

Missed opportunities in resolving people-conservation tensions in Dwesa-Cwebe, South Africa



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Introduction

The importance of biodiversity conservation is arguably undisputed globally, as people generally realise that their survival is intertwined with biodiversity, and that threats to it could diminish their quality of life (Sanderson & Redford 2003). But tensions between people and conservation management are a worldwide global phenomenon, particularly in the Global South, where past injustices saw conservation needs trumping land and natural resource justice for local people (Hutton, Adams & Murombedzi 2005) and where widespread poverty is seen by many as putting pressure on biodiversity (Du Toit, Walker & Campbell 2004). Given this state of affairs, numerous attempts to mitigate people-conservation tension have been made by various constituencies, including international bodies concerned with environmental health, state agencies tasked with management of protected areas, academics, businesses, organisations and individuals (Dressler et al. 2010). Kepe (2018) argues that these stakeholders commonly form alliances (ideological or actual) to advance or oppose the mitigation of the people-conservation tension. Strategies in mitigating people-conservation conflict have included, but are not limited to, erection and maintenance of fences and/or issuing of fines to trespassers. In this approach, enclosures and punitive measures are implemented as deterrents (Hutton et al. 2005). Alternative approaches include 'inclusive conservation', where local people are afforded a greater stake in managing local natural resources (e.g. Community Based Natural Resource Management), (Dressler et al. 2010), 'conservation against poverty', where alternative livelihood means are promoted to meet local livelihood needs, while aiming to reduce pressure on biodiversity (Salafsky 2011), and neoliberal conservation, where markets and the private sector are seen to play a role in making conservation commercially viable (Igoe & Brockington 2007). Although individual site-level successes have been documented, in general, these strategies have not succeeded as a universal blueprint for mitigating people-conservation conflict. This article argues that there is a need to acknowledge that the four strategies mentioned here are not a panacea for all contexts, and that there is a need to explore every opportunity, at multiple scales, in a manner that is context-specific.

Specifically, this article argues that in each case of people-conservation conflict, as much as there is a need to look forward, in terms of plans and resolutions, it is important to look back at important points in history, where opportunities existed for mitigating the tension. An assessment of the history of a site would allow planners to develop strategies that avoid repeating past mistakes, while at the same time opening opportunities to explore how past mistakes are addressed in future plans. Using Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve located on the Wild Coast of the Eastern Cape, a 300 km stretch of coastline, as a case study, this article explores missed opportunities that explain the lingering people-conservation tensions in the area. It is argued that acknowledging these failures, broadly, is a viable pathway to mitigating people-conservation tensions in the area.

The information discussed in this article is based on a number of sources. Firstly, there was extensive review of literature, including published and unpublished material. This material included books and journal articles, policy and legislation documents, and archival material. Secondly, the authors' long-term experience working on the intersection of natural resources and livelihoods, as well as conservation on the Wild Coast, including insights from one of the authors' doctoral study (De Villiers 2021), allowed for insights to be drawn from detailed direct observations in the area for a period of over 30 years.

Background and context of Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve

Although small in size, Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve is known in South Africa for biodiversity conservation, as well as issues around violent conflict and land justice (Timmermans 2004).

The 5700 hectares Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve is an amalgamation of two smaller terrestrial reserves (Dwesa Nature Reserve and Cwebe Nature Reserve), which were proclaimed in 1975. These are adjacent to the 18 000 ha Dwesa-Cwebe Marine Protected Area (De Villiers 2021). Dwesa was officially declared as a state forest in 1891 (Henkel 1895), arguably making it the first protected area in South Africa (Feely 2013). By the early 1970s, with the looming independence of the 'Transkei', an apartheid-created homeland for black South Africans, the South African government identified Dwesa as the ideal locality for the declaration of a protected area (Timmermans 2004). The biological importance of Dwesa and the adjacent Cwebe indigenous forests had long been recognised and were considered as being among the most valuable and ecologically significant forests in South Africa (Sim 1906). They are some of the most species-rich non-tropical forests globally (Moll 1974), with high levels of endemism (Cooper & Swart 1992). Moll's (1974) preliminary report on the Dwesa Forest Reserve not only highlighted the scientific value of the forests but also of the grasslands and adjacent marine resources. The establishment of these protected areas resulted in evictions of African people who resided inside these forests, as late as the 1890s (Henkel 1895). The act of evicting people from Dwesa and Cwebe state forests, or preventing them from reoccupying or utilising the resources of the land was sustained by the various successive governments that assumed management authority over the protected areas (Ntshona et al. 2010).

More recently, Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve gained national prominence during the early 1990s as a result of mass protests and reserve invasion by people from the surrounding seven villages, demanding access to grazing, forest resources and marine resources (Ntshona et al. 2010). The nationally televised account of local village protesters forcefully removing natural resources from the reserve was a stark reminder about the tensions that exist between people and conservation, something that led to numerous meetings between the authorities and local communities, including their representatives (e.g. non-governmental organisation), to mitigate the tension. These protests coincided with a changed political climate that signalled the end of official apartheid, and the ushering in of democratic governance in South Africa. In 1996, utilising the legislated land claims process, members of the seven villages lodged a land claim for the return of their land (Fay 2007). Even though the land claim was subsequently resolved, declaring the local communities rightful owners of the reserve, use of natural resources within Dwesa-Cwebe continues to be restricted because of a clause in the land restitution settlement agreement that the reserve will continue to operate as such, and be managed by a state conservation authority, while local people would benefit through ecotourism (Ntshona et al. 2010). The Dwesa-Cwebe land claim and settlement was seen as probably the most high-profile in the country, following the Makuleke claim and settlement for sections of Kruger National Park (De Villiers 2021).

Tensions between conservation authorities and neighbouring communities of Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve continue to

this day, and occasionally these turn violent. The causes of the tensions include a range of issues, from poor implementation of the land claim settlement agreement, to clashes over access to and use of the locally available natural resources (De Villiers 2021). Given the aforementioned context, the following section explores how the people-conservation tensions could have been and could still be mitigated in the case of Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve.

Missed opportunities in mitigating people-conservation tension in Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve

Linking Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve to local heritage history

History of place has been central in the origins of people-conservation tensions, globally (Agrawal & Redford 2009). Arguably, the history of settlement, natural resource use, and subsequent dispossession of local and indigenous people of their land to make way for biodiversity conservation, has been the central cause of tension. However, even with that history of injustice, there are potential opportunities to use other histories of places where the conservation area is, to give a sense of pride and belonging among the local people, and thus reduce potential tensions (De Villiers 2021). In Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve there is currently one historical linkage that could be made between local people and this protected area. The reserve is situated in the heartland of amaXhosa kingdom. More specifically, Dwesa Forest has direct linkages with one of the famous amaXhosa kings, Sarhili, the son of King Hintsa who was assassinated by the British in 1835 (Peires 1989). Part of King Sarhili's fame among amaXhosa comes from his several conflicts with the British armies, as part of frontier wars. Slade (2010) also argues that Sarhili was the last independent king of amaXhosa before they were defeated by the British, and thus is commonly seen as a symbol of amaXhosa life that was disrupted by Europeans' arrival. This is why his gravesite at Tsholorha is now a tourist site in the area (Mbashe Local Municipality 2022).

There are two important links between Sarhili and the Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve. Firstly, in his battles with the British, and on the verge of defeat, King Sarhili and his bodyguard hid in the Cwebe forests, just east of Mbashe River (Peires 1989). Secondly, long before the colonial government recognised the need to conserve Dwesa, King Sarhili is known to have had it set aside as a protected forest presumably for his royal hunting ground (Henkel 1889), but Cawe (1992) argues that he may have protected the forests because he admired their grandeur. Irrespective of the reasons for protecting it, there is clear evidence that King Sarhili protected Dwesa Forest long before the colonial Forestry Department (Henkel 1895).

This article argues that this history of protection of Dwesa by Sarhili, and his use of the Cwebe forest as a refuge when his life was in danger, could be promoted to allow local people to

be reminded of their history in association with the protected area. Just like Sarhili's gravesite has become a tourist attraction, Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve could elevate its historical relevance to develop a sense of belonging and stewardship among local people, as well as have a commercial value as a tourist attraction.

Planners' recommendations on inclusive conservation during establishment of the reserve

Studies on people-conservation tensions regarding Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve mostly mention local people's discontent with not being consulted and being restricted on natural resource use in the reserve (Ntshona et al. 2010). Yet the history of planning of this protected area shows that during the planning stages, these issues were considered, and recommendations were made. Firstly, Moll's (1974) preliminary report on the Dwesa Forest Reserve not only highlighted the scientific value of the forests but also acknowledged the historical utilisation of the forests, grasslands and marine life, and recommended that they be proclaimed as a nature reserve to protect them from destruction. While recommending restrictions to harvesting of marine resources, he did not state that utilisation should be outlawed forever, but recommended, '... the amount of cropping must be limited to the sustainable yield available from the area' (Moll 1974). His final recommendation was:

... [T]o re-emphasize that consultation and planning are the most important features of good long-term development. By having a well-planned, scientifically sound management plan for the future of an area like Dwesa, one will ensure that the maximum benefit for all will be obtained. (Moll 1974:5)

Secondly, in fulfilling their brief to develop a management plan for Dwesa and Cwebe Nature Reserves, Tinley and Van Riet (1975) considered Moll's report and recognised that local people depended upon certain resources from the indigenous forests. They made specific recommendations about natural resource use by local people and how the reserves should respond to their needs. They recommended that thatch grass collection should be allowed to satisfy local requirements as well as to reduce fire hazard in the forests. They concurred with Moll (1974) that rotational harvesting of shellfish should be implemented. Tinley was particularly adamant that herbalists should be given full cooperation in the collection of traditional medicines from the forests but overuse should be guarded against. Besides the natural resource use, Tinley and Van Riet recommended that local people should receive preferential employment opportunities. They suggested benefit sharing of revenue generated from tourism with neighbouring communities. The recommendations made by Moll, Tinley and Van Riet were ignored by the Transkei government in favour of a fences and fines conservation model.

The post-apartheid era, the land claim and its aftermath

Since the advent of post-apartheid South Africa in 1994, many opportunities opened up for the biodiversity

conservation sector to also ride the waves of change and adopt more inclusive approaches. This happened, but for the most part it failed to consider local people's historical links to a conservation area, including historical loss of land and other natural resource rights (Kepe 2018). This is where the greatest opportunity for a reset lies. In Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve the nationally televised invasion of the reserve by local people in September 1994, demanding access to resources, as well as the lodging of the land claim for the reserve in 1996, were opportunities to finally put this protected area on a new path (i.e. switch from a regime of exclusion and dispossession to one of inclusion and partnership), given all the publicity and attention. Ntshona et al. (2010) argue that despite their successful land claim in 2001, the Dwesa-Cwebe communities have not been able to fully benefit from it, as a myriad of government policies and legislation have made it almost impossible for them to access certain resources within the reserve. In addition, following the 'successful' land claim resolution in 2001, the state, in its multiple forms (departments) has virtually taken a back seat, leaving confusion and conflict between local people and conservation managers to go on unchecked. The absence of a clear and honest implementation of land claim settlement terms is a lost opportunity. Across the country, there is a need for intervention that should begin by acknowledging the failed implementation, or absence thereof, of land claim settlement agreements. In agreement with Ntshona et al. (2010), local people's:

[R]ights that are enshrined in policy documents and legal agreements should be informed by the capacity of people to access those rights. There have to be accompanying legal provisions and the capacity to enforce them. (p. 360)

Currently, local people are generally left on their own, and in constant conflict among themselves, and with the state, despite policies, legislation and legal entities (e.g. Community Property Association) that were supposed to mitigate the people-conservation tensions. A structural tension between legal entities such as the Communal Property Associations and local, traditional governance structures are often mired in structural tensions that limit success of mitigating people-conservation tensions (Ntshona et al. 2010).

Lessons from research on Dwesa-Cwebe and the Wild Coast at large

The national profile of the Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve over the last two decades or so, has encouraged a flurry of researchers from within and outside South Africa, writing about people-conservation tensions, the land claim, use of natural resources within and outside the reserve, the marine protected area and so forth (e.g. De Villiers 2021; Fay 2007; Ntshona et al. 2010; Shackleton et al. 2007; Sunde 2014; Timmermans 2004). There is also some writing by journalists and consultants. Whether explicit or not, collectively, these studies contain recommendations that, if taken seriously, could mitigate aspects of the current people-conservation tensions in Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve. Translating research findings into policy, or making them accessible to

practitioners is challenging, but in the case of Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve post-study dissemination workshops, policy briefs, op-eds and media coverage have become accessible to mitigate this past challenge.

Discussion and conclusion

This article argues that people-conservation conflicts are common globally, but that their mitigation is of primary importance. While much has been done to mitigate these tensions, including 'inclusive conservation' (e.g. co-management between local people and conservation agencies), Community Based Natural Resource Management, 'conservation against poverty', where alternative livelihood means are promoted to meet local livelihood needs, and neoliberal conservation, where markets and the private sector are seen to play a role in making conservation commercially viable, more is needed. This article argues that in each case of people-conservation conflict, there is a need to look back at important points in history, where opportunities existed that could have forged a better scenario and at least reduced the current tension. The article shows that this assessment of history allows for strategies to avoid past mistakes, while exploring how past opportunities could still be embraced or revived. In the case of Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve, the article explores some missed opportunities that can explain some of the lingering people-conservation tensions in the area. Firstly these include the opportunity to use the historical ties of the famous amaXhosa King Sarhili to Dwesa and Cwebe forests, including his exclusive protection of Dwesa. Given that Sarhili's grave is already promoted as a tourist attraction, local people could renew their sense of belonging to the Dwesa-Cwebe Nature reserve, and therefore see it in fresh light, were this similarly promoted the same way as the king's grave. Secondly, advice about community consultation and resource use that were given by the planners of Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve during the 1970s should have been heeded. Evidence shows that had some of those suggestion not been ignored, some of the tensions would have been much less.

Thirdly, the ushering in of the post-apartheid era that saw enthusiastic changes in policy and legislation, including in biodiversity conservation, as well as the 'successful' land claim for Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve by local communities in 2001, was another opportunity that could have been used to reduce the historical tensions in the area. With almost no positive intervention by state departments that were supposed to implement the land claim settlement agreement for the benefit of the local communities, it is easy to see this as another missed opportunity. Lastly, Dwesa-Cwebe Nature Reserve and the local communities with ties to it, have seen numerous research studies that yielded important recommendations. It is argued that lessons from these studies could shed light on a number of issues that currently contribute to the tension. These include information about natural resource use by local people, which vacillates between sustainable use of some resources, and extra-legal and sometimes destructive means of natural resource use

(e.g. poaching using dogs) (De Villiers 2021), understandings of the kind of rights that local people seek, and broadly, the political ecology of conservation in the Wild Coast.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

D.d.V. conducted the original fieldwork, wrote sections of the article and provided editing of sections of the final draft. T.K. conceptualised the idea of the article, wrote the first draft of the article and edited it for submission to the journal.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Rhodes University, Science Faculty Ethics Committee (No. SCI2017/075).

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no new data were collected or analysed.

Disclaimer

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