

PARTNERING WITH THE PRIVATE LANDSCAPE FOR CONSERVATION

– The MZCPE Story

The [National Protected Areas Expansion Strategy](#) (NPAES) identifies the need for significant expansion of the national protected area estate. However, as budgets for land purchase and ongoing management are limited, innovative mechanisms will be necessary to both expand the protected area estate in a cost-effective manner while also ensuring that globally important ecosystems are fully represented. Further, the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE, formerly known as the DEA) gazetted a [strategy on buffer zones for national parks](#) in 2012, which describes the need to protect national parks through a comprehensive range of buffer zone interventions in the surrounding landscape.

The buffer zones for [Camdeboo National Park](#) and [Mountain Zebra National Park](#) overlap and cover an area of about 840 000 hectares and predominantly consist of private land.

With the mapping of the buffer zones completed, came the big question of how to go about managing them. The parks had no mandate to influence private property. How could they help to protect them if they didn't have any say? The landscape between these parks held the perfect solution.

The land use surrounding the two parks and covering the buffer zone is that of natural rangeland management. It includes stock farming, game farming and game reserves.

The farming system is based on grazing on natural tracts of veld. This area has always been a grazing driven system with mass herds of animals passing through on migration paths following the rain and food. There are records of springbuck herds taking about six days to pass a point in their migration through the area. While animals only passed through the area in the past, nowadays these processes are mimicked by managed grazing periods followed by rest periods in line with the rain and vegetation needs. If this system was a grazing system naturally, and still is (although now actively managed), it is safe to say that the current land use is highly compatible with the conservation of this system.

The solution lay in the compatibility of the land use with the conservation needs of the landscape

So, understanding that to protect this area, one does not need to be prescriptive and change the predominant land use - why not partner with the private landowners to achieve mutual goals? By partnering with the landowners, it was envisioned that the landowners would retain the responsibility of the day-to-day management of their individual farms. Through the development of relationships with these landowners, SANParks could be of assistance when needed and could stand by the landowners should any threat to the landscape arise. It was with this realisation that the Mountain Zebra Camdeboo Corridor Project started in 2012.



Iconic aloes on the Pearston plains in the PE

The project was facilitated by the Wilderness Foundation and funded by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF). The two-year project was aimed at creating a corridor of protection between Camdeboo and Mountain Zebra National Parks with a target of 45 000 hectares. The project proposed three options landowners could partake in - a Proud Partner agreement, a Protected Environment agreement or they could become a Contractual National Park should the conditions be conducive. The protected environment agreement was the clear winner with all the landowners signing up under this option. Protected environments allow for multiple land uses and have numerous purposes one can declare for. It provided the perfect opportunity to continue commercial stock farming on natural rangeland but also promoted conservation and the opportunity for the landowners to seek legal recognition thereof.

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The Mountain Zebra Camdeboo Protected Environment (MZCPE) was formally declared in April 2016 and included 64 landowners across 268 388 hectares. Each of these landowners committed to belonging to the MZCPE Landowner’s Association (designated the management authority by the Minister in 2016) and agreed to its constitution. They agreed to the regulations as gazetted in April 2016 and to the completion of a management plan within 12 months of the date of declaration. By the end of the Mountain Zebra Camdeboo Corridor Project, the

MZCPE Landowners Association constitution and the MZCPE regulations were finalised and accepted. However, work on the management plan would not commence until the GEF-5 PA Project started in June 2016.

It was through the creation and implementation of the management plan, that the true value of the MZCPE/SANParks partnership would be realised.

Fortunately all was in place at the start of the GEF-5 PA Project and SANParks could hit the ground running on the development of the management plan. It had six months to get the draft management plan to the Minister for approval. The management plan was workshopped with each landowner and received the required individual approval. The management plan was approved by the Minister in August 2017. As challenging as it was to create a management plan that would be relevant to 64 different landowners, the true test of the management plan would be in the implementation.

The management plan was created for the collective and works on the principle that each landowner, in the management of their properties, would ultimately contribute to the achievement of the overarching management plan programmes. The management plan programmes focussed on relevant land management practices that make up the day-to-day operations of each landowner.

The GEF-5 PA Project played two main supporting roles in the implementation of the management plan. The first was to help the protected environment to employ consultants to conduct three vital baseline studies.

This included a **Land Degradation Study**, which did not only result in a map of degradation areas or threats but also produced a relevant alien species list

with the species prioritised for intervention as well as a set of recommendations relevant across the landscape in terms of soil erosion control and rehabilitation.

Another survey that was required for the MZCPE was a **Cultural Heritage Survey**, which was able to categorise and describe heritage assets within the MZCPE not yet captured on the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) database.

The third survey, a **Sensitivity Map**, was a requirement from DFFE and would guide future developments in the MZCPE by using multiple layers of spatial data that determine the agricultural and conservation value of the landscape and to overlap them to create a heat map representing sensitivities to development and/or transformation.



Large expanses of natural veld within the PE – characteristics of the area

The second main role that the GEF-5 PA Project played was the appointment of an Environmental Ecologist. Together with the Buffer Zone Coordinator, employed through SANParks as the project’s implementing agency, they could help to test programme implementation on the ground. It was here, on the ground, where the partnership between SANParks and the landowners came to life and went on to ignite

The MZCPE management plan was created in such a way as to achieve programme implementation by working within different mandates. The management plan consists of separate components. A large portion of the management plan programmes speak directly to land management. This is where the landowners hold the mandate as they are ultimately

SANParks does not interfere with private land management, but provides advice where required and tries to unlock opportunities to support land management.

responsible to ensure their farms are sustainable as their entire business depends on it. One example the partnership that was secured with the Centre for Biological Control (CBC) at Rhodes University. They operate in the MZCPE landscape releasing bio-control agents on private land to control alien invasive vegetation.

Another component of the management plan is biodiversity driven and relies on an understanding of habitat types, ecosystems, species diversity and the need to identify species of special concern. While the landowners each have species they hold close to their heart, most did not participate in conservation projects aimed at looking after some of these species before the MZCPE. The opportunity arose to identify conservation projects with an existing mandate to run species projects and have the landowners of the MZCPE contribute to these and work collaboratively instead of operating in silos.



Celebrations after a good management plan review session

There is also a section of the plan that focuses on the human aspect of the MZCPE by looking at the contribution to the local socio-economic development of the area. The focus is less on creating new jobs but more on caring for and empowering the people already reliant on the farms, both the landowners themselves as well as their farm staff and their direct families. The Local Socio-Economic Development Programme also tries to recognise the current contribution that the landowners have in the area with most of the Karoo towns only existing due to the presence of agriculture.



"The partnership with SANParks is critical. Their (SANParks) cooperation and network with other organisations and government structures have not only helped with the declaration but has unlocked many other project opportunities within the MZCPE and the larger landscape. Just by SANParks, a worldwide known organisation, being associated with the MZCPE has helped to put the MZCPE on the map and trigger interest from far and wide." – Jaco Loots (Current MZCPELA Chairman)

With the MZCPE Management Plan in place, a solution had to be found to keep track of all that is happening on the ground across a vast landscape with so many landowners and partners. The answer was the creation of the MZCPE Management Plan Tool. It is a system that allows each landowner to capture their property-specific data as per each component of the management plan. They are able to choose priorities to focus on for the year ahead and ultimately track the achievement of the management plan implementation on their properties over time. The tool provides landowners with access to the MZCPE Management Plan, the programme objectives and tools to prioritise interventions and additional resources to assist with land management interventions.

The tool has been created in a way that when annual management plan reviews are held, each landowner will submit their information to feed into a complete report for the collective. While the tool is currently only available in Excel format, work is underway to convert it to an online system that will provide easy collation and reporting.

Understanding the basic function of the tool highlights the partnerships roles between SANParks and the MZCPE. Each landowner keeps focus on his/her property and SANParks assists the MZCPE by coordinating the higher-level requirements like management plan reviews, reporting and amendments. SANParks remains a constant partner open to assisting the landowners with advice as well as assisting the MZCPE to further unlock opportunities with other conservation and agricultural organisations as well as opportunities that could arise from association with SANParks in general.

The partnerships that have been created are invaluable. It has been amazing to watch these partnerships develop and strengthen throughout the GEF-5 PA Project. The commitment of the landowners and the partnership with SANParks has made many stand up and take notice. The wool and mohair industry is a prime example of how the landowner commitment has been recognised and how the MZCPE has proven innovative in the textile market by taking a conservation stance.

“The declaration of the MZCPE was personally a fulfilment of a dream. It has allowed me to work together with neighbours on another level. The collaborative approach including SANParks, GEF, Department of Environmental Affairs and landowners facilitated a unique model of co-operation for the sustainable development toward responsible future-minded stewardship.” – Ed Kingwill (First chairman of the MZCPELA)



The landowners have been managing the properties the same way for many years, it's just that they are now being recognised for doing so. The relationships across the landscape have grown in leaps and bounds and what can be achieved through the partnership approach is an exciting journey that is worth being part of.

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