

WATER SOURCE AREAS

New national park plan to protect mountain water factory

South African National Parks (SANParks) and several partners are hoping to establish a new 30 000-hectare national park near the scenically-spectacular Naudé's Nek pass to protect a natural water factory in the mountains near Lesotho. Article by Tony Carnie.

Peter Brigg



"Grass is like a blanket that protects the land," says Themba Nsibandé.

Not so much to keep it warm, he explains, but because these lush green blankets cover the bare soils and protect them from being ripped away by the massive erosive force of rainwater falling along the mountain borderline between Lesotho and the Eastern Cape province. Safeguarding a threatened high-altitude grassland is one of the primary reasons for the proposed establishment of South Africa's newest national park in a collaboration between SANParks and the conservation group WWF South Africa.

By ensuring better protection and restoration of grasslands, the new park will also help to safeguard the abundant supply

of clean and clear mountain water that feeds local rivers and dams lower down in the catchment. Nsibandé, the WWF project coordinator for the proposed 30 000 ha park, describes it as a "national park with a difference". This is because, unlike traditional parks owned by the state, local landowners will have the opportunity – through a stewardship system – to incorporate their land in the park on a voluntary basis. As such they also stand to benefit from a range of financial incentives for private and communal land that is formally protected.

The heart of the proposed first phase of the national park is located close to the Lesotho border, in the vicinity of Naudé's Nek, Rhodes and Nqanqarhu (formerly Maclear). Naudé's Nek is one of the highest mountain routes in the country, and was originally established by the intrepid Naudé brothers (Stephanus

David Naudé and Gabriel Naudé) in 1896. There is a memorial plaque on the pass which pays tribute to these “*twee stoere boere*”, who trailblazed the winding route on horseback.

Nsibande says the site is among 22 strategic water resource areas in South Africa – areas which make up only 10% of the land area yet provide 50% of our water. However, even though critically important for South Africa’s water security, only 12% of these natural water factories currently enjoy formal protection.

Much of the high-lying land in the north-eastern section the Eastern Cape is also heavily infested with black wattle and other alien vegetation which reduces the flow of water to local river systems. “When we engage the elders of the community the issue of drought and water shortages is something that they can relate to because they have seen streams drying out over their lifetimes,” explains Nsibande.

They include elders from the Batlokoa Traditional Council communal land, spanning more than 10 000 ha and headed by Chief Montoeli Lehana. “He immediately resonated with the project and gave his blessing to approach the traditional council. Under his leadership are 11 administrative areas, each headed by a headman or headwoman, some Sotho and others Xhosa-speaking.

“At the meeting, Chief Lehana discussed the problem of invasive alien species, particularly black wattle, and its impact on water supply. He also discussed the communal adaptive grazing project in the Matatiele region, about 60 km away, where communal farmers have come together in conservation grazing associations aimed at rehabilitating the wetlands and grasslands.”

Nsibande notes that improved grasslands also improve the condition of the cattle, which then fetch higher prices at auction. “We are not saying that people should not graze or utilise the land, but these activities should be done in a more sustainable manner by resting the land and practicing rotational grazing.”

When Nsibande was appointed as the park project coordinator in April 2019, he started meeting the local community, especially

the traditional leaders and communal and commercial farmers and landowners, as well as citizens, municipalities, non-governmental organisations and business groups. “I was received with a mixture of enthusiasm and suspicion by some landowners, as they were naturally concerned about what we wanted to do with their land. I went to great lengths to explain that this is about partnering; it is absolutely not about fencing off the area and moving people off the land.

“It is about collaborating in an agricultural working landscape where all the farmers continue to graze their livestock sustainably in these mountains, as they have done for centuries. Our goal is to establish formal biodiversity stewardship agreements with all stakeholders in the park area to retain and restore the rich biodiversity here, and work together in implementing conservation grazing programmes.

“Well-managed livestock, especially cattle, are essential to maintaining the health and vigour of the grasslands, which become moribund in the absence of grazing. Healthy grasslands and wetlands are essential to a healthy water supply as they slow down the flow of water from the catchment area, mitigate erosion, and act as a sponge, releasing water throughout the year,” Nsibande notes further.

He also met several private landowners and commercial farmers in the Nqanqarhu and Rhodes areas and several have shown their willingness to participate in the project through partnership agreements. “If farmers in the park area are willing to sell their farms to us, we will certainly consider this, but the main objective is for them to be biodiversity stewards on their farms.”

Regarding access for future park visitors, some landowners do not want strangers coming on to their land, whereas several others are keen to attract tourists and to benefit from accommodation revenues. Welcoming the initiative, SANParks Acting CEO, Dr Luthando Dziba, says the ultimate objective is to consolidate an ecologically, economically and socially sustainable protected area, primarily by working with private and communal landowners: “The establishment of this national park will mark a new and innovative approach to protected area expansion as it will be located within a working agricultural landscape.”

On the economic front, Dziba says the project aims to raise significant government funding for the restoration and maintenance of the landscape for water security, bringing much needed employment opportunities to the area (through alien plant clearing and wetland restoration).

“Because of its rugged, unspoilt landscape, the area has rich potential for adventure and cultural tourism which could help to build an all-year-round tourism industry, further unlocking potential jobs. The declaration of a national park will also be a motivation for the inclusion of this area into the adjacent Drakensberg World Heritage Site.”

Dr Morné du Plessis, CEO of WWF South Africa, adds: “The beauty of this model is that biodiversity conservation and ecological management will be done in partnership with those who live and work in this area – while allowing them to continue deriving benefits from their land through sustainable agriculture and

Courtesy E. Muchapondwa



The Naudé’s Nek mountain route was pioneered by two brothers, Stephanus David Naudé and Gabriel Naudé, in 1896. According to the plaque at the monument to them, erected by their descendants in 1967, these twee stoere boere trailblazed the winding route on horseback. It was marked out and constructed using picks, spades and scotch carts, and completed in 1911.

Themba Nsibande



Themba Nsibande is the WWF project coordinator of the proposed mountain grasslands national park.

other compatible land uses. Ultimately this is a win-win – for nature and for people. We can't wait to see this project coming to fruition."

Nsibande notes that before any land can be included in the national park, an assessment must be done of the biodiversity value on their land. The declaration of the national park status on private and communal land is voluntary, involving willing landowners and SANParks. The landowners retain ownership and the rights to their land and SANParks and its partners will work with the landowners to protect the biodiversity on the land.

There are also benefits for landowners who wish to have their land declared as part of the national park, including those in terms of the Income Tax Act; the Property Rates Act; efforts to provide innovative conservation finance; extension support and ecological advice.

"Most importantly though, a landowner can establish legal protection for the biodiversity that has existed on the land over the years and create a legacy that ensures the natural, historic and cultural heritage of the landscape is protected for current and future generations."

Two legal agreements are prepared. The first is a written agreement between SANParks and the landowner, which records the landowner's consent to have their property included in the national park, the terms of which are endorsed on the title

deeds of the property. The second is a management agreement, which refers to the management plan and the commitments the parties have made towards the protection of biodiversity on the land.

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Angus Burns

SANParks general manager Kristal Maze says the proposed new national park is one of South Africa's key strategic water source areas (the Eastern Cape Drakensberg).