the stage. Gender is a social construct with attributes of masculinity and femininity, cultural norms and gendered divisions of labour. Moreover, perceptions and views on gender have the potential to change over time and vary between societies (Griffin 2017). Drawing from the work of Kingwill *et al.*, in Hornby *et al.* (2017) in different villages in Msinga, some change has been noted in terms of land access and land holding because women can now apply for land under their own names. In most African contexts, women usually need a 'male face' to gain some form of ownership of land. Even though land ownership and access control prioritises men, for the most part, resources are mainly used by women, argues Yeni (2024). Household sustainability depends on unpaid gendered labour performed by women (Benya 2015; Bhattacharya 2017; Federici 2012).

1.5 Criminalisation of livelihoods and securitisation as ways of restricting access

Criminalisation

We view criminalisation through the eyes of the law, policy and regulations that introduced the permit system, licensing, and restrictions on communities' access to natural resources. For us, criminalisation is part of a structural process of the broader system that prohibits people from gaining access to the means to generate their livelihoods, therefore leading to protest actions like entering the park at night, cutting fences, and going into the park territory in groups to camp (Isaacs & Witbooi 2019). This system includes the criminalisation of communities' activities to generate livelihoods through policies and regulations that exclude communities in order to prevent them from having access to nature and natural resources, securitisation (which refers to seeing the loss of nature as an existential threat) and militarisation of nature conservation (which refers to using military methods to conserve nature), as well as violence, which is a consequence of a system of exclusion based on criminalisation, securitisation, and militarisation of nature. To better understand this system, we draw from Nixon (2011) and the concept of 'slow violence', namely structural violence which is gradual and takes place over time. It is effected through policies and experienced through criminalisation, securitisation, and militarisation.

Isaacs and Witbooi (2019) challenge the notion of illegal, unreported and underregulated (IUU) fisheries when it is applied to small-scale fishers in South Africa which the state views as criminals, poachers, illegal, and unorganised groups. In the current paper we argue that it is important to separate crime from management regulation, and we take a human rights-based approach to access rights to a livelihood, cultural and traditional practices, and food. We further analyse the notion of poaching as a form of protest against an allocation system in fisheries that has failed to recognise small-scale fishers who in turn view the rights allocation system as lacking legitimacy. The fishers interviewed for the Isaacs and Witbooi study (2019) explained they are living next to the coast but they cannot harvest the resources they traditionally had access to and, although it is illegal to do so, they will risk fishing at night in protected areas for food and

to generate their livelihoods. In spite of their customary and traditional practices, and historical use rights and access to nature, because of criminalisation, when caught, they face gear confiscation, fines, and even imprisonment for illegally harvesting marine resources.

The history of access to natural resources before criminalisation was imposed matters. Isaacs (2004; 2006; 2011) locates the notion of criminalisation of marine-based livelihoods in a context where the current legal framework does not allow access to resources that were traditionally used, fishers are not allowed to sell their catch legally, and they are not allowed to practice their culture and tradition. We locate the criminalisation of livelihoods to conservation practices and management in iSimangaliso where we worked with fishers of KwaNibela, as well as grass collectors, traditional hunters, spiritual and medicinal healers, and honey producers of Dukuduku.

Securitisation

Another important component of the criminalisation of gathering natural resources for livelihood purposes is understanding how it is linked to securitisation. In fisheries, De Coning & Witbooi(2015) note how control and enforcement approaches to conservation have increased. Massé & Lunstrum (2016) see securitisation as a two-step process consisting of initially framing conservation as a security matter, which paves the way for accumulation of land and other resources by private actors through enclosing conservation areas on security grounds.

Securitisation goes along with militarisation – the adoption of military-like skills, technology and resources to protect conservation areas restricting local people’s access to the natural resources they contain (Massé and Lunstrum 2015) refer to how both public and private conservation actors have embraced securitisation. A militarised approach has been seen in practice as a response to incidents of poaching in the northern part of South Africa in the Kruger National Park (Lunstrum 2014).

South Africa has the biggest rhinoceros population and a very high rate of poaching, which has led the state to pursue a wide range of strategies to protect the species both nationally and internationally. This has seen investment in a militarised response to conservation and the protection of the rhino when non-military measures such as fences and fines have been unsuccessful. Private armed security actors are being contracted to patrol and manage the risks of armed poachers hunting rhinos and other valuable species.

The securitisation of nature is linked to policy shifts which seek to protect more of nature, setting targets for the conservation of certain parts of the landscapes, actions to address climate change, and actions to establish ‘new green spaces’ (Fairhead *et al.* 2012). In Botswana, one of the primary roles of the military is for the protection of nature, highlighting the move towards a securitised and militarised conservation approach (Henk 2006). In addition, Lunstrum (2014) refers to institutional security approaches to conservation as ‘green militarisation’. The militarisation of conservation is facilitated by expansion of security methods and the securitisation of protected areas (Massé & Lunstrum 2016).

Campbell *et al.* (2001) explain that the growing edge to protect wildlife has resulted in national parks and game reserves becoming epicentres of violence. Duffy *et al.* (2019) say this has come about as a result of a shift in the language used in conservation which affects approaches in the protection of nature with, for example, mainstream conservationists referring to the ‘war’ on biodiversity which focuses attention on the environment as a



KwaNibela resident, Thang'hini Ngubane, cooking during the 2024 PLAAS Living Landscapes in Action short course.
(Photo: Natalie Gabriels)

source of conflict rather than on the protection of nature (Bocarejo & Ojeda 2016; Duffy *et al.* 2019; Büscher & Ramutshindela (2015). This looks at how the environment and natural resources can be sources of conflict which gives rise to it to be secured, a context in which rangers may be recruited from the army and the police because of the military-like skills that are considered to be necessary for wildlife policing in a securitised and militarised context (Lunstrum 2014).

The consequences of the criminalisation and securitisation of livelihoods is violence and arrests of community members trying to access their livelihoods in natural landscapes. In conservation, practices such as fencing out people and penalising people through fines and confiscating their gear to protect nature serve to alienate communities from the environment and access to the means to generate their livelihoods which is a broader structural form of violence. Duffy *et al.* (2019) argue that these approaches are systematically underpinned by practices of intimidation, violence and surveillance which can be part and parcel of militarisation and criminalisation. She further says that this use of force and violence tends to alienate local communities from the natural environment.

Violence in conservation

Violence in conservation dates back to the late nineteenth century through the convergence of the colonial era which occurred simultaneously with the introduction of protected areas (Mollett & Kepe 2018). Violence is one of the core elements that drove the colonialism project and by extension the introduction of conservation areas. Violence has taken place in conservation in different forms and has been understood to be experienced in varying ways by

different communities. As suggested above, violence can be seen through the lens of slow violence – violence as an act which takes place over time or a delayed destruction that is distributed over time and space Nixon (2011). This understanding of violence takes a structural or institutional look at violence in conservation which includes acts of structural exclusion such as restricting access to natural resources through rangers acting as ‘fences’, the introduction of permit systems along with regulations that limit people’s ability to harvest natural resources to sustain their livelihoods, as well as the practical systemic exclusion of communities from participating in decision making processes about their ancestral lands and issues affecting their livelihoods.

The ascension of the national park model in the colonial era saw a rampant increase in the displacement of those residing within designated park borders. Communities in iSimangaliso are no different. Forced removals of people from the area have taken place at different times between the 1930s and the 1980s Sundnes (2013). It is important to note the violent character of dispossession in this region and other parts of the world. The act of removal was often done through the use of force, and in some cases included the physical removal of people from their ancestral lands, the burning of their homes, the displacement of their cattle, and physical harm against men and women, young and old. These are actions which put the interest of conservation, forestry and agriculture ahead of those of resident communities, bringing about turmoil between park authorities and communities which have never abated AFRA(2008).

Legacies of colonial violence continue to exist in conservation and this has also been evident in the change in the language used in conservation as well as the evolution of new methodologies to protect nature. Duffy *et al.* (2019) capture this shift in conservation language by referencing the evolving mainstream conservation narrative which refers to the act of conservation as going to war. The questions remain with whom? and for whom? As these languages and frameworks adopt strong and intimidating tones, the methods and techniques of protecting nature also become strong and intimidating. There is an increasing security presence in conservation spaces, an increasing presence of firearms, and the use of electronic security technologies to protect nature. Lunstrum (2014) and Dunlap and Fairhead (2014) describe this as green militarisation, which is the deployment of military-like methods and techniques to protect nature. It is again important to note that all of these have underpinnings of the use of force and violence, which is inflicted on real people’s lives and livelihoods and compromises the sustainability of their family and cultural institutions. Büscher and Ramutsindela (2016) have identified limitations in the definition of green militarisation. This ‘dehumanising’ act in conservation spaces is not a unique practice as scholars who have done extensive research around the globe have said, although it can be identified as an understudied phenomenon Lunstrum (2014). These authors say that ‘green militarisation’ focuses on the materialist (physical) form of violence which excludes social forms of violence which are crucial for conservation conversations. They introduce the term ‘green violence’ which looks beyond violence as a physical or material phenomenon to draw attention to the non-materialistic aspects of violence and the way violence takes on social and linguistic forms.

This ‘green violence’ integrates the broader social, political and economic contexts within which violence is perpetrated. These understandings are particularly focused on narratives of militarisation and the marketisation of nature for the benefit of private and state interests, at the expense of the communities, the structural impacts of policies and regulations on people and their livelihoods, as well as important aspects such as the way that conservation as it is currently practised takes dignity away from communities.

2. Historical background

iSimangaliso Wetland Park, a public conservation site that was previously known as the Greater St. Lucia Wetland Park, was renamed on 1 November 2007 (Walker 2015). This area was first given the name Rio dos Medos do Ouro meaning River of the Gold Dunes by the survivors of the Portuguese ship Saint Benedict in 1554 (Kloppers 2014). This given name, and the history, already provides an image of an area rich in natural resources. The key elements to track in the establishment of the park include understanding the landscapes and their use before the introduction of ‘conservation’ in and around the ISWP. The Tembe and Maputo royal families co-existed in borderless and fenceless territories in these landscapes, after which British colonisation and apartheid and institutionalised racism with a clear negative impact on the access to land and natural resources of people living in and around these landscapes.

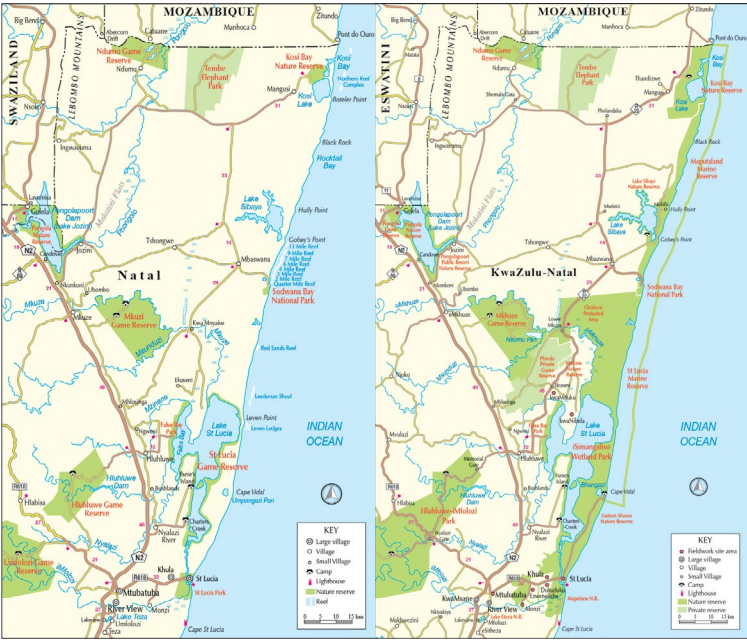
2.1 The colonial period

As was the case in other parts of Africa, South Africa experienced colonisation under the British which in this area brought about the advent of British AmaThongaland (Kloppers 2014). AmaThongaland was divided into Crown and trust land; Crown land belonging to the British while trust land was allocated to the Mabudu tribe (Van Wyk 1983). The British later proclaimed St. Lucia as a township in 1822. In 1897, the British AmaThongaland was merged with 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’ (Kloppers 2014).

In South Africa the politics of parks is rooted in forced removals with a history of land dispossession being (re) lived by communities as they seek restitution in terms of the Restitution of Land Rights Act, 1994. The current

Figure 1: Map illustrating uMkhanyakude District in 1971, highlighting the early stages of establishing public conservation areas/ games reserves (dark green) and private conservation areas/ game reserves (light green).

(Cartographer John Hall, drawn based on our research.)



ACCESS, LIVELIHOODS AND BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION IN ISIMANGALISO WETLAND PARK, KWAZULU-NATAL, SOUTH AFRICA

Women from KwaNobela and Dukuduku areas carrying hand-crafted items made from grass found in iSimangaliso Wetland Park. (Photo: Natalie Gabriels)

report shows how communities are experiencing dehumanisation, exclusion and restriction from accessing natural resources in their ancestral lands. The politics of parks are primarily based on creating divisions between people and nature, also identified as 'fences and fines', which are the result of forced removals and the communities being dispossessed of their land (Büscher *et al.* 2021; Büscher & Fletcher 2019). Forced removals meant that Africans were squeezed into small parcels of land, leading to overcrowding and limited access to agricultural lands (Chellan & Khan 2008). Some lost their land in the name of nature conservation; others were dispossessed to pave way for commercial forestry in the area and the establishment of a South African Defence Force (SADF) missile base on the Ndlozi Peninsula in 1968 (Walker 2015).

ISWP's historical conservation establishment dates back to 1895 during a period when the first reserves were created by the Zululand Government. Up until 1875 the park was home to the Tsonga people, together with their Tsonga fish kraal, who were residents of the area for more than 1 000 years (Harries 1983). The area was known as the Tembeland/ Thongaland but this name fell into disuse in the early 1900s. There were no natural or human-made boundaries which meant the area between St. Lucia Bay and Maputo was borderless. The Tembe royal family ruled the area around St. Lucia and the Maputo royal family ruled the area around Maputo. It was through a sequence of events that will be illustrated in detail in this report that the ISWP has evolved, becoming a globally recognised World Heritage Site, with noticeable physical, environmental, political and socio-economic shifts.

2.2 The apartheid period

In keeping with the goal of apartheid and its highly racialised policies that marginalised surrounding communities of black people from access to natural resources, as well as the

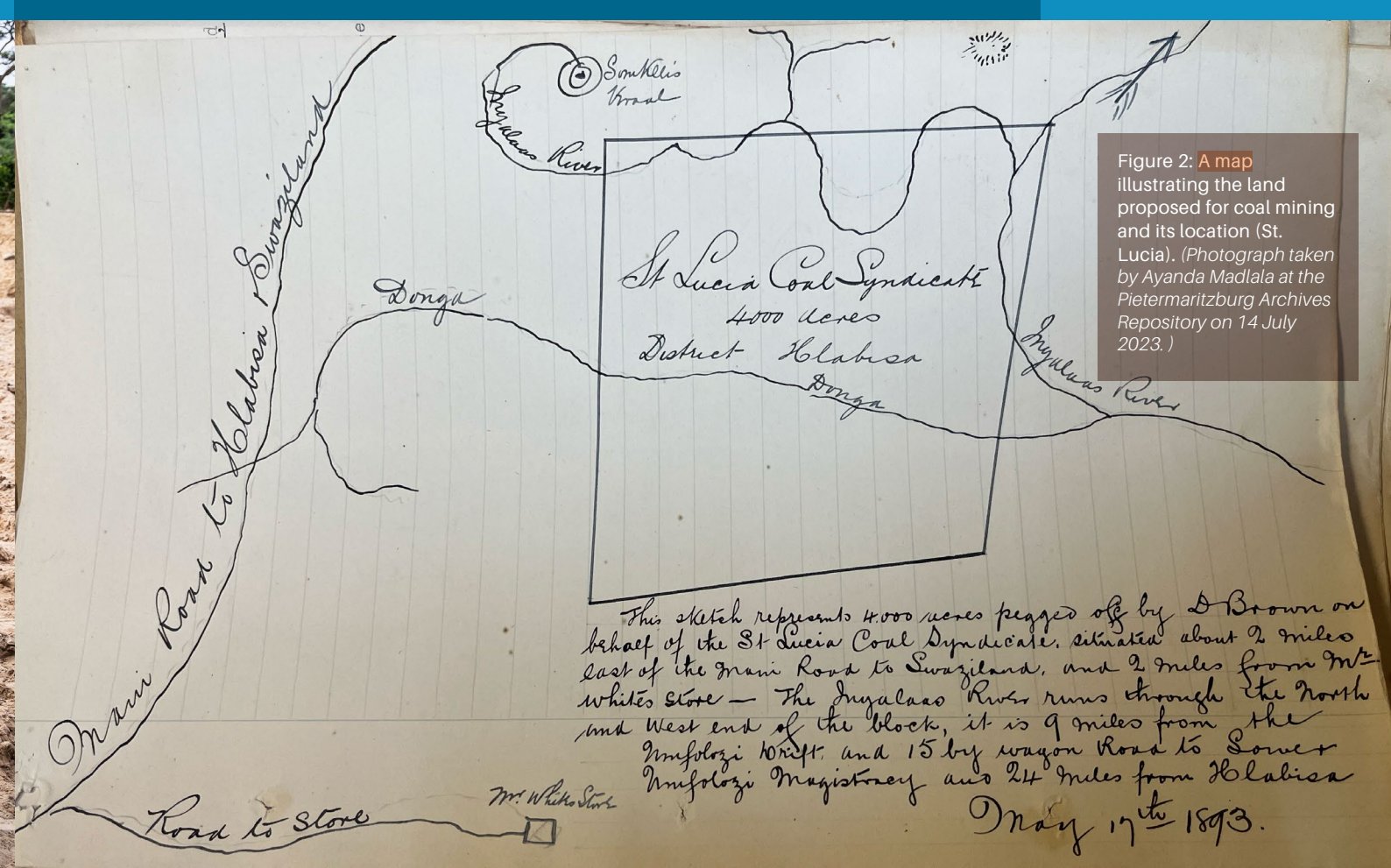


Figure 2: A map illustrating the land proposed for coal mining and its location (St. Lucia). (Photograph taken by Ayanda Madlala at the Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository on 14 July 2023.)

preservation of the park as an exclusive conservation area, a new wave of clearing so-called 'black spots' in Lake St. Lucia area occurred between 1956 and 1974 through forced removals to entrench territorial apartheid (Skelcher 2003). This process solidified the establishment of what is now the ISWP. People residing in and around the ISWP have a long history of poverty, neglect and land dispossession which began in the colonial era and exacerbated the establishment of the 'bantustans' or 'homelands' under apartheid. In efforts to consolidate the homelands of the former apartheid state, the most recent forced removals began in the 1960s, including those of large numbers of farm workers following the abolishment of labour tenancy, and persisted up until as recently as 1983 (Skelcher 2003). During this period, much land was lost to conservation, military areas, and commercial forestry plantations. Significantly, given the large population of KwaZulu-Natal, land allocation has led to small land holdings and low-income generation from agriculture. The acute land degradation in former homeland areas is partly a legacy of the country's apartheid history, which saw the relocation of subsistence farmers to homeland areas often characterised by low agricultural potential. Individuals in many of iSimangaliso's neighbouring communities and land claimant communities are still able to clearly recall the trauma caused by these events (Skelcher 2003).

"Even graves of our forefathers were left inside the park when people were moved and put in trucks to be left on the highway. Many people do not have access to those gravesites or even know what happened to them after the removals." – Mr Qwabe, 77 years old, St. Lucia

The history of iSimangaliso Wetland Park reveals that there have always been contests for resources in the region for different interests, some of which are conservation and tourism, but also include mining for sand and coal. Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, a multinational company proposed to mine the dunes on the eastern shores of Lake St. Lucia in iSimangaliso for titanium and other heavy metals. This proposal was met with resistance and polarised public debate (Hansen 2013b).

According to archival data obtained from the Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, there was a proposed lease on land in St. Lucia for coal mining purposes. The historical background underpinning the purpose of this lease application dates back to 1895 where three farmers who had already settled in the southern part of what was then Natal province applied for a parcel of land estimated to be 4 000 acres (equivalent to 1 618ha). The objective for leasing this land was to use it as a coal mine. The proposal request included a plea to lease land for 21 years with rights of renewal. The Natal government was responsible for receiving the application and considering the proposal. An estimated eight families were residing on the site. Even though there is a 'mention' of these families in the documented conversation between the government of that time and the farmers, there is no documentation regarding any form of consultation with these families. Instead, there was talk that the farmers would be responsible for compensation to the families, but no mention of what form it would take).

The sketch in Figure 2 is a representation of 4 000 acres of land pegged off by David Brown, one of the three lease applicants, on behalf of the St. Lucia Syndicate. This land was situated about 2 miles east of the main road to Eswatini, and 2 miles from White's Store with the Nyalazi stream running through it, 20 miles from St. Lucia Bay. The surveying and mapping of the land in question solely aimed to look at the natural features and whether there would be any impact from the proposed change in land use. This action also signifies what is regarded as important and what is not a priority. In this case, capital is given higher value than people's livelihoods.

The land was described as 'very barren, scantily covered with grass and stunted Mimosa bush, about 300 feet above sea level, badly watered intersecting with dry water-course or donga between long low ridges'. Even the Nyalazi stream is described as consisting of long pools of water unfit to drink. While the documentation shows that there were families identified as residents of the area, there is no further mention in the correspondence on what happened with these families. Instead, the focus is on follow-up processes that the lease would need to take into consideration, the lease amount that would be required, the duration of the lease or contract agreement, employment opportunities, and how the work would be executed. This agreement followed section 20 of the Rules and Regulations framed under the provisions of Section 84 of Zululand Proclamation No. II, 1889. Discussions that followed took a turn which focused on answering the question of how the mined commodity would be transported. A separate report on all the data retrieved from the Archives has been prepared.

3. Methodology and case study sites

3.1 Ethnographic research approach

The entry point of this research was through the local communities and this required understanding of the language and culture, close observation, and participation from both the researcher and the community. The researchers allowed themselves to be embedded in communities to build connections, relationships and trust while identifying challenges that local communities face through their own eyes for over two years. As described by Gautam (2023) A slow, intentional research process was followed using ethnographic data gathered through active participation in community life and activities to understand community access to natural resources in ISWP for social, cultural, traditional and livelihood reasons.

Our approach was that of action research where the researchers are part of the research process. As Hall *et al.* (2017) explain, action research is conducting research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action that uses 'a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action' (Hall *et al.* 2017) Participatory action research involves the pursuit of social change and the democratisation of the knowledge process which means including others in the data collection process and using various tools and methods to ensure their contribution (Isaacs 2016). The point of action research is both to change the situation and to challenge power relations in terms of who holds the knowledge that emerges from the research process.

We used participant rural appraisal tools in our research to learn and be part of the daily rhythms of community life, livelihoods, living conditions, norms and cultural practices. This learning was done with and by the communities involved, allowing for participants to do their own analysis, planning and act on matters that affect their daily struggles (see Chambers 1992). We adjusted our methodology to fit the local setting and found such as the Venn diagram, night halting, transect walks, resource mapping, stakeholder positionality mapping, observation tools, participation in community meetings and protest action, adopting meth-

Through night halting – living with communities – we experienced the community's lived experience of living with nature, e.g., hippopotamuses 'resting' at the main gate of Mam Mhlongo, seeing hippos roaming around the streets of St. Lucia, and hearing wild animals making loud noises in the middle of the night have become part of the researchers' lived experience."



Figure 3: Small-scale fishermen, small-scale fishers' co-operative leaders, Chief Mdluli and LAA Associate Researcher Siphesihle Mbhele at the Mtubatuba Magistrate's Court after meeting the prosecutor working on the young Nibela fisherman's murder case. (Photo: Siphesihle Mbhele, PLAAS)



Figure 4: Associate Researcher Siphesihle Mbhele conducting a focus group interview with youth people from the Nibela and Nkundusi communities who are fishermen, speaking on their position in the community, and their challenges in generating sustaining livelihoods. (Photo: Siphesihle Mbhele, PLAAS)



Figure 5: Small-scale fishers in Nibela, Chief Ngubane and Associate Researcher Siphesihle Mbhele during a focus group interview. (Photo: Siphesihle Mbhele, PLAAS)



Figure 6: As part of the night halt, the researcher participates in doing what the research participants do every day. This photograph was taken on 21 February 2023 after heavy rains in St. Lucia resulted in catfish (a type of freshwater fish) being swept into the sea. Fishers came with buckets to collect as many as they could as this fish species cannot survive in salt water. (Photo: Natalie Gabriels)

odologies which ensure integration into the social structure and forming part of the daily livelihood activities, and building solid relationships with all stakeholders in the communities participating in the study. This also included participating in various community advocacy initiatives such as providing support to civil society organisations which work with our study communities by being involved in advocacy initiatives, forming part of community and civil society workshops, providing research support for their advocacy processes, and supporting court cases in which communities are the applicants.

Our desktop research included data from the Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository focused on the history of land use, land ownership as well as dispossession and displacement. The archival data complemented the oral histories obtained from community members, and helped the researchers to understand the current dynamics in relation to the ownership of land and existing agreements. We collected grey data as evidence, comprising participants' letters, permits, pictures and other documents to tell their stories. Because we would be conducting research while living in and with communities, we needed to undergo a traditional ethical clearance process conducted by the traditional council. This was an important process of relationship building and integration into the community which also helped the researchers in their day-to-day interactions with natural resource users in a society with deep traditional values. We also used traditional face-to-face interviews with participants to gain deeper insights into an issue of access, or beating by the rangers, etc. We conducted key informant interviews with strategic stakeholders in the community's traditional authorities, and the fishers' organisations Coastal Links and Masifundise Development Trust. Focus group interview methodologies differed based on the intention of the focus group and the type of group which was being interviewed, e.g., women grass cutters, fishers, youth, traditional healers, and other groups. Each group was asked the same questions as described in the project template, supplemented by follow-up questions to obtain greater insights into the subject under discussion.

Through night **halting** – living with communities – we experienced the community's lived experience of living with nature, e.g., hippos roaming around the streets of St. Lucia, and hearing wild animals making loud noises in the middle of the night have become part of the researchers' lived experience. Social issues that affect communities included power outages (over and above scheduled load shedding), the difficulty of finding water that is fit to drink, and dangerous wild animals escaping out of the reserves with attendant safety concerns. Narayanasamy and Boraian (2005) argue that this tool provokes change in the way in which outsiders view research communities by affecting their attitudes after sleeping and eating as research communities do. This demonstrates commitment by the researcher, bringing the worlds of the researcher and the community much closer together, strengthening trust, and building good relationships.

During transect walking, we engaged actively to try to understand the community's timeline on its assets, social issues through observations, probing, listening, mapping (layout) and presenting the resource data as diagrams. In KwaMduku we used this tool understand the historical of the land use over time (change in private land ownership, grazing areas and locations of water resource), knowledge of the natural resources found in the area and different uses (medicinal, cultural/rituals, livelihood uses), intergenerational skills transfers, social conflicts, different stakeholders and their relationships (traditional authority, ISWP, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (EKZNW), and private conservationists in Phinda Game Reserve).

The Venn diagram was very useful for building relationships with communities. It is a visual participatory tool where cut-outs of circles in different sizes are used to represent each stakeholder (Narayanasamy and Boraian 2005). We used this tool with women groups in Dukuduku who harvest and use *incema* grass as a form of livelihood generation. We got to understand their daily challenges of access, and the impact on their livelihoods of top-down regulations and restrictions imposed by the iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority. Through talking about the meaning of land, fences and the collection of plants, we got deeper insights into the relationship between community members and nature.

3.2 Overview of research sites

Southern iSimanagalis

uMkhanyakude District Municipality where ISWP is situated is the second poorest district municipality in South Africa with an estimated population of 689 060 (Community Census, 2016). More than 80% of households in the district live below the poverty line with only 42% of the population being formally employed. Out-migration of local residents in search for better employment opportunities elsewhere remains the major reason why most households are either female-headed or child-headed (Census, 2022). The municipal Integrated Development Plan of 2022/2023 states that:

‘Much of uMkhanyakude is characterised by remote but densely settled and poorly serviced communities, and in this context, the following development inputs are urgently needed: poverty alleviation, job creation and local economic development; water and sanitation, electricity, health services, roads and public transport, infrastructure and social services. (Cogta,2020)

This research selected the following communities which are in close proximity to the iSimangaliso Wetland Park: Khula Village, Dukuduku, Monzi, Khayelisha, Ezwenelisha, KwaNdonyana and St. Lucia which are in the southern part of ISWP, under the Inkosi Matubatuba Local Municipality. This local municipality has a total population of 202 176 citizens (Census Survey, 2016) occupying over 34 000 households (DBSA 2011). The municipality has a working age population of 56% and an elderly population of 4.4% with an unemployment rate of 39% overall and a young unemployment rate of 46%. Over 15 000 households in the region depend on agricultural activities in order to generate their livelihoods. As a result, several homes that fall in the municipality have crops in their yards varying according to the subsistence needs of the family, the market in which they sell their produce, as well as the time of the year. Local community members from Khula Village, Mtubatuba and Monzi also provide local tours and cultural experiences to tourists such as *indlamu* which is a Zulu traditional dance.

uMkhanyakude’s population is young with 50.7% (349 279) of the population under the age of 18 years, (Stats SA, 2016). The age group 18 to 64 years accounts for 45.4% of the population (312 695). The unemployment rate is 32% for those younger than 25 years and 34% for those between 25 and 34 years. Small-scale fishing has become a key livelihood activity for young men in Nibela and young women selling fish and collecting *ince-ma* grass. Young people face the risk of entering the lake illegally to survive. A portion of residents of ISWP are dependent on different government grants which include old age pensions, disability grants, child support grants and the recently introduced social relief grant for the unemployed. Another government intervention that supports the households in this area is working on projects under the Expanded Public Works Programme and the Public Employment Programme. There is seasonal employment on commercial ground nut and pineapple farms and in conservation establishments during the tourism high season.

Table 1: Land, livelihoods and conservation activities in iSimangaliso

	SOUTHERN ISIMANGALISO				NORTHERN ISIMANGALISO	
	Mtubatuba	Monzi	Khula	St Lucia	Mduku	KwaNibela
Public Conservation (Tourism, rewilding, securitisation)	x	x	x	x	x	x
Private Conservation (Tourism and Rewilding, securitisation)	x				x	x
Large Scale forestry	x					
Forestry Out growers’ schemes	x				x	x
Tourism			x	x	x	
Small-scale fishing				x	x	x
Recreational Fishing				x		
Large scale farming pineapples and Nut (type) - seasonal employment					x	
Small-scale farming livestock		x	x		x	x
Crop production		x			x	x
Grasscutting		x	x		x	x
Small crafts			x	x	x	x
Coal Mining						
Sugar plantations		x				
Traditional medicine collection		x	x		x	x

The Mtubatuba area mainly consists of large-scale timber plantations operated under a joint initiative between Mondi and Siyaqhubeka Forestry (PTY) LTD. A total of 9 000ha of these timber plantations is on land owned by the ISWP. Historically, former residents of the area experienced forced removals from land that is now forest plantations. The region also has a community of small-scale timber producers under the forestry outgrowers’ scheme on communal land. In Mtubatuba we linked the history of land dispossession and displacement to land where Mondi (through Siyaqhubeka Forestry and Khulanathi Forestry) have their timber plantations and where community members who have land also grow timber on their own land and sell it back to the company (outgrowing) (Clarke and Isaacs 2005). We looked into the nature of those relationships and how they are seen in this area and had a closer look into the actors involved in the forestry sector and how these actors relate to the community. The Somkhele coal mine is located in this community, and has experienced local residents having to undergo forced removals and displacement, experience changes in their livelihoods, and negative impacts on their health (Benya 2015; Yeni 2024). The Somkhele coal mine covers an estimated 780ha of land with possible expansion in the pipeline. Mining, especially of coal, has severe environmental impacts as well as social implications for those residing in affected areas and this is one of the reasons for selecting this area for data collection (Benya 2015).

Monzi Smallholdings area is adjacent to parts of ISWP with Ezwenelisha (meaning new world/ new place), Monzi Estate (an affluent area with predominantly white owners), Futhululu Forest (which is focused on forestry as well as tourism activities such as camping). Ezwenelisha residents experienced land dispossession in the late 1990s when they were moved from Dukuduku forest resulting in a loss of livelihood activities. Residents of Ezwenelisha who now sustain their livelihoods through small-scale farming (crop, forestry and plant production), and make art and craft items which they sell along the St. Lucia coast (Jabulani, Estuary and Ingwe beaches). Even after some of the locals were resettled in the area, restrictions on access to natural resources were



Mr Mamba, a fisher from Dukuduku, sharing his experiences with LLA short course participants in iSimangaliso Wetland Park.
(Photo: Natalie Gabriels)

still imposed on them. Portions of land in this area have been fenced in to restrict access and limit grazing for livestock, all in the name of conservation. Local protests take place regularly in the area. The most recent took place early in 2022 when locals marched to the ISWP offices demanding to go back to their forefathers' land. This protest was provoked by wetlands not being a suitable environment for housing structures, challenges which proved to be worse during the floods that affected many parts of KZN at that time. Part of the area that was claimed by iSimangaliso is now used as a game reserve. In this area, the study assisted the researchers to look at the changes in land use over the years and how this has had a negative impact on the locals' overall attitude towards the importance of nature. Moreover, because power dynamics between the ISWP Authority, proclaimed chiefs, local business owners, leaders of political parties and affected local members, come into play and there seems to be more emphasis on the protection of natural resources than on protecting and nurturing human life.

Khula Village community is home to most small-scale fishers who have occupied this village since reclaiming the land in the 1980s after having experienced evictions from their ancestral lands (Monzi Smallholdings). The area forms part of a three-part subdivision for resettlement of those who had been previously removed (Nyathi 2021). The process included community mobilisation and meeting with officials as a precursor to lodging a land claim was led by former ward councillor and *induna* of Khula village Chief Philip Mkhwanazi who was a community leader and activist who believed in capturing indigenous voices and the idea of community-based tourism. He was also in the forefront of the activism emerging against attempts to mine heavy minerals in St. Lucia (rutile, zircon and ilmenite) from coastal sand dunes in the southernmost buffer zone of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park and also founded what is now called Khula Village (Veyane Village, 2023). Although there is a traditional authority (chief) in Khula village, the different fishing groups have also established internal committees to organise themselves to demand fishing rights and access to other natural resources. The main demand in this village is securing access to the ocean and opposing regulations that limit their catches, as well as limits on access to iSimangaliso Wetland Park for the purpose of selling and displaying their crafts on the beaches of the park for which they are now required to hold vendor permits. Khula Village also consists of small-scale farmers who have had and continue experiencing challenges with crop production due to land scarcity, and sometimes flooding from the Mfolozi River, which limits their ability to produce crops. Recently, a closed estuary caused the inland rivers to flood cropping fields in the area.

St. Lucia area is dominated by, and centred around tourism activities with women and men selling their craftwork and seasonal fruits along the main road and the coast. The ISWP supports these vendors by providing free space for them to store their goods so that they do not incur daily delivery costs. However, because this is an open shelter whose contents are visible to the general public, vendors take turns to guard their goods at night. There are also restaurants, mainly white-owned. However, obstructions to access to natural resources along the coast are clearly visible in the form of fences along the coastline, fences to prevent communities from accessing protected areas, and increased security is in the form of rangers ('human fences') who control access. In St. Lucia, people are questioned and their belongings are searched to ensure that alcohol does not enter the premises. The main issues in this site are obstructions to access to the actual natural resources in the form of fences, and further measures that restrict where people can and cannot fish, which fishing gear is allowed and which gear may not be used, meaning that small-scale fishers cannot easily generate a livelihood. Recreational fishing is permitted in this area as it helps to attract tourists. Fishing without permits is prohibited in the area but tourists pay to engage in fishing activities like 'catch and release'. Business owners also engage in fishing activities using high-powered boats to go into the sea where they catch fish that they sell to restaurants. It seems

that the fishing restrictions are directed at black small-scale fishers, not business owners in the area. Apart from access to fishing, locals also use the coastline for traditional and cultural purposes and leisure.

St. Lucia has an enclosed conservation area featuring four of the 'big five' fauna (cheetahs, elephants, buffalos, rhinos), as well as other wildlife. This area is called Bhangazi where local black communities once resided and sustained their livelihoods through hunting, fishing in the swamps and the Bhangazi lake, crop production, animal production, craft. They performed rituals using indigenous resources. Another form of land use for former residents was for burying their loved ones, but they are no longer permitted to do this. As with the rest of land and ocean space 'conserved' by ISWP, Bhangazi is also subject to a land claim. Bhangazi was the first land claim in the area to be 'settled'; this took place in 1999. This settlement seems to be biased towards conservation as former residents and so-called 'land claimants' are still refused access; the area is now fenced and access must be paid for at a cost of R59 to R70, with a levy of R7 going towards the Bhangazi trust, an entity that was created after the settlement was reached.

Northern iSimangaliso

The second research area is the Big Five Hlabisa Local Municipality. This region was selected due to the number of communities which are in close proximity to the ISWP and a private conservation area called Phinda Game Reserve with a reliance on nature for subsistence. The communities in this area are the Nibela and Mduku communities. This municipality has a total population of 116 622 people occupying over 25 000 households (Census, 2016). This region has a 18% employment rate with 57% of people who are not economically active. The region has 515 homes which are headed by children under the age of 18. A total of 30.7% of the homes in this region are headed by women (Wazimap, 2016). The main economic sectors in this area are agriculture, with large-scale farmers, services as well as tourism featuring game reserves and conservation tourism. The young male population is actively involved in livelihood activities such as fishing, cattle grazing, crop production, and seasonal wage labour on nearby pineapple or avocado farms. Other formal livelihood activities include working as security guards, waiters, vendors, taxi drivers, petrol attendants and municipal employment under the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP).

The area has high dependency on natural resources, and the land is governed under customary law. Small-scale fishing remains the mainstay of the communities in the north and south, with gender-specific roles for men (fishing) and women (processing and selling fish in town and other parts of the area). Women also cut grass for household use and sell crafts, plant and bulbs for medicinal and cultural purposes, and hunt small antelope. Other livelihood activities in the area include keeping livestock, growing cash crops (sweet potatoes, amadumbe and bananas), and working in large-scale agriculture enterprises growing pineapples and groundnuts. Forestry outgrower schemes on communal lands have become an important source of livelihood generation - entering into highly structured contractual agreements to grow timber for offtake by large corporations such as Mondi and Sappi. The Lima Rural Development Foundation facilitates the conclusion of subcontracting agreements with communities as small-scale timber outgrowers (iSimangaliso Integrated Management Plan 2022-2031). In recent years, the small-scale growers have organised themselves into community associations to negotiate the sale of their timber. This has become an important source of community livelihoods in the iSimangaliso area.

Mduku A local community in Hluhluwe surrounded by private business ventures both in the form of commercial farms (pineapples and nuts) and game reserves (Phinda Private Game Reserve,

Amorello, Qabula Game Reserve). This community is under the leadership of Chief Gumede who has taken over the chieftaincy from his father who recently passed away. The local members use the Sibhicayi river to fish mainly for subsistence and some even go to neighbouring fishing communities i.e. KwaNibela and KwaJobe to sell fish. Other forms of livelihood that are found in the area include seasonal employment opportunities from the aforementioned commercial farms and reserves, agricultural activities (crop and livestock) and the use of natural resources (*ikhwani*, ilala palm, *incema* grass, indigenous trees, and wood). The majority of women in the area are dependent on fishing to provide for their children, sometimes as the only option. The current research focused on women in fishing and the impact that private conservation on communal land has on their access to natural resources, their disputes with private security officers restricting access to natural resources, and mostly violent actions taken against locals accessing nature that seems to prioritise conservation over the welfare of locals residing in the area.

KwaNibela is a predominantly fishing community with a gender breakdown of 55% female and 45% male population, most of whom are youth (Census, 2011). The community land falls under the KwaNibela Traditional Authority Council as permitted by chapter 12 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Luthuli, 2015). This body includes the King of KwaNibela, the Prime Minister of KwaNibela as well as Chiefs (*izinduna*) of the different communities within the village. The King and *izinduna* are responsible for land management which includes land administration, the allocation of land, settling land disputes in the community, ensuring productive and sustainable use of land, presiding over customary law courts on land matters and other issues involving community members and disputes in the community, ensuring that community members participate in decision-making processes, as well as managing safety and security in the community. The Nibela community lives on a peninsula surrounded by the KwaNibela lake which falls under the authority and management of the Isimangaliso Wetland Park as part of the marine protected area. This lake is a source of livelihood for almost all community members. The main source of livelihood in this community includes fishing (from the Nibela lake), hunting, agriculture, keeping cattle, harvesting plants for traditional and medicinal purposes, and harvesting *qumbe*, *ikhwani* and *incema* grasses, a livelihood activity primarily undertaken by women.

The majority of the people now residing in the Nibela community are either descendants of people who were forcibly removed from the KwaNkhosi and KwaMbila for the establishment of the ISWP, or some of the few who were present when the last wave of displacement occurred in the 1970s. This move changed the structure of communities formerly residing in the Nkhosi and Mbila areas, dismantling social structures into fragmented communities in various parts of northern KZN and, more importantly, having a negative impact on their livelihood activities, their interaction with nature, and their access to natural resources necessary for their day-to-day lives. The restrictions on access to natural resources resulting from the establishment of a protected area in the areas from which they were forcibly removed have had a negative impact on the sustainability of this community, prevented people from pursuing their livelihood activities, and contestation that has often resulted in violence as a result of the authorities deploying more militarised methods to protect the park.

Apart from involvement in fishing activities as the main source of livelihood, a small portion of locals in the area also engage in forestry as outgrowers growing and selling gumtrees to companies, which is an important livelihood activity in the area. This is not an environmentally friendly activity because eucalyptus consumes large amounts of water with an attendant negative impact on biodiversity in the area.



KwaNdebele residents, Zodwa and Thang'hini Ngubane, cooking for the PLAAS Living Landscapes short course participants in iSimangaliso Wetland Park.

(Photo: Natalie Gabriels)



Living Landscapes in Action short course participants during a field trip visit to the locally led Manukelana Nursery in iSimangaliso Wetland Park.

(Photo: Natalie Gabriels)

4. Governance structures of the park

After its proclamation in 1999, the ISWP fell into the hands of the state which was responsible for managing, protecting, conserving and limiting entry, and the extraction of natural resources from the area. There was also an element of socio-economic development that the park authority needed to incorporate which looked at ways in which tourism can be used to attract national as well as international visitors for economic gain. Below is a description of how the park operates, the stakeholders that are involved, together with their roles and responsibilities regarding its management. We use the Park's Integrated Management Plan 2022–2031 whose language use shows that the priority is two-fold: conservation of natural resources while generating income from tourism activities. The key focus of the Integrated Management Plan is that the ISWP Authority is on economic gain through tourism, i.e. conservation-based tourism where locals (specifically land claimants) are supposedly included in the agenda. This ten-year plan speaks about developing and empowering locals through job creation and the stimulation of the areas' local economic growth. It is important to note that this structure has not included the role or contribution that local communities surrounding the park should be playing.

Moreover, further exclusion is executed through the re-introduction of more 'licensed tourism activities'. This is another form of exclusion because, for example, fishers in the area are already struggling to utilise the fishing permits that have been imposed on them. They are 'forced' into organising themselves into cooperatives with permits that recognise them only as subsistence fishers fishing only for household consumption, with a limited fishing bucket. 'For iSimangaliso, restoration and rewilding of the ecosystems means that communities can sustainably participate in the economic and social benefits from the Park', says the municipal Integrated Development Plan 2022/23.

4.1 Management authority

The legal framework that underpins the management of the ISWP protected area comprises the World Heritage Convention Act, 1999 (Act 49 of 1999), the National Environmental Management Act (Act 107 of 1998), and the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act (Act 57 of 2003) ('Protected Areas Act').

The iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority (ISWPA) is responsible for managing the park on behalf of the state. The regulations governing the iSimangaliso Wetland Park World Heritage Site require the ISWPA to manage the site through a Board and executive staff component whose duties are provided for in terms of the World Heritage Convention Act. The Authority reports directly to the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment,¹ from which it receives its core funding (DEAT 2009). This structure consists of a Board of nine members representing business, traditional councils, land claimants, as well as national, provincial and local government (DEAT 2009). The Board is responsible for policy formulation and directing the executive. The executive staff component, headed by a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), is responsible for the operations of the Authority, including relationships with other organisations such as

1. Previously known as the Department of Environment Affairs and Tourism.

Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the KZN Tourism Authority, and local government. Furthermore, the Act makes provision for the Authority to prescribe rules in connection with the World Heritage Site under its jurisdiction regarding such matters as the Minister may determine.

The Isimangaliso Wetland Park Integrated Management Plan 2022–2031 includes, among other things, plans for merging the Isimangaliso Wetland Park with Maputo National Park. The rights and responsibilities of the iSimangaliso Authority, EKZNW and the KZN Tourism Authority with respect to the management and development of the ISWP are regulated through legislation and have been further elaborated through a management agreement signed in August 2001 by these parties. The ISWPA is the nationally appointed management authority in terms of the Protected Areas Act, and is statutorily authorised both to manage the park and to make conservation and management decisions. EKZNW derives its authority and responsibility through its agreement with the ISWP Authority and operates as the day-to-day conservation manager. The agreement specifies that the parties will cooperate in order to meet park management objectives.

The ISWP Authority manages the park using values from UNESCO and the World Heritage Convention to ensure the effective day-to-day management of the ISWP. Part of the Authority's responsibility is to promote, manage and facilitate tourism activities as well as to develop the park so that it promotes local economic development. The inclusion of communities is centred around supporting job creation in the park. Apart from subcontractors who are engaged in infrastructure development in the park that is commissioned by the Authority, there are some internship opportunities that require some tertiary education. Local communities say that these 'white collar' job opportunities are structured in ways that exclude the majority of local community members.

The ISWP Authority also has a mandate to enter into cooperative governance agreements with a range of institutions across all spheres of government, including local government, to fulfil its core functions. Although there are clear terms of reference for these stakeholders in the management of the park, there seems to be no coherence in implementation and management, entities operate in siloes, and there are tensions between stakeholders.

4.2 Land and tenure systems

After having experienced forced removals to clear the way for the establishment of the ISWP, some community members were relocated to the margins in the Khula Village project. This was facilitated by COGTA (the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs) in terms of what was called a co-management agreement. The result has been a land tenure system that Kingwill *et al* (2017) describes as a legal plurality, i.e., a mixture of customary law (*de facto* rules) and statutory policy (*de jure* principles). Before the area was called iSimangaliso, the area was a disjointed set of parcels of land allocated to former homelands in which different tenure systems applied. The colonial history and the important ecological significance of this area guided the land tenure systems.

Even though this portion of land was the subject of a land claim that was settled in 1991, the owners have no say about what the land can or cannot be utilised for."



Figure 7 shows a patchwork of land owners – national government, provincial government, local government, and private landowners. This includes areas like Khula Village and Dukuduku. The iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority plays a custodianship role in terms of the overall management of the park.

State-owned land

COMMUNAL LAND TENURE SYSTEM

The Ingonyama Trust Board is a statutory legal entity which was established in terms of the KwaZulu-Natal Ingonyama Trust Act, 1994 just before the advent of democracy in the same year to hold and preserve land which is collectively and communally settled by various tribes and communities that together constitute the Zulu nation. This can be seen as the re-establishment of the Zulu trust which was created by the British colonial authority's recognition of the customary law and royal house of the Zulu nation in the early colonial era (Ingonyama Trust Board 2020). Customary law and governance under the Ingonyama Trust recognises the king as the sole trustee, followed by *amakhosi* (chiefs), then *izinduna* (headmen) and then, within a family, the family head. The land is communally owned. The *izinduna* and *amakhosi* are authorities in the community who are responsible for allocating land, approving and overseeing land use in the areas under their jurisdiction, granting contracts, granting permission for entry into the community of the area, managing land use disputes, and authorising any form of activity on Ingonyama Trust Board land. Their powers include adjudicating disputes in matters concerning community livelihoods such as access to certain areas as well as fisheries which is a substantive contributor to the food supply of families living in the area covered by the current study. Communities in and adjacent to the ISWP, especially in the Hluhluwe locality, reside on communal land which falls under traditional authority. There are strong community ties, substantial communal use of natural resources in the area, and the traditional authorities decide on who has access to the local natural resources. Approximately 18% of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park falls under the Ingonyama Trust.

Private land ownership

Private companies (mainly commercial forests and agricultural farms) have title deeds that declare them to be owners of the land.

All of the land in the ISWP is currently under a land claim by communities that were forcibly removed to establish the park. A total of 14 claims that collectively comprise the entire park were lodged with the Commission on the Restitution of Land Rights in 1994. The first three claims were settled between 1998 and 2002 and six claims were settled in 2007. In terms of the settlement agreements, claimants have been assisted by the ISWP Authority to establish trusts – legal entities whose members now own the land, but it is held in trust, and the members share the benefits of ownership with the ISWP Authority. Whether these benefit-sharing co-management arrangements really benefit the communities who own the land, or whether they are more beneficial to the ISWP Authority and traditional authorities is still a question to be answered. The claims of five dispossessed communities have not yet been settled, which exacerbates tensions between these communities and the ISWP Authority.

Dispossessing Africans of their land was a central feature of colonial conquest and apartheid rule. The allocation of all land in South Africa on grounds of race was pursued through a series designed to control the movement of Africans and restrict their ability to own land in areas designated for other defined race groups. The government's post-1994 land reform initiative aimed to address these past injustices and to create a basis for more equitable economic growth in the rural areas. It was also to remedy the racially skewed distribution of land (Hall & Ntsebeza 2007). Unfortunately, communities that had been subjected to forced removals from their land for purposes of conservation in ISWP, the implementation of land reform in this area has left dispossessed communities with more questions than answers regarding their property rights and who really has power and control over their land. Even where restitution claims over ISWP land have been settled, although title has been transferred, the ISWP remains the overall manager of the land. Secondly, the consolidation of the ISWP has resulted in the imposition of new rules of governance through the World Heritage Convention Act, which limits access to natural resources in the park that are important for social and economic development and livelihood generation (for example land for grazing and agriculture). Thirdly, the consolidation of state control in the park through the World Heritage Convention Act has meant that social and economic development opportunities for people residing in the park have become even more limited (Hansen *et al.* 2015)

Coastal communities living in close proximity to iSimangaliso are subject to traditional authority and have traditional and customary rights and ownership of land. Ownership of ISWP land where claims have been settled has been restored, but the land is still under the administration and management of the ISWP Authority and the only benefit for the community arises from the economic value of the land whose benefits are generally administered through community trusts, the Ingonyama Trust Board, or traditional authorities. However, communities continue to be hindered from enjoying access to nature and the natural resources of the park. Property rights and ownership are similar in both iSimangaliso South and North, but community power and control over resources differs. In the northern, more rural communities outside economic hubs such as St. Lucia, traditional authorities have a stronger presence and an important role in the management of natural resources. However, the degree to which this is of real benefit to the communities is open to question. The process of gaining access to land in the northern more rural communities is usually administered by traditional authorities who then give permission or deny access. In the Southern ISWP area near St. Lucia, traditional authority and customary law has less power and voice over community access to natural resources, but there has been a securitisation and a militarisation of the conservation agenda with new restrictions on community access.



Grass cutter in Nibela preparing her grass.
(Photo: Ayanda Mdladla)

In an interview conducted by our associate researchers on 24 January 2023 in St. Lucia with Mr Qwabe, who is 77 years old, recalled the removal of his family from their land in 1961, land is now part of the iSimangaliso protected area. He said that, to this day, he still does not know where some of the graveyards of his ancestors are and what happened to those graveyards since the forced removals.

'Even graves of our forefathers were left inside the park when people were moved and put in trucks to be left on the highway. Many people do not have access to those gravesites or even know what happened to them after the removals. I myself have family and my parents who were buried inside the park.' (Mr Qwabe, 77 years old, St. Lucia, January 2023.)

Many protected areas in South Africa and all over the world are found within and overlap with lands, territories and resources of indigenous and traditional peoples. In many cases the establishment of these protected areas has affected the rights, interests and livelihoods of indigenous peoples and traditional peoples and subsequently resulted in persistent conflict (Chellan & Khan 2008). These voices of indigenous community members in ISWP have been systematically overlooked from participating in the policy processes to develop policy documents such as the integrated management plan for iSimangaliso as well as the initial establishment of the area as a World Heritage Site. The exclusion is in many other forms such as the systematic exclusion from participating in the ecotourism sector (Chellan & Khan 2008). These exclusions are limitations on fishing permits for local small-scale fishers who fish as a form of livelihood generation, the high price of accessing places such as the Bhangazi Reserve, the inability of small-scale fishers to access the broader market due to the conditions of their permits, as well as restrictions on certain trees being used for spiritual purposes.

5. Findings

One of the key themes that stems from our research we conducted in communities living in and adjacent to ISWP between 2022 and 2025 is that access to natural resources and fishing as a source of food and livelihoods for communities living in and adjacent to the iSimangaliso Wetland Park is limited. Fishers, grasscutters, traditional healers, traditional hunters, and women's livelihoods are limited by physical barriers such as fencing, armed park rangers, privatised securitisation with electric fencing, armed security officers, drones, and surveillance of communities entering private game reserves. The consequence of preventing community access and criminalisation of community members' livelihood activities through fines, fences and the confiscation of gear is community members cutting fences, fishing at night, risking being shot or beaten by private and public security officers. Rewilding in private game reserves without constraints on the population of dangerous animals such as crocodiles and hippopotamuses has led to a rise in deaths and increasing human-wildlife conflict. In this section we highlight the impact that restricting access has on communities' access to livelihood generation activities, traditional uses, customary practices, and women's activities in particular.

5.1 Access

People and communities often experience negative impacts from state interventions in the name of conservation, for instance a loss of access to natural resources (Hansen *et al.* 2015). The proclamation of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park as a World Heritage Site in 1999 led to restrictions on access to natural resources in the area, including regulating fishing, imposing catch limits, requiring fishers to hold permits and, in some places, prohibiting fishing altogether. Turning land formerly owned by people into a park to conserve wildlife and the biodiversity of plants and other species led to residential land being fenced off and the imposition of access restrictions on people previously residing in the Bhangazi Lake and other areas surrounding the iSimangaliso Wetland Park.

As with other areas where the ISWP claims to preserve nature, the Bhangazi area, which falls under St. Lucia, used to be a residential area but due to ISWP being proclaimed as a World Heritage Site people were forcibly removed in order to 'protect nature'. This resulted in changes in land use, limited access or no access at all to local communities, the introduction of four of the big five fauna (elephants, buffalos, leopards and rhinoceroses), and the exclusion of people from access to natural resources by erecting fences. This part of St. Lucia is an example of human action creating a disconnection between humans and nature, commodifying nature through rewilding, and restricting local people's access to livelihood activities. Even though this portion of land was the subject of a land claim that was settled in 1991, the owners have no say about what the land can or cannot be utilised for.

Mr Qwabe, a 75-year-old fisher remembering the change that the proclamation of iSimangaliso as a World Heritage Site brought to the community with regards to access to natural resources and the park itself said:

'There are many places where we are not allowed access. There is one in the ocean called first rocks - we are only allowed up until that point. We are restricted from access to mission rocks when entering on that

Living Landscapes in Action short course fieldtrip to Monzi in iSimangaliso, facilitated by Associate Researcher Ayanda Madlala (pictured).

(Photo: Natalie Gabriels)

side. You must pay a fee at the gate. We are also restricted from entering the forest where we find meat. They have claimed ownership. We are restricted from getting fish because they claim it's theirs.' (Mr Qwabe, St. Lucia, January 2023).

Traditional healers in this region rely on natural resources which are mostly available to them around the iSimangaliso Wetland Park and they use different plants, herbs, trees, roots and other natural resources which they use to make traditional medicines. Traditional leaders use nature and all its resources, including beaches and waterfalls for traditional cleansing ceremonies which have spiritual and ancestral significance Rivers *et al.* (2023) say that indigenous and local knowledge holders and cultural heritage continues to be largely neglected in ocean governance, especially area-based management approaches such as marine spatial planning in South Africa, and more broadly along the African coast. This has resulted in the formulation of a policy framework that does not adequately consider the social and cultural aspects of nature and its uses, often resulting in negative impacts on local indigenous people. In the case of iSimangaliso, this has often resulted in a restriction of access to nature spaces (Peer *et al.* 2022), that is not only necessary for the livelihoods of communities living in close proximity to the area, but also restricts other uses of nature and natural spaces and resources such as harvesting of certain herbs which are used by traditional healers for making medicine as well as the use of natural features that include land and water inside the park for rituals and other traditional purposes.

Conservation has not only created a division between people and nature by implementing restrictions on access to nature and natural resources, but this has also meant removal of people from their histories and existing ties with the environment and different resources which were used for other spiritual or cultural purposes (Lam & Paul 2014). As Kiwango & Mabele (2022) reflect, indigenous knowledge and indigenous knowledge systems are under threat primarily due to the exclusive nature of current conservation paradigms which have also seen the criminalisation of indigenous livelihoods such as livestock grazing and the forced displacement of pastoralist communities due to conservation across the African continent that further separate people from nature and life as they know it.

The different resources which are commonly used by community members in the region include *incema*, which is the isiZulu name of a fine reed known as the salt marsh rush in English. *Incema* rushes grow in coastal estuaries where it tolerates salt-water conditions and stabilises estuary banks and riversides, thereby preventing erosion. Because of its flexibility, *incema* is an excellent fibre for weaving of different traditional objects (Veyane Village Heritage 2023). *Incema* is used for making mats, such as food mats and traditional sleeping mats. Large sleeping mats made from *incema* grass are an important cultural symbol in traditional ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. These traditional practices have been passed down from generation to generation for hundreds of years, especially in this area. Ongoing demand for this specific grass for traditional purposes and traditional craft items sold to tourists means harvesting it is a source of livelihood generation for community members.

The ilala palm *Hyphaene coriacea* is another natural resource which is used by these coastal communities and grows all over grasslands surrounding iSimangaliso Wetland Park and in Maputaland. There are more than ten million of these trees in KwaZulu-Natal province and it is common in sandy environments from Somalia to South Africa and in Madagascar (Veyane Village Heritage 2023). In the region surrounding ISWP, the ilala palm supports the livelihoods of many families. A form of traditional alcoholic beverage called *ubusulu* is made from

the sap of the ilala palm tree and consumed at home during ceremonies and at other times. The tree also supplies fibre for weaving baskets used in the home and sold to others. The iSimangaliso area is considered to be a good source of traditional medicine and the home of some of KZN's best traditional healers.

In 2022, new regulations made in terms of the National Environmental Management Laws Amendment Act reduced the number of fish that small-scale fishers were permitted to catch in a single haul to only five fish. This means that small-scale fishers who fish for a living are no longer able to feed their families.

Restrictions on access to the ISWP also mean that communities cannot harvest wood for purposes that include building traditional huts.

Mr Mbokazi, who is a traditional healer from KwaNdonyana village in St. Lucia, spoke about how restrictions on access affect him and his work and how new restrictions are continuing to affect his work.

'We are not allowed into the area. As I am telling you, I sometimes must travel to get the Sibaka muthi in the northern part of the province. But it is available right here in the park next to me, but I am unable to get into the park with some form of permit and ask to use nature, that is where my work is also very much affected because of the problem of access.' (Makhosi Mbokazi, 25 March 2023.)

'We have a problem with iSimangaliso and their restrictions, as traditional healers there is now a rule which restricts us from entering the St. Lucia beach during the day with our chicken that we have to use as part of the ritual. Sometimes there are situations where a person comes to you for help and they need it urgently, and you would need to take them to the ocean. However, these new restrictions on access by iSimangaliso deny us the ability to enter these places during the day, but only says we should enter at night. I am not trying to fight this, but this is a challenge that we are facing, and I just want to let you know about it.' (Mr Mbokazi, Kwandonyana, March 2023.)

Makhosi Ngubane, who is a healer from the Nibela community in the northern part of the region spoke about her experiences of reduced access to certain herbs and how it has affected her work as a healer practising indigenous healing through natural herbs.

'There are many big challenges when it comes to access to certain places here for us as traditional healers, even if I leave here and go to Mtuba because there is a certain umuthi (herb) which I want to get from there I won't be able to enter into that place because they want permits, but we do not have them. There is also another place called False Bay here in Nibela. I cannot go to that place to get this herb because there are officers and when you go there, the white person will ask you for a permit but we as traditional healers don't have those permits. Here in Sobhengu, the place has many trees which are very important for our work but because it is now a hotel and fenced in; we are not able to access and use those trees.' (Makhosi Ngubane, KwaNibela, May 2023.)

Indigenous uses of nature and natural resources is significant to rural communities, not only as a livelihood generation activity, but also for its ability to provide traditional medicinal care for community members and all those who practise medicine and consume these medicines. This use of nature is one of the largely ignored and threatened uses of land and nature in the conservation paradigm, often resulting in the separation of indigenous communities from their land and histories through dispossession and severe access restrictions. However, the separation of indigenous communities from their cultural practices and restricting them from certain resources and nature means removing them from their identity and the part of them that is spiritual.

5.2 Women's access to natural resources

There are gendered dynamics and relations with nature as well as roles in the interaction of people and nature in these communities. This is important to understand when studying rural and mostly traditional societies which are gendered.

Line-fishing and traditional trap fishing is mainly the duty of men, and other kinds of marine resource harvesting, such as harvesting mussels, is done by women. This forms part of the cultural fabric of coastal communities passed from generation to generation, in patriarchal and matriarchal ways (Mbatha 2018). While men catch fish, women clean fish, cook it, and sell it. A few women also fish. Generally, regarding the utilisation of natural resources such as harvesting wood, crafting and carving wood, men tend to do more of the physical labour roles.

Mr Qwabe, whose wife is a former cutter of *ikhwani*, another grass used by weavers to make mats and other crafted items that is of lower quality than the *incema* grass that can be found inside the ISWP, spoke about the impact of increased security at the boundaries of the park on him and his family and the consequences of 'illegal' entry into the park for those who dare to enter.

'If they enter the park, they get arrested. They don't want people to access the park or access that place. Even my wife used to be part of the women who go in there to cut the grass, but I stopped her from doing it because it is not safe for her. Ikhwani is her work. She used to do the work a lot and it is the work that helped her in taking care of the children here at home. Because all of these children who are now educated it is because of this grass, but she also did that in the form of stealing it because we are not allowed to access the place' (Mr Qwabe, 30 March 2023.)

Miss Mdluli, who is Mr Qwabe's partner, gave her account of how they used to enter into the park and the impact that this livelihood had on her family.

'I stole the grass from the park for a long time, we used to open the fence and break through it to steal it. I did it for a long time, I'm not sure if there are other people who still do it or not, but I have stopped. But money is a problem, I raised my children using that grass but now I have had to stop' (Miss Mdluli, 30 March 2023.)

Safety has increasingly become a challenge for women residing in conservation spaces. This is partly due to the risk of being exposed to dangerous wildlife. There have been incidents of



Figure 8: Fishing nets and boats on the shores of the Nibela lake. (Photo: Siphesihle Mbhele.)



Figure 9: Participant showing one of the houses that were being constructed on her land without consultation on a plot that she previously used for crop production. Picture taken on 18 April 2023.

women being attacked by hippopotamuses and crocodiles in St. Lucia while using natural resources. This has led to women only going out into nature when they are accompanied by a man for safety reasons. They have also stopped their children from, e.g., going out to fish in order to protect them from dangerous wildlife. Mr Qwabe told us, *'There were two women that we used to fish with, one of whom was eaten by a crocodile and died'*.

5.3 Customary practices curtailed by conservation

Conflicts over land and access to natural resources have often led to a disconnection between indigenous people and natural resources which has seen negative impacts on their livelihoods. While communities in this northern part of KwaZulu-Natal still rely on natural resources as a major source of livelihood, restrictions on communities' access to natural resources in the ISWP has hampered their ability to sustain themselves through nature-based livelihoods.

Although customary law is prominent in the day-to-day business of the Nibela community, the community experiences several issues with regards to access to natural resources necessary for their livelihoods: fishing, *incema* grass, and traditional herbs and plants. The most deeply affected fisher people and make up almost the entire population of the Nibela community. According to community members, customary law recognises the land as belonging to all who live in it therefore the resources are to be utilised by all. Mr Mzileni spoke about his views on customary law and access to nature and natural resources.

'Ezemvelo are behaving as if we don't have the right to fish, but we do have a customary right to fish in that lake because it is ours, our fathers grew up fishing here and they taught us to fish in this place. We know our nature and how to take care of it. It is ours but the people from Ezemvelo act as if they do not know that, but they know that. Again, when they come to place these rules and restrictions, they never come to us as the community to talk to us and consult on what they can do to work with us in conserving nature because we have been living with this nature and conserving this nature ourselves.' (Mr Mzileni, Nibela, May 2023).

Community members struggle to access the nearby Nibela lake for fishing as they are in constant fear of iSimangaliso rangers who stop anyone without a ‘permit’ from fishing. Most of the members of the Nibela community do not have permits as they consider it their customary right to fish in the Nibela lake as they have done all their lives. There have been various incidents where communities experience abuse and restricting of fishers from accessing the Nibela Lake. *‘These rangers have no respect for our rights and are not allowing us to fish at all’, they say. ‘We are continually harassed and chased away and, in some instances, they confiscate our fishing gear.’* (FINSa 2021). Even the few in the community who have permits are subject to catch limits and limits on the times at which they can access the lake for fishing.

Local community members have their own self-arranged tenure systems to keep their harvesting of natural resources for livelihood purposes within sustainable limits. Cousins and Hornby *et al.* (2017) unpack the different forms of tenure arrangements in rural settings which are usually seen as ‘informal’ and sometimes ‘illegal’ as they are not formalised in any way, shape or form (no documentation, no title, lease agreement, etc.). An example of these forms of social tenure arrangement includes the case of a participant who has a rose nursery who ‘leased’ a portion of land from his brother because it was unused. There is no formal arrangement or payment attached to this. This is a way in which this person sustains his livelihood and he refuses to let the lack of a title deed restrict his ability to earn a living.

Hornby *et al.* (2017) state that, culturally, women, especially those who are married, do not own any assets like livestock or land. Assets belong to their husbands. There are instances where women inherited their household assets when their husbands died. The current research project found that land grabbing is used as a tool by men to occupy land owned by women, especially widows. Mam Mlungwana told her story of how her land rights were violated after her husband passed away. The land that she used for planting and grazing for her cattle has since been grabbed by unknown individuals without consulting with her. Three individuals have constructed homes on her land. Asked if there were any actions taken against these grabbers she responded as follows:

‘I have witnessed people dying in fights for their land. I would rather keep quiet and live than speak out and die, leaving my children without both parents.’

5.4 Slow, structural forms of violence

To pave the way for tourism in the conservation space, there was a process of excluding local people and their voices from the utilisation of natural resources found in the area. This exclusion meant the reinvention of social constructs and exclusions, i.e., structural boundaries to separate local people from the wilderness which has compromised the safety of local people in more ways than one. They are threatened and have to face the possible consequences of being found in a protected area which may result in verbal or physical violence.

‘I was beaten so much that I was even thinking to ask them (rangers) if I could go and find the gun myself..... I even have scars from the beating I got that day, I almost died. I was beaten up because they wanted the gun that they thought was in my possession.’ (Mr Ndlanzi, KwaNibela.)

A fisherman in St. Lucia shared his story of when he and two of his friends were found in a



Figure 10: Access control/ information boards in iSimangaliso Wetland Park. (Photo: Sipheshile Mbhele.)



Figure 11: A ranger with a gun patrolling the boundary of the Phinda Game Reserve in kwaMduku, illustrating the military nature of enforcement in private conservation areas. (Photo: Ayanda Madlala, 23 March 2023.)

private game reserve hunting for food. He was suspected of having a gun in his possession so he was tortured so that he would disclose the whereabouts of the gun that was allegedly in his possession.

‘All of these natural resources belong to ISWP. They have tortured me so much and so many times that I have learnt to toe the line. Nowadays they enter your home if you are even suspected to have extracted [anything] from the lake.’

This is a different form of violence, more psychological and dehumanising as people are violated against in the comfort of their own home, with their families watching.

‘Violence is what we have experienced and have been living with for many years. I remember growing up, when what is now a game reserve was still a cattle farm. The owner would extract your teeth, shoot and kill you if you were found hunting on the farm.’ (Mama Ngwane, a 73-year-old fisherwoman in Mduku speaking about the lengths that private landowners would go when violating local hunters).

In the case of iSimangaliso and the founding stages of its establishment to allow for tourism and what was then termed as improving socio-economic conditions of neighbouring communities using capitalist forces and capital accumulation through conservation, the result was extreme exclusion of community members from any consultative processes to formulate policies which govern the park. This exclusion meant the reinvention of social constructs which are ways of life that community members shared while enjoying nature and the different uses of these natural resources as well as subsistence forms of living that require access to nature. This was achieved through the creation of these structural boundaries separating the people from nature and their resources. Mr Nxumalo, who is an elder from the Nibela, spoke about what he remembers of the forced removals in the mid 1970s, he says the forced removals took place initially to make way for the establishment of military bases which soon afterwards turned into protected areas under the local conservation authority, which community members are still not allowed to access.

‘You know, there were people who had homes here where we are and there were people on the other side of the lake and both of these

mountains but these are places that we cannot go to now, they were chased out of these places in 1976 because there was a military camp in the other side of the mountain and the other one was just on this other side and that military base existed for 25 years there and when they hit bombs from the one side of the mountain to the other, it wasn't supposed to find anyone there so all of the people who were there were chased away from that place and even now they have not gone back there.' (Mr Nxumalo, KwaNibela April 2023,)

Mr Nxumalo went on to speak about the current challenges of access to these spaces and how these processes of violence have changed the way they interact with nature.

'I am talking about right opposite us there those are places that we usually used to go to, we would cross and go to the other side when we were growing up to cut down trees which we need for medicinal purposes and we would also go to hunt there for springboks but now you cannot do that anymore or even get the piece of wood because they have now said that they don't want anyone there now. But before we would go there and be able to get the herb to help our people here and these are the problems. Even on this side we used to be able to go and fetch umhlanga which is a reed and used that to build our houses but now we cannot do that. They arrest us.' (Mr Nxumalo, KwaNibela, April 2023.)

The use of force and violence has created fear amongst community members who rely on accessing restricted resources for livelihood purposes. It has also created tension between community members and the ISWP and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, with community members citing their customary rights and denouncing the use of force such as the burning of boats and confiscation of nets if these are found in the lake or in the park. Mr Sabelo Mzileni, who is a leader of small-scale fishers' co-operative in the Nibela community, shared his view on the restrictions to access that have been imposed, the criminalisation of access as the local conservation authority Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife.

'But these guys from Ezemvelo are behaving as if we don't have the right to fish but we do have a customary right to fish in that lake because it is ours. Our fathers grew up fishing here and they taught us to fish in this place. We know our nature and how to take care of it. It is ours but the people from Ezemvelo act as if they do not know that, but they know' (Mr Mzileni, KwaNibela, May 2023)

The current research finds that communities in this region are still affected by impacts of the violent and exclusive nature of conservation preceded by forced removals, it also notes that, although there have been changes in terms of policy which governs the protected areas around issues of inclusion, communities still face other forms of structural violence which continue to ignore their legitimate livelihood needs. Hansen *et al.* (2015) say that the restrictions and the ongoing conservation-oriented approach to the management of the iSimangaliso Wetland Park has given rise to complaints from local people that the park has developed its own plans for the area, without consultation, and this has further compromised the community in the iSimangaliso park and goes against policy which calls for the need of consultation in line with Section 23 of the National Environmental Management: Integrated Coastal Management Act (Act 24 of 2008) and the national estuary management protocol.

5.5 The impact of private conservation (game farms and rewilding)

In Mduku, northern KwaZulu-Natal, in March 2023, local communities spoke about how private game farms have moved their fences to take even more of their land, further reduced fishers' access to fish in the swamps, introduced electric fences that are a safety hazard for humans, and adopted 'rewilding' – the introduction of wildlife that communities are not familiar with like lions, elephants, cheetahs, baboons and buffalos, while allowing the numbers of hippopotamuses and crocodiles to increase. In addition, hidden surveillance cameras have been installed around the reserve as a security measure and also for catching so-called thieves. Private game rangers now carry big guns to ensure there is no illegal entry into the reserve. One of the big distinctions between the cattle farm owner who previously and the current game reserve as portrayed by interviewed locals is respect.

'Before this was a reserve, no one entered our homes uninvited, being accompanied by dogs and carrying big guns to interrogate us about illegal entrance. There was some level of respect for the land in our forefathers.' (Mr Richard Khumalo, Mduku, March 2023).

Fear has entered into people's homes; they are no longer safe where they live.

Table 2: Deaths of alleged poachers in the northern part of KwaZulu-Natal since February 2014.

DATE	LOCATION	DEATHS	REASON
05-Feb-14	Phinda Game Reserve	2	Rhino Poaching ²
04-May-14	Hluhluwe-Mfolozi Park	2	Rhino Poaching ³
13-Oct-14	St Lucia Estuary	1	Mysterious disappearance of fisher ⁴
04-Nov-14	Mkuze Game Reserve in ISWP	2	Rhino Poaching ⁵
25-Dec-14	Mkuze Game Reserve in ISWP	1	Rhino Poaching ⁶
03-Nov-16	Eastern Shores	1	Rhino Poaching ⁷
16-Sep-20	St Lucia Lake	1	Fish Poaching ⁸
12-Nov-21	Tewate Wilderness Area (St Lucia Lake)	1	Fish Poaching ⁹

This is also evident in the experiences of communities of small-scale fishers, incema grass harvesters and users of other natural resources in this area who face violence at the hands of local security officers enforcing the protection of nature. Mr Nkululeko Mdluli spoke about securitisation further limiting access to the park and how this has had an impact on his community's livelihood. Mr Nelson, who is a small-scale fisher in the Nibela community, spoke about the

2. <https://www.arrivealive.mobi/news.aspx?s=1&i=11722&page=two-rhino-poachers-fatally-shot-two-others-to-appear-in-court>
3. Zululand Observer, 6 May 2014.
4. Zululand Observer, 24 October 2014 <https://zululandobserver.co.za/49573/gill-netter-disappears-in-estuary/amp>.
5. Zululand Observer, 6 November 2014.
6. <https://www.iol.co.za/ios/news/cops-jail-rhino-rangers-1799238>.
7. <https://www.sapeople.com/2016/11/08/rhino-poacher-killed-in-the-act-south-africa/>.
8. <https://www.landislife.org/justice-for-celempilo-indigenous-fisherman-shot-dead-by-rangers-in-south-africa-776/>.
9. Report of serious incidents at Tewate area, eastern shores section, 2009 to 2021 presented to the Portfolio Committee for the Department of Forestry Fisheries, and the Environment.

times that communities have to go into the park to avoid risk of violence at the hands of security officers and the attendant dangers of being exposed to dangerous animals at night.

'Here, we, who are young men, are fishers and cut wood called mthombothi which is found here in the community. And the women are incema grass cutters. These are the things that people live through and they are also abused and arrested when they go in there and cut this grass. That is all that people do here, making mats, fishing and wood cutting there is nothing else really. Women also fry the fish that we come out of the water with and then they sell it. But we are not allowed to do this, we are arrested if we are found there.' (Nkululeko Mdluli, KwaNibela May 2023)

'We would be inside the lake during the night and always know that by 4am you must be out of the water because that would be the time parks board officers would be doing their usual patrol and sometimes there would be parks board officers who would even come inside the community and enter house to house searching for fish.' (Mr Nelson, KwaNibela, April 2023.)

Mr Nelson said that these security-driven conservation approaches which included conservation law enforcement officers coming into the homes of members of the Nibela community to search for fish were extremely invasive.

'If they found even a bone of fish in your yard you would get arrested immediately, they would even go as far as smelling your pots even and if they smell that there was fish being cooked here, that would mean you would be arrested. We didn't have fridges that time so we would just cut the fish in half and tie it for it to be dry and if they saw any of that you would get arrested. Life was very difficult under those conditions for us, it was very difficult.' (Mr Nelson, KwaNibela, April 2023.)

The militarisation of conservation practice is driven and rationalised by discourses of war and national/regional security that have transformed poaching from a conservation issue into a security issue (securitisation), with negative impacts on other forms of generating a livelihood, resulting in violence against subsistence natural resources users in the area (Massé & Lunstrum 2016). Two local community subsistence fishermen were shot and killed by local conservation authority officials in iSimangaliso Wetland Park while fishing at night (Masifundise Development Trust 2021).

In September 2020, a young small-scale fisher in the Nibela community went into the Nibela lake at night in order to catch fish to avoid restrictions on access to the lake, knowing that there are hardly any conservation law enforcement rangers patrolling at night. Three fishermen were met by two law enforcement officials of the ISWP who opened fire on them as they were cooking food, causing the death of 'Celimpilo Mdluli'. Senzo Ndlovu was also shot, but managed to escape.

This death of a young fisherman who was conducting his livelihood activity in the iSimangaliso Wetland Park by law enforcement officers was one of the most violent experiences of the impact of conservation on nearby communities and their livelihoods. Social justice organisations and lawyers sought to ensure justice for the family. The Legal Resources Centre (LRC) was appointed as the family's legal representative, and reported the incident to the National Ministry for Forestry, Fisheries, and the Environment as part of a pattern of unjust actions by conservation officials against members of the Nibela community seeking to exercise their fishing rights.



Figure 12: Two young fishermen preparing fishing nets before entering the lake at the Nibela lake. (Photo: Siphesihle Mbhele).

FINDINGS

After multiple letters sent to the ministry and calls by the community for the recognition of their fishing rights an inclusive process of governing the ISWP and its natural resources, and the frustration caused by slow progress in the case, finally in November 2020 the ministry sent a special advisor who conducted a community engagement meeting which included the family of the deceased and witnesses.

After over six months of no headway, the LRC sent a letter to the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Rights of Indigenous People, describing the incidents of violence against community members on the Nibela peninsula as a human rights violation and calling for the recognition of the rights of those who own the land and have a right to share in its resources. By February 2023, no prosecution had yet been secured against the perpetrators of this killing (see Figure 13).

A year later, another fisherman from the Nibela community was shot and killed by conservation law enforcement officers while accessing the iSimangaliso Wetland Park for fishing. However, the body of this fisherman has not been found. Communities in and around ISWP are fearful of local conservation authorities and relations are tense. This puts relationships between these agencies and adjacent communities at further risk and increases the risks of failure.

Figure 13: Timeline of events in the killing of two Nibela fishers and the injury of another.



An early morning on the Nibela lake shores, where fishers offload their catch after spending the night in the waters.
(Photo: Siphesihle Mbhele)

Associate Researcher Ayanda Madlala and grass cutters in Dukuduku during a focus group interview.
(Photo: Azania Mahlase)

5.6 Criminalisation of livelihoods

The criminalisation of livelihood activities in the ISWP refers to community members wishing to enter areas that are historically and traditionally theirs as well as their primary livelihood generation area but are met with fines, restrictions and violence. This is a result of these large pieces of land being proclaimed as a conservation area and a World Heritage Site under the management of the conservation authority which limits community access to the site. This criminalisation of livelihood activities through restricting access and the use of physical tactical force on the small-scale fishers, *incema*, *qumbe* and *ikhwani* cutters, traditional healers and other people in KwaNibela and other areas around the ISWP has been a cause for concern amongst the iSimangaliso neighbouring communities.

The use of force has created fear in community members and had a negative impact on families whose main source of livelihood is fishing and interaction with nature in other ways to feed their families. Community members have not ceased to take part in these forms of livelihood due to high levels of poverty and low opportunities in the region. A common phrase used by community members describes the value of the lake as follows:

'This lake is our firm and our employer, there is no other job we can do in this place, so this is what we do.' (Mr Gumede, KwaNibela, May 2023.)

Restrictions on access to natural resources in the ISWP have far-reaching impacts on communities in this area because of their heavy reliance on nature and its resources as a source of livelihood. Hloniphile, who is a fisherwoman from Khayelisha in St. Lucia spoke about her experience of the use of force by ISWP officials during an arrest:

'They found me on my way to the lake. This time around the reason for me to go there was not to fish but to buy fish. So, I bought fish and, on my way back home, I was caught. I was unfortunate that, for me at the time, I did not know the iSimangaliso officials or game rangers. There were five of them and it was five of us, it seemed like they had made a head count. They came and forced us on the floor, they made me kneel on the floor and they tied the men who are fishermen who were also with us, and "the fish" to the car.' (Hloniphile, fisherwoman, St. Lucia, March 2023.)

Mr Ndlanzi, a small-scale fisher from the Nibela community, shared his experience of violence and the use of force by conservation law enforcement officers and its impact.

'I was beaten so much that I even have scars from the beating still. I almost died. I was beaten up because they wanted the gun that they thought was in my possession when they found me fishing. Today I still cannot see properly because of that incident which happened at the lake.' (Mr Ndlanzi, KwaNibela, April 2023.)

Peer et al. (2022) say mainstream conservation approaches that have resulted in the plethora of restrictions have led to the criminalisation of the livelihood activities of community members living adjacent or in close proximity to these protected areas. This is evident in the use of force and even violence to maintain restrictions on access to the ISWP. The lack of consultation with communities about the management and policies of the park have given rise to measures that do not consider the livelihoods of these populations. Instead, they deepen structural violence such as the exclusion of community members from important processes as well as perpetrating day-to-day physical violence on small-scale fishers in these communities.

5.7 Co-management does not solve our land claims issues

Tenure systems can, be community managed through self-governance, be fully owned and managed by the state, be privately owned land, or, in the study area, communally owned land under traditional authority. A management tool introduced in post-apartheid South Africa is that of co-management and the ISWP is the leader in creating such a management system to work with local communities living in and adjacent to the park (see Mbhele *et al.* 2025). The concept of co-management by design and envisaged practice shows a promising and hopeful relationship between different stakeholders working in conservation (Thakholi & Büscher 2021). The instruments that are proposed for a working co-management system include the participation of all parties, empowerment of local communities through which their voices form part of the decision making and decentralisation of power with regards to accessing natural resources. Structures that are assumed to represent the different voices and contributors to nature conservation are put together in order to form a joint decision-making body (Mbhele *et al.* 2025).

This is where lines become somewhat blurred, i.e. roles and responsibilities are not clear. An example of a co-management system that was initiated between ISWP and locals is in Bhangazi after that particular land claim was settled in 1991. It was agreed that the ISWP Authority would work alongside the Trust (a legal entity whose members are former residents who were forcibly removed and successfully claimed back their land. The Trust has a seat at the decision-making table and is at the forefront of sharing profits made through the recreational activities in the area. All of this comes with a fine-print agreement that people will not go back to their land for any reason. Interviews with local people who have a connection to this so-called settled land claim had the following to say:

‘We have been refused access to our ancestral graves.’ (Mr Qwabe, 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 ISWP of cutting alien trees inside the park and that is the only time where I have witnessed the authority engaging with members of the Trust. Those who are then temporarily hired and are given R150/day. How can you be called a land claimant when you are refused the right to say what should or should be done to your land? This is not what our father fought for. It was never about the money but always has been about the land itself. The objective was to go back to our land, sustain a living that will be inherited for generations to come.’ (Bongani Msane, 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 you up that is in the form of a bribe.’ (Xolani, 2023.)

Hall and Ntsebeza (2007) state that such a change usually results in the less powerful actors finding themselves being restricted from access and without a voice in what and how resources can and cannot be managed. From the voices above, it is clear that locals that have been interviewed have lost all hope in the co-management system approach. It seems to be a good practice on paper, but has proved to be ineffective in practice. Part of the role of this research is to identify stakeholders found in the area, their relationships and impacts they have on nature conservation conversations.

5.8 Human-wildlife co-existence

After numerous incidents of rangers working for the SoBhengu/ Nibela lake attacking alleged poachers, the community ended up making the following statement: *‘If protecting nature is that important to you, take it and let us be’* (Ntshangase, November 2022, talking about what transpired at a community meeting between ISWP, local traditional authorities and members of the community on the Mdluli case discussed above. This is an illustration of how daily acts of *‘dignity taking’* make communities feel powerless.

Mr Bongani Gumede (2023) from Mduku shared an incident while fishing with two other fishermen.

‘One of the fishers I was with had their feet in the water. The crocodile could clearly see that there was someone in the water. It went beneath the water, watching us closely while we were focused on fishing. It appeared right close to us. I then took my machete and hit the water just in front of it to make a big and noisy splash. It swam away from us and disappeared on the spot.’

Wildlife, some of which had already co-existed with humans before the establishment of the ISWP, and some that was introduced in these communities as a tourist attraction may pose a threat to humans. Communities have identified and shared ways in which they have been able to live with these animals, but there also have been attacks. A woman who crafted mats using incema as part of her livelihood had gone to cut grass with her children in one of the areas under ISWP authority. This was in the early hours of the morning – locals usually enter protected spaces during these hours to avoid getting caught by rangers and private security companies guarding these protected areas. At these times, they are at greater risk of encountering dangerous animals. For instance, hippopotamuses are herbivores known for spending the day cooling off inside the lake and coming out at night to graze up until the early hours of the morning. This woman was attacked by a hippo and died on the spot. ‘The authority did not empathise so much so that it pursued a case against the family of the deceased for trespassing’, said Mama Mlungwana in an interview in Dukuduku in 2023.



Living Landscapes
in Action 2024
short course
participants during
a fieldtrip visit to the
community gardens
in Dukuduku.
(Photo: Natalie
Gabriels)



KwaNibela residents
preparing food
stations during the
Living Landscapes
in Action 2024
short course in
iSimangaliso.
(Photo: Natalie
Gabriels)

6. Discussion

Various models have been explored to conceptualise the struggle for access to natural resources, including looking at access as the capturing of common nature/ resources which leads to the exclusion of communities that the resources belong to.

Green grabbing takes place through global green agendas which aim to protect nature and biodiversity in efforts to mitigate climate change, with almost no consideration of the social and historical contexts in which this biodiversity exists (Duffy *et al.* 2019; Fairhead *et al.* 2012) and green militarisation which is the use of paramilitary tools and methods in the protection of nature and natural resources (Lunstrum 2014; Lunstrum 2015). These are methods implemented to further Western nature conservation approaches which exposes the relationship between capitalism and conservation (prominent business interests) in which powerful international conservation organisations and agencies play a significant role and have contributed hugely to the exclusion of people residing in conservation spaces. In the case of ISWP, the park and, in some instances, conservation agencies, are not shy to document and publicise that the management of natural resources, organisation development plans and partnerships which exclude communities as well as those who depend on access to nature for livelihoods are based on regulations from the World Heritage Site Act and UNESCO. This is what this research has recognised as other forms of violence which have been used by conservation agencies in the ISWP area, which includes the systematic exclusion of communities from accessing their livelihoods as well as governance processes which has led to the criminalisation of their livelihoods and violence. Büscher and Ramutsindela (2016) further break green violence down into three forms: material – which has already been touched in detail above – social, and discursive. These forms of green violence highlight racialised violence through social media platforms and the abuse of conservation initiatives to obtain and/ or maintain class privilege.

Hansen *et al.* (2015) refer to the neoliberalisation of nature, which is the practice of putting nature on the market as a resource that is able to be bought and sold. This has resulted in negative experiences for communities around the globe who reside in close proximity to protected areas and rely on nature and natural resources for their livelihoods. This has resulted in the disruption of community livelihoods and has had structural and social implications that continue to affect various aspects of their lives, including cultural and spiritual aspects. In the case of iSimangaliso Wetland Park, Bhangazi game reserve may be used as an example. Over

This research report, which presents empirical data that has been collected from September 2022, is a clear illustration of how conservation of fauna and flora has been and continues to be prioritised over livelihoods of those residing in and around protected areas, particularly in iSimangaliso Wetland Park.

and above former residents experiencing forced removals from the land of their forefathers, there was loss of livelihoods (fishing, farming, hunting, collection of natural resources for different purposes – medicinal, ritual, craft, firewood and food) through natural resources they previously had access to and to which entry is now prohibited. The area now forms part of the St. Lucia tourist attraction sites.

Fortress conservation created the division between people and nature, firstly through the forced removal from their ancestral land and, secondly, the introduction of the fences and fines approach that has affected people's welfare, particularly socio-economically, with a heavy impact on mostly rural populations who have high dependency on nature and access to natural resources for their livelihoods. These institutional approaches to conservation which have led to dispossession, separation and restrictions are what this research sees as structural and slow forms of violence which are the systematic exclusion of people and communities not only from access to land belonging to them, but governance processes in conservation are forms of violence which are hidden in the narratives for protection of nature. This research report, which presents empirical data that has been collected from September 2022, is a clear illustration of how conservation of fauna and flora has been and continues to be prioritised over livelihoods of those residing in and around protected areas, particularly in iSimangaliso Wetland Park. This is seen in the way in which what is now ISWP was conceptualised together with the envisaged day-to-day operation of the park itself which is driven by violent behaviours, structural forms of exclusion from the hands of the so-called conservationists using the banner of 'nature protection'. The use of top-down approaches to resources management, rewilding, enforcement of natural resource control through access and systematically silencing communities from public participation processes with a negative impact on people's livelihoods. Struggles for access to natural resources for affected communities are being exposed, worsening rural household living and survival conditions. This access control, as we have illustrated in this report, is rooted on 'bundles of power'.

To pave the way for conservation in ISWP, black people who are former residents of the area have experienced different forms of violence resulting in acts of dehumanisation and dignity taking. These acts of dignity taking range from structural, physical and psychological forms of violence with consequences of land dispossession, forced removals, loss of their livelihoods and cultural identities. This is why there are still disputes over land and other natural resources in the area. Even after land claims on some parts of ISWP have been declared as 'settled', people still resist and call for getting their land back and demand access to natural resources for livelihood purposes. One of the questions that they are asking is from whom and for what is nature being protected? This is because priority is given to commercial fishers, farmers, businesses and even tourists 'freely' extracting the very same resources that locals are refused access to.

Co-management as a concept shows a promising and hopeful relationship between different stakeholders working in conservation (Thakholi & Büscher 2021) but the case study of ISWP proves to have failed through limited consultation and imposed legislation. On paper, e.g. in the municipal Integrated Development Plan, there is a mention of incorporation of locals, not necessarily for the co-management of resources, but for job creation and local economic development. How that will materialise when locals are struggling to sustain their livelihoods remains an unresolved mystery. Furthermore, the processes of isolation and exclusion of communities and their needs from nature continues to be at risk in the conservation agenda in this area. Some important considerations for future research in the area should

be unpacking the currently underway expansion of the Isimangaliso Wetland Park which is to be combined with the Maputo National Park (iSimangaliso Integrated Management Plan, 2022–2031) and its implications for communities who are living in close proximity to the park along the entire coast and terrestrial area. This is a strategic goal for the Isimangaliso Wetland Park as mentioned in its recent Integrated Management Plan and has already seen skewed consultation processes which have evidently sidelined communities living in the area. More questions which need to be investigated include understanding how the park seeks to ensure the safety of communities living next to it, given the expected increase in the animal population, the implications of expansion on issues around management authorities involved in the day-to-day workings of the park and its impact on natural resource users access to nature, what measures will be put in place to secure the tenure and access to communities to natural resources during this process, and the extent to which communities know and have been a part of the process of expansion.

As indicated throughout this document, the research focus and entry-point is conservation through the voices of people that are surrounding protected spaces, specifically the landscapes of the ISWP. Having collected data also meant that other themes that may not have been the main focus of the research emerged very strongly, namely climate change and climate justice. While one part of the park has historically and in the present time) experienced droughts, the other is experiencing floods both of which have enormous negative impacts on conservation and people's livelihoods. As a result, these climate shocks have had a visible impact on the ways in which people relate to and continue to conserve nature, how they have introduced coping mechanisms for sustainable livelihoods, and how this has sometimes even posed a blockage. Because of these climate struggles, we realise that climate impacts are linked with conservation which calls for further investigation using the data already collected, possibly in the next phase of our research.

7. Conclusion

The world is in a polycrisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and growing inequalities. By 2030, the Global Biodiversity Framework wants 30% of the land and oceans' space under protection. An added element to the expansion of conservation areas is buffer zones where communities live, also known as other effective area-based conservation measures (OECM). The ISWP is expanding conservation areas to meet the target, and the UNESCO World Heritage Site has just proclaimed Maputaland as a protected site for protection. This will expand the conservation areas from ISWP to Mozambique and form a Transfrontier Conservation Area between Mozambique, South Africa and Eswatini to grow the biodiversity tourist economy, land wetlands and oceans for conservation that forms part of the SANParks 2040 vision. Local communities in this report showed how access to natural resources, land for crop production, and traditional, spiritual and cultural practices are important for their daily livelihoods, food, and medicinal uses. Most of the land under conservation is still under claim and governed by traditional leadership and the Ingonyama Trust. Currently concessions for coal, mining, and private conservation continue on land where communities were forcibly removed and dispossessed of their land. Communities we work in are opposing the regulations, rules, and forms of management. They are met with violence from public officials and private conservation officers who are armed and dangerous. Communities' dignity is taken on a daily basis when they encounter these forms of violence. They are also exposed to dangerous animals.

In his keynote address to the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies conference on Land, Life and Society, Prof. Issa Shivji challenged those of us working on commons to shift our thinking from access, entitlement, through ownership to collective control (Shivji 2025). He suggested collective control can be in the form of a cooperative, or an association depending on local circumstances and struggles of people and natural resources will determine the nature of the organisation that is best suited at the local conditions. This means the organisation controls and manages land and other resources including the commons (fisheries, forests, rivers, lakes, oceans and wildlife). The person in the organisation has an obligation to society to use the land and natural resources responsibly, is the custodian of the land and natural resource and, if the person breaches this social obligation, it can lead to social sanctions.

We would like to close our report by quoting Bayo Akomolafe: 'The times are urgent, let us slow down'. If we slow down to listen and spend time with communities, we will know their cultural and traditional practices place conserving resources at centre stage and this is critical for the future of their livelihoods and for conservation imperatives.

Dukuduku traditional healer Mr Ngubane displays his medicinal plants and herbs harvested without a permit from the park and other parts of the region because of restrictions.
(Photo: Siphele Mbhele)

Fishers in KwaNdonzana (Dukuduku) preparing fish for trade at what they call their depot, the entry and exit to St Lucia Lake.
(Photo: Ayanda Madiata)

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Grass cutters
in Nibela Lake
cutting grass to be
used for making
traditional mats
(Photo: Ayanda
Madlala)

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