

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD WILDLIFE AND PARKS IN THE MAKULEKE VILLAGES, SOUTH AFRICA

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Despite the ecological benefits of the establishment of parks or protected areas (PA), these are embedded in a socio-ecological context that is frequently omitted or overlooked. The South African community of Makuleke represents a particular case study to evaluate perceptions and attitudes toward wildlife and parks due to its history and current situation. The community was removed from the Kruger National Park (KNP) in 1969 during the apartheid period. The village was burned and people was transported in trucks to their new home 32 miles to the south. The new settlement formed by three villages, presented totally different conditions than their previous territory, forcing them to adapt their livelihoods and lifestyle to this new scenario. By 1996, after the return to democracy, the community claimed their land back supported by the restitution of the Land Rights Act. After two years of negotiations with the government, the community recovered their land under one main condition: the land must be used for conservation purposes and remain protected within the KNP. Currently, the Makuleke Community

owns 22,000 ha of the KNP under the management of the Community Property Association (CPA). Facing the impossibility of returning to their lands, the CPA constructed three lodges and started to rent them to external companies. The revenues from the lodges are managed by the CPA and should be allocated to development projects and/or individual benefits for the Makuleke inhabitants.

In this context, and under the umbrella of a broader effort to empower communities by developing an evidence-based adaptive management program, a team of local translators and two UF master students carried out livelihood surveys in the three villages of the Makuleke community. In order to assess people's perceptions of wildlife and the KNP, I included specific questions regarding this issues in the main questionnaire.

The preliminary results of this data reveal that respondents from the Makuleke community have positive perceptions and attitudes toward both, wildlife and the KNP. Some of the reasons given by the respondents for their positive attitudes toward wildlife were highly intangibles, such as aesthetic and religious reasons.

According to the respondents, the conflicts with wildlife have decreased in the last 5 years, both the attacks to livestock, as well as the damage of crops by wild animals. Additionally, more than half of the respondents perceived the KNP as valuable for their community, and agree that park managers treat them with respect. Nevertheless, they reported that more contact with the park would be desirable. These results suggest that increasing the number of meetings with the community have the potential to improve even more the positive perceptions of the KNP, supporting the idea that participation is crucial for people's perceptions of parks.

Regarding the underlying factors influencing attitudes and perceptions, gender, education level, and wealth status showed to have significant influence in people's responses. Particularly the educational level seems to be an important contributing factor for an appreciative vision of wildlife and park, showing that people with higher levels of education are more likely to have positive attitudes and perceptions.

It is interesting that the potential economic incentives resulting from the CPA were not mentioned by the respondents, only 10 from the 171 respondents declared have received some type of benefit from the CPA in the last years. These results not only highlight the need for improvement in the governance structure and decision making process of the CPA, but also leave us the uncertainty of what are the real drivers behind these positive perceptions and attitudes. Ultimately, the results of this research will hopefully help to inform park managers, researchers, policy makers, and the CPA to prioritize avenues for future actions.

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