

Woven Livelihoods: Women Crafters and Protected Areas in KwaZulu-Natal

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During May 2012, I started my pre-dissertation work on the east coast of South Africa to get a sense about whether or not access to and control of crafting materials supports conservation. Every May, the iSimangaliso Wetland Park and Umlalazi Nature Reserve allow women to harvest *Juncus kraussii*, a high quality reed mainly used for crafting bridal sleeping mats and traditional beer strainers. These items are valued in Zulu culture for their utilitarian properties as well as their cultural heritage. I focused on individual crafters and crafting groups, most of which were women, and their harvesting and use of *J. kraussii*. Gaining insight into this economic opportunity for a vulnerable population contributes to the limited social research in and around these protected areas.

In South Africa, women head almost half of all households because of historical patterns of patriarchy, apartheid, macro-economic conditions, and HIV/AIDS. Economic opportunities for women are often limited and there is constant



turnover in small business enterprises because of HIV/AIDS and a reduced number of younger women with adequate skill sets. Further, older women tend to be the primary caregivers for the sick and for their orphaned grandchildren or take on other orphans in the community. Female-headed households are more likely to take on the financial, emotional, and physical responsibilities of sustaining those in the household unit. As a result, the need to find alternative economic opportunities is greater in this population and can compromise their ability to support conservation of protected areas.

First, I traveled to Umlalazi Nature Reserve at Mtunzini where I had the opportunity to work



with a female park ranger, Mbyui, who assisted in meeting harvesters in the reserve. I saw firsthand how this annual harvest was organized. A temporary “tent city” was set up just outside the reserve for women who come from all parts of the province. The women pay a fee of R10 per day to enter the reserve and harvest as much *Juncus* as they can carry. Some women will stay for weeks before returning home. The fee to collect in this reserve is less than at iSimangaliso but the size of the *Juncus* is smaller so the women can only make small and medium-size mats.

Next, I traveled to St. Lucia, the tourist town and entry point into the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, South Africa’s first World Heritage Site. Here, the organization of the harvest is much more rigid. The tent city for the women was farther away and out of sight of the main road leading to the town. Women will pay R55/day to enter and harvest as much as they can carry. The harvesting areas are much bigger here and the size of the reeds enables women to make the large mats for wedding ceremonies.

My final stop was to meet with a crafting group in Eshowe that is mentored by Duncan Hay (former

visiting scholar at UF). From them I learned about the different products the group creates including the traditional Zulu crafts and contemporary creations for international exports. For many of these women, crafting is a major source of income.

After spending time in these areas, I have a better grasp of the interactions between the protected areas and community members. My dissertation will uncover issues relevant to protected areas managers, policymakers and practitioners who intend to work with crafter groups to improve their capacity. The experience of meeting these crafters reinforced my desire to work with people living around and/or utilizing resources in protected areas. I appreciate the support from the Center for African Studies and my committee as I had an incredible experience and am even more excited about my dissertation.

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