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## **The community versus community-based natural resource management: the case of Ndumo game reserve, South Africa**

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**ABSTRACT** This article investigates the escalating violence directed by community members towards the Ndumo game reserve in South Africa, which has pitted residents against the reserve they are invested in as owners and managers. We argue that escalating tensions at Ndumo result from three distinct, but interrelated factors: (1) the local community's historical and present day feelings of loss of land, autonomy and "home" as a result of colonial and neoliberal conservation initiatives; (2) a lack of transformation in the colonial institutions governing community-based natural resource management (CBNRM); and (3) the increasing frustration with the prospects of scaling up CBNRM ventures into a new global conservation paradigm: transfrontier conservation areas (TFCA). We argue that the destruction and violence at Ndumo are best understood as an example of communities trying desperately to engage with state- and private-sector-led conservation in the face of continued exclusion.

**RÉSUMÉ** Cet article examine l'intensification des actes de violence commis par des membres de la collectivité locale dans le conflit qui l'oppose à la réserve faunique de Ndumo (Ndumo Game Reserve) en Afrique du Sud, réserve dans laquelle les habitants sont pourtant investis à titre propriétaires et de gestionnaires. Nous avançons que cette intensification des tensions est le résultat de trois facteurs distincts qui sont cependant interreliés : (1) le sentiment de perte, passé et présent, ressenti par la collectivité à l'égard de son territoire, de son autonomie et de son chez-soi, causé par les projets coloniaux et néo-libéraux de conservation ; (2) l'absence de changement au sein des institutions coloniales qui encadrent les politiques de « gestion communautaire des ressources naturelles » ; et (3) l'insatisfaction croissante à l'égard de l'évolution des entreprises de gestion communautaire des ressources naturelles vers un nouveau paradigme de conservation mondiale, avec la création d'aires de conservation transfrontalières. Nous soutenons que le vandalisme et la violence à Ndumo doivent être interprétés comme un cas typique de collectivités cherchant désespérément, face au maintien de leur exclusion, à se faire entendre de l'État et du secteur privé qui gouvernent la conservation.

**Keywords:** community-based natural resource management; community resistance; Ndumo; South Africa

### **Introduction**

In May 2008, residents of villages adjacent to the Ndumo Game Reserve in the northeast corner of South Africa attacked the neighbouring conservation area. More than 11 kilometres of fencing

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along the eastern boundary of the reserve were destroyed within a few days, enabling free access which residents used to harvest resources, cut down trees, graze cattle and hunt wildlife (Carnie 2011). Violence flared again a few months later when a game ranger was abducted and beaten.<sup>1</sup> Tensions remained high in the ensuing years: angry residents routinely confronted tourists and game rangers, culminating with the destruction in 2010 of a suspension bridge that served as a key access point. Soon after, residents allegedly set fire to a game rangers' camp. The local wildlife authority was completely overwhelmed by the scale of this violence, calling on the police and army to guarantee the safety of the reserve. A government official who visited Ndumo late in 2010 described the situation as "total anarchy" (Liebenberg 2010).

The increasing hostility at Ndumo is particularly noteworthy because the reserve is managed within the paradigm of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM). In the preceding decade, neighbouring communities had been granted ownership over various sections of the reserve and become comanagers of the conservation area. The acts of vandalism committed by community members against a conservation area in which they themselves are invested as owners and beneficiaries highlight some of the deep-seated tensions and contradictions contained within community-based conservation initiatives.

This article investigates tensions between conservation programs and local realities by critically evaluating the ongoing conflict at Ndumo, with a particular focus on the relationships between key stakeholders. Whilst proponents of CBNRM uphold it as a solution to conflicts stemming from exclusions associated with fortress conservation, analyses by critical social scientists suggest that community-based conservation can itself be considered an imposition that precipitates violent resistance (Klooster 2000). Previous scholarship suggests that resistance emerges when communities perceive limited opportunities for meaningful participation (Brosius 2010). Through this lens, actions of everyday resistance such as fire setting, hunting, farming and vandalism are best understood as both strategies of resistance and engagement (Kull 2002; Sullivan 2003; Holmes 2007). In light of these broader arguments, we argue that the violence at Ndumo is a case of communities trying to engage with the conservation debate in the face of continued exclusion and alienation from their land and livelihoods.

We suggest that escalating tensions at Ndumo resulted from three distinct but interrelated factors: (1) local people's historical and contemporary feelings of loss of land, autonomy and "home" as a result of colonial and neoliberal conservation initiatives; (2) a lack of transformation in the colonial institutions governing CBNRM; and (3) the increasing frustration with the prospects of scaling up CBNRM ventures into the new global conservation paradigm, transfrontier conservation areas (TFCA). Thus, the destruction and violence at Ndumo are best understood as an example of communities trying to desperately engage with state- and private-sector-led conservation when all other possibilities have been exhausted.

### **Does the community count in CBNRM?**

Community-based natural resource management – and community-based conservation more broadly – emerged as the darling of the conservation movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s. CBNRM rose to prominence as an approach that sought to redress the human costs associated with coercive conservation by reversing the centuries-old tradition of excluding local communities from the management and associated benefits of biodiversity conservation. Adhering to the principles of sustainable development that sought to achieve environmental, social and economic goals simultaneously, CBNRM promised to bring about more locally relevant and equitable forms of conservation by returning the stewardship of biodiversity to local communities through participation, empowerment and decentralisation (Dressler et al. 2010).

Over the past two decades, there has been increasing criticism that the promise of CBNRM does not hold true in practice. Critics argue that instead of balancing conservation and development goals, CBNRM privileges the former over the latter. Many studies of community-based conservation have found it to be an ineffective and, at times, regressive approach that prioritises the creation and viability of protected areas over the well-being of local people (Adams et al. 2004). The principle that all development within the conservation area must be congruent with the overarching aim of natural preservation requires all parties to have access to both expert knowledge and political influence, which are not evenly distributed among communities and their partners (Turner 2006, 14). These unequal power relationships serve to marginalise the community perspective within CBNRM programs (Büscher and Wolmer 2007; Hoole 2007). In this sense, critics argue that community conservation does not represent a fundamental break from its colonial and exclusionary predecessors, but rather cloaks these same power imbalances in the rhetoric of participation and inclusion, without creating the means and space for community empowerment or self-improvement (Fabricius and De Wet 2002; Garland 2008).

Another major critique levied against CBNRM is that it represents the extension of neoliberalism into the realm of nature. Neoliberalism is the dominant international political economic system of our time, a multifaceted ideology that seeks to subject political, social and ecological affairs to capitalist market dynamics (Büscher et al. 2012). The logic of neoliberalism is deeply embedded within the CBNRM paradigm. CBNRM is based on the principle that biodiversity must pay for itself by generating economic benefits, in this case through eco-tourism, ignoring any other preferred land use by local people or non-monetary value that the land in question may have for them. Second is the pervasive “need” for private sector involvement (Büscher and Whande 2007, 31). As a result, the private sector, having undergone an image makeover as eco-friendly and responsible, has become the supplier of unspoiled natural areas for recreational use, and is consistently favoured over community partnerships throughout the Global South (AFRA 2004, 1). CBNRM thus favours solutions that promote secure property rights and engage the private sector, which is ideally suited to generate financial benefits for communities while simultaneously achieving environmental goals (Igoe and Brockington 2007; Büscher and Dressler 2012).

But some scholars suggest that the reality of CBNRM has not lived up to its rhetoric and that the paradigm has become corrupted (Dressler et al. 2010). Like its predecessors, CBNRM is criticised for being socially insensitive and economically unjust – especially in South Africa where there is an overarching restitution element – and unable to meet the complex challenges of nature conservation. In such instances, community conservation becomes a buzzword: an attractive catch-all slogan that promises a win–win outcome, but that does not address the contradictory nature of the attempts to achieve both conservation and development goals. Ultimately, CBNRM represents a powerful symbiosis between the local elite and international capital, whereby the former grants projects legitimacy and authority, and the latter provides skills, financial resources and technology (Igoe and Croucher 2007, 553). The state is central to this relationship, both in creating conducive neoliberal socioeconomic policies and in brokering individual deals with the private sector (Harvey 2005; Fraser 2006). The poor, too often, remain excluded. For these reasons, the legitimacy of CBNRM programs has come under mounting criticism from the very communities they are intended to benefit.

### **CBNRM in context: the South African case**

South Africa’s early history of conservation followed the same pattern experienced elsewhere on the African continent: by the middle of the twentieth century, game reserves that were established to protect species prized by colonial hunters had morphed into national parks geared towards

attracting urban tourists (Carruthers 1997; Adams 2003; Steinhart 2006). With the genesis of the apartheid regime in 1948, the state refined and intensified the restrictive land policies of its colonial predecessors. Under apartheid, black South Africans were relegated and relocated to designated African homelands. A key component of this racialised land policy was the forced removal of many black South African communities from sites of rich biodiversity in order to cement the illusion of these “wild” natural spaces, which became the exclusive preserve of white tourists. Most of the communities that were evicted from conservation areas were relocated to nearby villages and townships (Fabricius and De Wet 2002).

This process was supposed to be rectified with the arrival of multiracial democracy in 1994, when the Restitution of Land Rights Act established the Land Claims Court (LCC). The LCC was established to address land disputes related to apartheid forced removals via restitution, reparation or repair (Freedman 2003). This proved to be an unwieldy undertaking: by 2007 almost 80,000 claims were still outstanding (South African Associated Press 2007). For those 30 or so claims that centred on land within South Africa’s national parks, the most common resolution involved granting formal titles to the communities whose land had been expropriated, with communities involved as comanagers within the CBNRM paradigm (Kepe 2008). The most significant precedent for this model was the much publicised resolution of the land claim made by the Makuleke people to the Parfuri region of Kruger national park (Steenkamp and Uhr 2000; Robins and Van Der Waal 2008). This preference for CBNRM was solidified with the ANC government’s adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy (GEAR) in 1996, which heralded a shift towards private-sector-driven development that resonated with CBNRM’s neoliberal emphasis (Poultney and Spenceley 2001).

Today, CBNRM programs in contested conservation areas are guided by the *Cabinet Memorandum for the Settlement of Restitution Claims on Protected Areas and State Forests* (hereafter referred to as the Memorandum; Republic of South Africa [2001]), which was initiated in 2001 to facilitate agreements among the various stakeholders implicated by the previous displacement of claimants from demarcated conservation areas. The Memorandum sets out guiding principles for restitution agreements on conserved land: the land should be maintained as a protected area in perpetuity, no residential resettlement should occur and no development or activity should take place except that which is compatible with the use of the land for conservation. In instances where the agreement prohibits physical occupation of the property – for instance, to protect the integrity of the conservation area – compensation is to be made through a planned regime of economic benefits, which accrue to the claimants as the land’s legal owners (AFRA 2004).

The Memorandum does not specify how such an arrangement is to be operationalised or how benefits and responsibilities of CBNRM are to be divided up. Ultimately, this limited form of community property rights provides for land ownership without residency and land management without the right to dispose of the property. These formulations have proven every bit as problematic in practice as they are contradictory in conception, as evidenced by the case of Ndumo.

### **Situating Ndumo: people, place, displacement**

Situated in the predominantly rural region of Maputaland, adjacent to the Mozambican border, the Ndumo Game Reserve covers over 10,000 hectares of biologically rich wetlands. One of South Africa’s oldest nature reserves, it contains two major semi-permanent pans. Water covers between 15 and 40 per cent of the park depending on the time of year, making it an oasis in the otherwise dry and sandy landscape of Maputaland. The reserve is famous for its floral and faunal diversity, especially its unparalleled birdlife (Tinley and van Riet 1981).

Although human occupation has been prohibited within Ndumo Game Reserve for several decades, the history of the land is closely bound up with those of its dispossessed human inhabitants. After its establishment in 1924, the reserve continued to remain accessible to residents: those living within and outside the reserve relied on the land for water, fish, game, medicinal plants, wild fruit and reeds for building homes. Forced removals by the apartheid regime began in the late 1940s. All residents of the reserve were evicted, with severe fines levied to discourage hunting and fire setting. Most evictees settled on land along the periphery of the game reserve where they pledged allegiance to the local *Nkosi* (chief), built houses, and prepared new fields for cultivation (Impey 2006).

Today, almost all the dispossessed households scattered outside the park's boundary are governed by two Traditional Authorities (TAs). The Mbangweni corridor, consisting of the narrow stretch of land between Ndumo's eastern fence and neighbouring Tembe Elephant Park's western fence, is home to just over 100 households, most of whom are the remnants of a Tembe community that used to inhabit the junction of the Usuthu and the Pongola Rivers, in what is now park land. They fall under the tribal jurisdiction of the Tembe Tribal Authority, based at eManguzi (see Figure 1). To the southern and western side of the reserve is the heartland of the Mathenjwa TA, where displaced Mathenjwa families sought refuge within eight neighbouring communities that border the southern edge of the reserve. The Mathenjwa TA is based at nearby Manyiseni. For the sake of simplicity, all eight Mathenjwa communities that neighbour the reserve will be collectively referred to as the Mathenjwa communities, whereas the single Tembe community adjacent to the reserve will be referred to as the Mbangweni community.

Both communities are typical of the region, so the demographic information provided for the entire Umkhanyakude District Municipality (UDM) in which they are located is instructive. The district consists primarily of poor, rural communities who reside on communal land (land is granted to tribe members by their TA according to need). Livelihoods depend primarily on subsistence agriculture, a small informal economy and government grants in the form of pension and childcare payments. More than 70 per cent of the population survives on less than R800/month, approximately USD90 (UDM 2009). The population is predominantly young, with about 70 per cent of residents under 18 years of age. The area is characterised by a shortage of services and infrastructure: 80 per cent of the population is without electricity, 76 per cent without piped water and 92 per cent without municipal waste removal services (Department of Local and Provincial Government 2008).

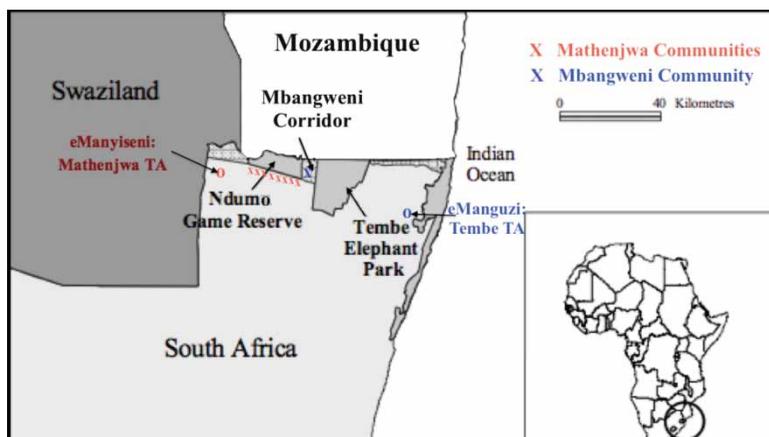


Figure 1. Map of Greater Maputaland, showing study area (adapted from Jones 2005, 269).

The main entrance to the reserve is situated in Ndumo village, located in the Jozini Local Municipality, under the Mathenjwa TA. The village is the regional hub, housing a small government clinic, eight primary schools, two high schools and a community centre. On the other side of the reserve, under the jurisdiction of the Tembe TA, the Mbangweni community is considerably less endowed. The Mbangweni live in a relatively isolated corridor between Ndumo Game Reserve and Tembe Elephant Park, which has long been used as a thoroughfare for travel between South Africa and Mozambique. Little infrastructure and few services are available.

## **Findings**

Our analysis suggests that the recent violence at Ndumo stems from three key issues: inadequate or absent land restitution; continued colonial institutions; and lack of inclusion in new conservation initiatives.

### ***Land restitution and neoliberal conservation: contemporary losses to compensate historical ones***

The Mbangweni community was the first to seek restitution for their eviction. In 1995, 114 households made a claim to 1,262 hectares of land within the Ndumo reserve (Hall 2003). Grievances included their forced removal to land south of the reserve, their loss of access to the water inside the reserve, and their subsequent transplantation to the smaller, less fertile slice of land east of the reserve, where they continue to reside today. The claim was officially settled out of court in 2000, when the Regional LCC afforded the community legal title to the portion of land in question, situated in the northeast corner of the reserve (Jones 2005). At the time, Land Claims Commissioner Thabi Shange, offered R10,000 per claimant household as compensation and further suggested that the evictees be permitted to access a 200-hectare portion of the reserve for fishing and cultivation as an interim measure.

This final concession caused uproar among members of the public and conservation NGOs. Buoyed by Ndumo's 1997 inclusion in the Ramsar convention, conservation advocates both within and outside South Africa argued that granting community access to the reserve would threaten Ndumo's status as a wetland of global importance (Westwood 2008). Unprepared for the severity of this backlash, the Regional LCC decided to revisit the claim, based on the newly raised contention that the Mbwangweni community never actually resided on the land, and were in fact Mozambican in origin (Tong 2002). Community members objected, maintaining that they and their ancestors did indeed occupy homesteads on the land, using it to supplement their livelihoods on a seasonal basis by hunting and collecting wild fruit and reeds, as well as cultivating in the floodplain and the riverbanks in the dry season. Nevertheless, due to the controversy it created, the idea of ceding a portion of conserved land to the Mbwangweni for agricultural purposes was eventually discarded by the Land Claims Commissioner and removed from the final agreement (Naguran 2002, 8; Venter 2010). The promised monetary compensation was also halved to R5,000. None of these payments have been received by the Mbangweni (Groenewald 2008).<sup>2</sup>

Dissatisfaction over these fast-changing, inconsistent government positions and the succession of unfulfilled promises of compensation are critical factors fuelling vandalism towards the reserve. As Venter (2010) notes, Mbangweni community members attempted to reengage the government in negotiations following the flip-flop on the restitution arrangement, but to no avail. Ishmael, an official at the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Development, explains that fence cutting is a direct reaction to the state ignoring their pleas for urgent and swift restitution: "People cut the fence ... because they were saying that the process to resolve

the land claim was going very, very slowly.”<sup>3</sup> As Brosius observes in the case of Penan opposition to logging in Sarawak, such violence in the face of conservation efforts should be viewed as a community’s desperate attempt to have their voice heard. Acts of violence and vandalism are simultaneously efforts of resistance and engagement: “efforts born of frustration and desperation, to be sure, but efforts at engagement all the same” (Brosius 2006, 315). In the face of severe power inequality and a lack of decision-making and bargaining agency, such dramatic expressions of public discontent are critical tools that communities use to give voice to their swelling dissatisfaction with both local authorities, conservation agencies and government, and to attract attention to their grievances.<sup>4</sup>

The Mathenjwa claim has been comparatively less problematic. In 1995, 562 households launched a claim with the LCC in Pietermaritzburg, seeking ownership over just under 10,000 hectares of land, approximately 90 per cent of the reserve’s total area. In anticipation of the granting of this claim, a legal trust was established in 1996 to hold shares in both the camp and a private tour-operating company on behalf of the Mathenjwa community. By the time the Mathenjwa land claim was finally settled in 2007 – with most of the claimed land allocated to the community – this trust was the primary mechanism for delivering financial compensation to Ndumo’s new owners (Poultney and Spencely 2001).

Similar to the case with the Mbangweni, there has been significant government inconsistency regarding both the nature and size of the benefits accruing to the community. Although a copy of the actual agreement does not exist on record, community members claim that the then Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism promised R10,000 to each of the 562 claimant households during the handover celebrations for the Mathenjwa claim in 2008. This pledge was later revoked. Instead, compensation became solely dependent on the funds accruing from the joint venture mentioned above, where the Mathenjwa (as the soon-to-be owners of the reserve) partnered with a private company, Wilderness Safaris (with existing operations in Botswana, Congo, Kenya, Namibia, Malawi, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe and the Seychelles) to establish the Ndumo Wilderness Camp, a luxury eight-suite tented camp overlooking the Banzi Pan, in the heart of the reserve. This venture epitomises the promise of the CBNRM rhetoric: community owners partner with a private company to create a pro-poor, financially viable model – a win-win for both parties.

The reality of this venture did not live up to its promise. Within a few years of operation it became apparent that this scheme was not financially viable. The company lost approximately R5 million between 1995 and 2004, failing to turn a profit in any single year of operation (Spencely 2008). This poor performance was largely a result of the distance and difficulty in accessing the park from major cities, and because Ndumo’s niche as a bird-watching destination limits its appeal for tourists. In a typical year, Wilderness Safaris reported occupancy highs of around 50 per cent, with lows dipping below 15 per cent (Elliott 1998, 6). They pulled out of the venture in 2004, dismissing all local employees and ending the possibility of reimbursements for Mathenjwa residents. As critics such as Turner (2006) predicted, the vagaries of international eco-tourism markets undermined the venture’s success. While the private partner was able to weather the losses and move on, local people were far less fortunate.

Conversations with community members suggest that many residents would not have supported this joint venture even if it had proved to be financially viable in the long run. Most community members we spoke with were much more concerned with their limited access to the reserve than they were with issues of financial compensation. Most continue to resent being fenced out of their land and prioritise increased access to the land over monetary benefits. Gogo Mampo, an elderly Mathenjwa woman, explains: “To them [non-community members], money is more important. We live in a society where money is not the biggest issue. We just want to live ... They are obsessed with making money. This doesn’t benefit us. We would

rather get buck [antelope] to eat than to get money.”<sup>5</sup> Another Mathenjwa resident confirms that access to the land is more important than profit: “I don’t believe in money. I think it would benefit us a lot more if people were each given a half acre or a hectare to farm their crops. It is the way of our people.”<sup>6</sup>

There is an important emotive and spiritual element to these feelings of exclusion. One of the most important reasons cited by residents for their desired return of the land was personal or spiritual connection. Members of both the Mbwangweni and Mathenjwa communities stressed that they wanted to be able to return to visit the graves of their ancestors in the reserve: “there are burial grounds ... that we request to visit if things are not going well. Things have changed though. We are not allowed in.” laments one Mathenjwa *induna* (headman).<sup>7</sup> Adam, a senior consultant for Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife (EKZNW), the provincial conservation body, summarises the frustrations of the Mbwangweni people when he paraphrases a conversation with an irate community member: “The bones of our ancestors are there, we want to occupy that land which is ours! ... Why aren’t we able to go back to it? What’s this business of land claims, we won our claim!”<sup>8</sup>

All of the 14 Mathenjwa community informants interviewed reported feelings of loss related to their inability to reoccupy their ancestral home. All individuals also expressed dissatisfaction with CBNRM as the mechanism to redress this. For instance, when asked what outcome she hoped to see from the land claim settlement, Gogo Emerald, a 95-year-old grandmother and subsistence farmer said: “They can leave so we can return to our homes. If they opened the reserve tonight I would go here and sleep under a tree.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly Gogo Dladla, also a Mathenjwa grandmother, concurred that ownership without access is meaningless: “We want our land back. The government said they’d give it back. This did not happen. They told us that we would own the land, but this is not the case.”<sup>10</sup> CBNRM’s failure to fully take into account residents’ emotional and spiritual ties to the land is a major source of community frustration. Yet such cultural and psychospiritual needs are beyond the scope of CBNRM as it is currently conceived, because it values nature solely in material and monetary terms (McCarthy and Prudham 2004). This frustration fuelled community desires to reclaim or reoccupy the land that held such important spiritual value for them.

The crux of the matter is that CBNRM arrangements in Ndumo focus on the question of land ownership – the cornerstone of neoliberal capitalism – rather than the community’s priority of land use or access. As Adams and Hulme (2001) argue, the most critical component of a compromise solution for local communities is secure land access and tenure. The exclusionary nature of the tenure arrangements at Ndumo, alongside uncertain and inconsistent resource use and access regimes, severely restrict the abilities of local residents to manage their livelihoods effectively and to maintain a sense of belonging to their traditional land because they are not allowed to engage in the cultural, social and agricultural practices that give it meaning (Connor 2005). CBNRM in Ndumo is predicated on legal ownership, without corresponding access, use or exchange rights. Such ventures will likely fail to gain the full support of residents until this prioritisation is reversed (Brockington 2002).

Increasing frustration over long delays, inconsistent government positions and land use arrangements that privilege ownership over access have fuelled longstanding feelings of bitterness, frustration and mistrust on the part of the Mbwangweni and Mathenjwa communities. Residents lashed out against the reserve in order to give voice to these concerns and frustrations. As Induna October, a 65-year-old Mathenjwa, explains: “the main reason for their actions was that they did not know what else to do. They wanted government to hear them.”<sup>11</sup> The recent violence in Ndumo is thus best understood as the culmination of community frustrations at their lack of access to what they perceive as their land and their rejection of the limited ownership granted to them through CBNRM programmes.

### *Colonial institutions with neo-colonial mandates*

The second underlying factor fuelling increasing violence at Ndumo is the longstanding mistrust directed towards the institutions charged with planning and implementing CBNRM. Institutions and organisations have a profound influence in shaping outcomes within community-based conservation and have much to gain in terms of decision-making and financial control, often at the expense of local people (Agrawal and Gibson 1999). This section examines community attitudes towards the two institutions critical to the implementation of CBNRM at Ndumo, the Traditional Authorities (TAs) and the local conservation agency, Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife.

Traditional Authorities represent an influential and powerful force in the debate over community-based conservation at Ndumo. Under apartheid, Tribal Authorities were established in the *Bantustans* (African homelands) to serve the interests of the ruling regime, by inexpensively assuming state functions (Cousins 2007). After the fall of apartheid, Tribal Authorities were transformed into Traditional Authorities, and today TAs continue to play a major role in the former *Bantustans*, particularly with respect to land affairs (Rangan and Gilmartin 2002). However, TAs are struggling to retain their relevance and autonomy within this drastically altered political climate, and land restitution within conservation areas has emerged as a critical area of influence. The government routinely engages with TAs in matters of land reform and restitution, often as the representative body for the claimant community. A key tension is thus the degree to which TAs have evolved from their patriarchal and authoritarian apartheid-era incarnations to be able to foster reconciliation and genuine partnerships with the community members they are supposed to represent.

The two TAs who represent the interests of the Mbangweni and Mathenjwa communities have been fraught with controversy. The Mbangweni are governed by the Tembe TA, which spans the largest communal area in South Africa. Instances of abuses of power and authoritarian decision-making are rampant (Jones 2005). Most of the allegations centre on nearby Tembe Elephant Park, where the Tembe TA has been accused of accepting bribes, usurping local conservation authorities and funnelling funds to secure and expand their own authority. The Mathenjwa TA has also been accused of authoritarianism and corruption. Currently, it is unable to account for the R99,400 paid by Wilderness Safaris to the community trust between 1996 and 2001 (Poultney and Spencely 2001, 22). Community members report that they had not seen any benefits associated with this money.

In order to curb the power of the TAs, local conservation boards (LCBs) have been established to “promote local decision-making regarding [conservation management] as well as to promote the integration of the activities of the protected area into that of the surrounding area” (EKZNW 2011). A joint LCB for the neighbouring Tembe Elephant Park and Ndumo Game Reserve was established in October 2000. The 15-member board is constituted by sectoral representatives (traditional authorities, regional councils, business sector, formal agriculture, regional tourism and special interest groups), who are appointed by the Minister of Environmental Affairs after a local nomination process (Luckett, Mkhize, and Potter 2003). The board is responsible for planning and implementing management plans for the conservation area (in consultation with the conservation authority), as well as the administration and dissemination of all funds accruing to community members.

But the effectiveness of the LCBs in representing community interests remains in doubt. More than half of the Mathenjwa interviewees responded negatively when questioned about the role of the LCB, while only one thought that they had a positive impact on community participation. The most frequent explanations for these negative responses was that the board was unreliable, that it did not convey information to the communities, that it misrepresented the communities’ interests and that it was corrupt or fraudulent.

This adds credence to concerns that CBNRM constitutes a local trap, wherein it is automatically assumed that local distributive mechanisms are inherently just or appropriate, when in practice they are just as susceptible to corruption and inequitable outcomes (Purcell and Brown 2004; Igoe and Croucher 2007; Torquebiau and Taylor 2009). This persistent and longstanding controversy around the representativeness of the TAs and LCBs underscores the propensity for institutional actors to hijack the opportunities associated with community-based conservation at the expense of the community at large (Igoe and Croucher 2007, 553).

The second institution that has come under increasing scrutiny in Ndumo is the conservation authority, EKZNW. EKZNW represents the merger of two apartheid conservation agencies, the Natal Parks Board, the conservation agency for white Natal province and the KwaZulu Department of Nature Conservation, created to administer conservation areas in the African homeland of KwaZulu. These bodies were reconstituted into Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife in 1994, the single custodian of all conservation areas in KwaZulu-Natal province.

Our research suggests that EKZNW's effectiveness in Ndumo is limited by an institutional focus that prioritises the goals of ecological conservation over those of social justice and community development. Firsthand discussions with conservation officials and Ndumo park rangers underline how little they know about the communities that border the reserve. The Mbangweni in particular are viewed with suspicion; EKZNW personnel seldom venture into the Mbangweni corridor due to concerns over safety and fear of this hostile community. Relations at Mathenjwa are better, but even their community affairs have been inconsistent and poorly managed. Fred, a senior EKZNW official at Ndumo, asserts that their mandate remains primarily conservation management, and that they are inexperienced and ill-equipped to engage in the kind of comanagement that community-based conservation requires. He suggests that the general view among conservation officials is that community involvement is tedious, time-consuming and "not the responsibility" of the conservation authority.<sup>12</sup>

EKZNW's distant relationships with the Mathenjwa and Mbangweni communities have left residents feeling excluded and disempowered. The lack of communication and resistance to community input is a matter of critical concern. Joseph, a Mathenjwa farmer, laments the lack of outreach from EKZNW: "There is this habit the people who run the reserve have about leaving us out of the decision-making ... clearly the white man's interpretation of working together is different to ours."<sup>13</sup> Induna Leko concurs: "EKZNW does not keep close relations with the people and when they do something they do not inform us."<sup>14</sup>

Local people are further disinclined to cooperate with EKZNW because of its historical links to the apartheid regime. Both Ismael, a Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) official and James, a local researcher, note that this is born out of a culture of resistance that matured in response to the injustices of apartheid.<sup>15</sup> As the post-apartheid state continues to impose its conservation ideology in the area, it has consistently failed to provide services or alternate development in Maputaland. As a result, the conservation sector is also widely blamed for broader government neglect of the area. The game reserve is the most immediate physical manifestation of this perceived exclusion and neglect, and EKZNW, the most proximate arm of the government that the communities hold responsible.

A significant disconnect exists between the rhetoric around the role and responsibilities of the two major institutions responsible for community engagement around conservation in Ndumo, the local TAs and EKZNW. Neither seems able to achieve its mandate: the TAs have failed as community representatives and administrative agents, and EKZNW has prioritised its role as conservation manager above that of community partner. In order to be successful CBNRM requires stable, transparent and accountable institutions that are committed to balancing both environmental and social justice objectives. Mbangweni and Mathenjwa community members are increasingly frustrated by the inability of these institutions to achieve their stated goals.

***Moving forward: TFCAs and putting the local last (again)***

In recent years, international donors and conservation practitioners have embraced the transfrontier conservation area (TFCA) as a new model of community-based conservation designed to move beyond the limitations of CBNRM. TFCAs involve broadening, merging and bridging existing conservation areas to follow more natural spatial arrangements instead of human and political boundaries. Larger-scale ventures, proponents argue, promote ecological continuity and integrity, while simultaneously offering greater economic opportunities for community members. Further, by invoking the cooperation of numerous nation states in the establishment and comanagement of TFCAs, popularly known as “peace parks”, the model promises to deepen regional allegiances and promote stability (Duffy 2001; Büscher 2010).

In June 2000, the governments of Swaziland, Mozambique and South Africa formally established the Lubombo Transfrontier Conservation and Resource Area (Patel 2006). This initiative aims formally to connect the Ndumo Game Reserve and Tembe Elephant Park with land in Swaziland and Mozambique to form a single transnational conservation area. In total, more than 4,000 square kilometres of land are proposed to be added onto existing conservation areas, with annual revenues from tourism projected to be upwards of USD18 million annually (Smith et al. 2008).

Progress has been slow, though, due primarily to funding constraints on the Mozambican side and the ongoing conflict at Ndumo, which threatens to destabilise the entire project. One of the key stumbling blocks has been the proposed resettlement of local communities, including the already twice transplanted Mbwangeni, whose current home within the corridor separating the Ndumo and Tembe parks would be swallowed up within the new TFCA. Such a corridor is an essential link in the Lubombo TFCA initiative, but threatens to further destabilise an already aggrieved community by relocating them yet again, even as the fallout from their previous resettlement remains unresolved. A government consultant engaged with current negotiations at Mbwangeni reports that community members are extremely mistrustful towards another proposed relocation, and that the issue of land access and use has emerged as the key obstacle.<sup>16</sup> Roger, a member of the Tembe royal family, expresses the scepticism felt by the Mbwangeni towards the new TFCA: “You can work very hard to make sure this thing is joined, but if you want to join this you must have an alternative for the people. Create a sort of employment, create a sort of changing of the lifestyle of the community away from there.”<sup>17</sup> He goes on to explain that there wouldn’t be a need to resettle Mbwangeni residents if they were provided with an attractive alternative, because the land is so poor there that they would be happy to move out gradually, but that their recent experiences with government makes them distrustful of any proposal to move.

Critics are also concerned that TFCAs will entrench neoliberal conservation in the area. It is worth noting that the primary institutional driver of TFCAs in Maputaland (and in Southern Africa more broadly), is the Peace Parks Foundation (PPF). This South Africa-based non-governmental organisation was founded in 1997 with the specific aim of promoting TFCAs in southern Africa. It garners funding from a host of international aid donors, conservation NGOs and Western government sponsors (Jones 2005).<sup>18</sup> The organisation offers human, financial and technical resources to conservation agencies (Büscher and Dietz 2005). But Dressler and Büscher (2008) contend that the regional focus of TFCAs in southern Africa completely bypasses the resource base of poor rural households, such that benefits are unlikely to “trickle down”. By investing directly in the tertiary economy (service sector), PPF does little to support the consumptive land-based livelihoods on which the poor are dependent for cash or subsistence. Hence, although PPF trumpets the “social possibilities” of TFCAs and their potential to accelerate improvements to livelihoods based on economies of scale (Büscher 2010, 650), such ventures are unlikely to be transformative in South Africa, where very few local people are well placed to tap into the private–public synergy of transfrontier conservation.

Even if, as its proponents hope, TFCAs accelerate improvements to livelihoods based on economies of scale, this will likely not alleviate community concerns around institutional mistrust and misrepresentation if it does not address issues of institutional transformation for both the TAs and EKZNW. Most crucially, there is still no consensus in the neighbouring communities about the desirability of the project. The community members we spoke to were split: half of the interviewees thought a TFCA was a bad idea, while the other half saw it as positive if it could provide jobs and infrastructure. The main reasons interviewees offered for their opposition to the TFCA was that partnering with neighbours in Mozambique or Swaziland would lead to increased crime in the area.<sup>19</sup> Another argument levied against the proposed TFCA was that it would prevent residents from accessing neighbouring countries to visit family, as borders that have been relatively permeable for local people may be enclosed within the TFCA and stocked with wildlife. Gogo Mampo's response encapsulated both of these fears: "The thought of us joining Mozambique and Swaziland is too terrifying. Not only because of the dangerous wildlife, I'm also talking about the crime. It would also prevent us from visiting relatives if the area is now filled with this dangerous wildlife."<sup>20</sup> Resistance to the TFCA among residents is rooted in concerns over loss of access to reserve land: without institutional transformation there is little confidence that a larger-scale conservation venture won't leave communities worse off than they already are.

Jones's (2005) study points to a number of potential negative social and economic impacts from forced mass relocation in order to create the Lubombo TFCA. Among these are decreased access to important livelihood resources such as water and grazing land, further fragmentation of the social linkages between Mbangweni family members and friends still living in Mozambique, and increased intracommunity tensions due to ballooning population density that will result from their likely resettlement to southern Mbwangeni and the neighbouring Bhekabantu area (Jones 2005, 270). She concludes that the creation of a TFCA will only exacerbate community resentment towards the conservation area. Ironically, then, "peace parks" advanced as a means of moving beyond the struggles and conflicts that have plagued CBNRM and, more ambitiously, creating regional peace and security through regional conservation partnerships, have the potential to exacerbate and prolong conflict at Ndumo.

### **"Sending a fax": local agency in the face of continued marginalisation**

The recent wave of violence at Ndumo game reserve has been widely dismissed as "wildlife crime"; illegal and unwarranted attacks perpetrated by residents that, some conservationists argue, are best handled in the realm of criminal justice (Warchol and Johnson 2009). But our analysis suggests that these acts of violence represent a much more foundational challenge to CBNRM. As Scanlon and Kull (2009) stress, community support and commitment to conservation must be cultivated over time through the distribution of appropriate and equitable benefits, devolving decision-making and control to communities as comanagers, and ensuring that peoples' identities and aspirations are reflected in these conservation initiatives. None of these principles hold true in the case of Ndumo. Conservation agreements have been slow and inconsistent, favouring land ownership over access and use. Promised financial payouts have yet to materialise, perpetuating community feelings of marginalisation and frustration. The key institutions responsible for operationalising CBNRM in Ndumo have failed to represent residents' interests and devolve meaningful decision making to the community level. The proposed scaling up of conservation efforts into a TFCA seem likely to exacerbate current tensions.

Local communities have very little space to assert themselves. Once they agree to engage in CBNRM the option of withdrawing from conservation does not really exist because land restitution was premised on ecological preservation (AFRA 2004, 21). Thus, the Mbangweni and Mathenjwa communities have had to find alternative avenues to express their dissatisfaction. The

recent incidents of violence and vandalism at Ndumo are referred to locally as “sending a fax”: actions that are intended to convey a message of dissatisfaction to government. The case study of Ndumo offers an important example of how local communities can use violence as a tool to make their frustrations known. As Brosius (2006) notes, such actions should not be seen simply as antagonism toward the state and private conservation agencies, nor the idea of conservation itself, but rather as a desperate attempt on the part of local communities to attract attention to their cause and be meaningfully included in decision-making about their lands and livelihoods.

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### Notes

1. Interview, EKZN (Ezemvelo KwaZulu Natal Wildlife ) official (Fred), 29 June 2009. Officials and local police refuse to comment on this incident.
2. While the settlement process progressed, the claimant households received food parcels for six months as an immediate poverty alleviation measure (Venter 2010).
3. All names used in this article are pseudonyms. Interview, Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) official, 22 July 2009.
4. Interview, Gogo Dladla, 3 July 2009.
5. Interview, Gogo Mampo, 5 July 2009.
6. Interview, Induna Leko, 5 July 2009.
7. Interview, Mathenjwa farmer (Nate), 5 July 2009.
8. Interview, EKZWN official (Adam), 17 July 2009.
9. Interview, Gogo Emerald, 4 July 2009.
10. Interview, Gogo Dladla, 3 July 2009.
11. Interview, Mathenjwa farmer (October), 4 July 2009.
12. Interview, EKZN official (Fred), 29 June 2009.
13. Interview, Mathenjwa farmer (Joseph), 3 July 2009.
14. Interview, Induna Leko, 5 July 2009.
15. Interview, DEAT official (Ismael), 22 July 2009; interview, researcher (James) 20 August 2009.
16. Interview, EKZWN official (Adam), 17 July 2009.
17. Interview, Tembe royal family (Roger), 13 July 2009.
18. The Peace Parks Foundation’s “Club 21”, who “also serve as an advisory council to the Foundation” are: Absa Bank; HRH Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands† 1 December 2004; Sir Richard Branson and Virgin Unite; Cartier; Chrysler Corporation Fund; Daimler; De Beers; The Edmond de Rothschild Foundations; Deutsche Bank; Dutch Postcode Lottery; Exxaro; Mr Paul Fentener van Vlissingen† 21 August 2006; Donald Gordon Foundation; Fondation Hoffman; Dr H. L. Hoffmann; Philips; Remgro; Richefont; The Rufford Foundation; Rupert Family Foundation; Ms Pierrette Schlettwein; Swedish Postcode Foundation; Swedish Postcode Lottery; Ted Turner Foundation; Total; Vodafone Group Foundation; WWF Netherlands (Peace Parks Foundation 2013).
19. Interviews, Gogo Mampo, 5 July 2009; Gogo Manana, 5 July 2009; Mathenjwa farmer (Malume), 3 July 2009; Mathenjwa farmer (Muzi), 4 July 2009.
20. Interview, Gogo Mampo, 5 July 2009.

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