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

AMY PANIKOWSKI

From late April through June, I continued my fieldwork on the east coast of South Africa working with Zulu women and crafting materials. Every May, the iSimangaliso Wetland Park and Umlalazi Nature Reserve (every other May) 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 interviewed individual crafters and crafting groups, most of which were women, about 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 addition to this harvest, I also interviewed women who harvest iKhwani, which is like *J. kraussii* but found in open-access wetlands within KwaZulu-Natal. I focused my research on Mbongolwane Wetland, near Eshowe.

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 even 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 meet with the community outreach manager. UNR was not harvesting this year because not enough salt had washed over the reserve which results in less of the reed. The adjacent communities and their authorities work with the reserve to determine the management of the reed harvest. 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 and any Zulu may have access to harvest. The tent communities for the women were across the road from one of the gate entrances, out of sight of the main road leading to the town. Women will pay 55Rand/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 interview women around Mbongolwane Wetland. I quickly got a sense of how harvesting from this wetland works – seemingly no rules on harvesting by community members and those who come from afar.

After spending time in these areas, I have a better grasp of the interactions between the protected areas, open-access areas, and interacting community members. I hope my dissertation will uncover issues relevant to protected areas managers, policymakers and practitioners who intend to work with crafter groups to improve their capacity. My experience meeting these crafters reinforced my desire to work with people living around and/or utilizing resources in protected areas.

Amy Panikowski is a doctoral candidate in geography. Funding provided by the UF Office of Research and the Center for African Studies.

