

Contesting Ecotourism Development in the iSimangaliso Wetland Park¹ in KwaZulu-Natal

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Introduction

In the post democratic South Africa, ecotourism has become the government's flag-ship programme to attract foreign currency and promote local economic development especially amongst communities historically marginalised within the precincts of tourist sites. This bold initiative was encapsulated in a White Paper on Tourism (Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism 1996). Isolated by apartheid and blessed with natural assets in the form of biodiversity, ranking it the third highest in the world (Cowan *et al.* 2003), South Africa has become a destination of choice for foreign tourists. Given the high influx of foreign visitors to the country resulting from decades of international isolation, the tourism sector provides a lucrative opportunity to promote development given the enormous inequalities inherited from the past. Tourism is perceived to be an important catalyst to stimulate local economic development, especially in communities that have been previously disadvantaged (Sebola1998:59-58).

South Africa enjoys vast natural resources which historically benefited the white ruling class. In the post democratic era, the state is attempting to ensure that those communities that have been disadvantaged by vicious social policies; excluded from their rightful ownership of land and

¹ Formerly known as the Greater St Lucia Wetlands Park.

the benefits accruing from this, are restored (Department of Land Affairs 1994). Although much progress has been made at a policy level to effect social, political and economic restoration through nature, the praxis of this is challenged by a set of complex dynamics and social forces. Effectively managing different expectations among stakeholders with different interests is critical to ensuring that social, economic, political and environmental concerns are addressed.

The aim of the paper is to provide insight into the different social, political and economic dynamics unfolding in the formerly known Greater St. Lucia Wetland Park (GSLWP) which is now called the iSimangaliso Wetland Park (iSWP) and the impact of contestations relating to the struggle for natural resources and natural resource spaces amongst different stakeholders on a site that enjoys World Heritage status. Firstly, the politics of parks is discussed. Thereafter, a brief historical context of the iSWP is provided and the factors that influenced its evolution leading to the present contestations in the area. This is followed by an analysis of restitution dynamics in the region, how this complicates tourism development and the impact of this on the local people. The final section highlights some of the emerging concerns that relate to the sustainability of the iSWP and beneficiary communities, as well as the likely impacts these will have on the World Heritage Site.

This article draws from a number of data sources given the peculiar dynamics in the region. Parts of this article are sourced from field research findings undertaken in the region in 2004. Given the political dynamics of the region, not all stakeholders participated fully in the study. The fieldwork was characterised by mistrust, gate keeping by powerful stakeholders and an attempt to block participatory research processes. Nonetheless, the article is informed by a social survey involving 100 respondents selected by utilising purposive sampling techniques in two communities' viz. Khula and Dukuduku Forest communities. Respondents from the Khula community were largely from households whose land has been restored whereas those from the Dukuduku Forest community were respondents who were locked in dispute with the Department of Land Affairs in relation to their land claim. In the case of the latter, a snowball sampling technique was used based on the willingness of respondents to participate in the study. This was due to the prevalence of an element of mistrust and gate keeping amongst the forest

community based on concerns that the findings of the study will be used to weaken their pending land claim case with the Department of Land Affairs. A focus group discussion was also undertaken with members of the Khula Village community. During the primary data collection phase the Dukuduku Forest community resisted participating in the research process. However, some members availed themselves to participate in an interview. Those choosing not to participate in the study strongly opposed being relocated from the forest and were frustrated with the length of time it was taking for their land restitution application to being finalised. In-depth interviews were undertaken with one Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs) known as the Wildlife and Environmental Society of South Africa (WESSA) and the Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, an environmental and ecotourism parastatal.

A profile of the social, political and economic dynamics of the region was conducted using available literature sources on the region, although very little has been documented by way of academic research. To overcome some of the field constraints and the lack of written material on the region, a total of 150 national and local newspaper articles (published during 1994 to 2007) were sampled from the South African Media website. These were clustered in themes and an in-depth content analysis undertaken with the aim of ensuring consistency in reporting. Where a particular issue on the region was reported in more than three newspapers consistently, then one was chosen which provided the most coverage and insight into the study locality.

The Politics of Parks

The politics of parks focuses on the role of public spaces in providing for the needs of the poor, the homeless and victims of social exclusion. Parks as public spaces whether in an urban or a rural setting has historically been noted to serve as a space for those living on the margins of society to benefit from the sanctuary provided for by nature (Hall 1994). In a rural setting, those excluded from the formal economy have access to natural resources to sustain a livelihood (Ashley *et al.* 2000). However, over the years, as parks as public spaces have increasingly become regulated and privatised, it has resulted in them becoming commodified recreation spaces and a spectacle for the affluent, much to the exclusion of the less fortunate who depend on natural resources to make a living (Mitchell 1995).

Spaces such as parks have become political spaces as it is in these spaces that the marginalised find an opportunity in which they can be seen and represented and a site in which activism can arise and expand. It is in these spaces that they can seek representation in ways that can secure their self interest and preservation. Historically, the politics of parks has been a symbol for law enforcers versus the homeless or dispossessed, the have-nots versus the haves, progress versus turmoil and development versus non-development. Parks remain sources of different forms of social, political and economic contestations (Mitchell 1995:125).

The politics of parks and indigenous people has drawn on many contestations especially in areas considered as havens of unspoilt nature in different parts of the world (Cater 1994). These struggles have mostly focussed on poor indigenous communities who have been displaced to protect nature from degrading human actions in an attempt to secure a livelihood from the offerings made by nature's resource base. In addition, increasing levels of industrialisation and urbanisation has caused the relationship between human beings and the natural environment to be strained resulting in irreversible damage to the environment (Stilwell 2002). This is aptly captured by Bush (1997:503) who asserts:

In many respects the neo-Malthusian orthodoxy persists whether in academic, national policy making, or international financial institution circles. The poor are blamed for land degradation and too many people chasing too few resources are often identified as the cause of environmental crisis.

Explanations such as these do not help to come to grips with the deeper impact of processes underlying human interaction and the environment and vice versa. Specifically there has been a general failure to analyse how human actions are governed by and, likewise, influences the wider economic, political, social, and cultural structures and relationships in society and the effects this has on the natural environment. For instance, tourism, like other human activities such as mining, forestry, the construction of dams, housing and industrial estates, is an industry that has competing interests involving a wide range of stakeholders (local, national and transnational), all competing for the control of resources from a common

source. This results in a complex set of relationships, processes and dynamics impacting negatively on the natural environment (Fallon 2001).

Political economists of all persuasions are increasingly expressing concern on the persistent commoditisation of all aspects of life that is fast-tracking the process of globalisation (Jafari 2000). In all forms, nature has been highly commoditised as economic activities generally occur in a biophysical context, using land and other natural resources. The world over, the private sector has wasted little time in developing ecotourism eco-lodges close to important natural areas resulting in parks increasingly functioning as commercial businesses (Kenya & Munai 1992). Hence the ideology of consumerism is rooted in the privatisation of nature and the appropriation of rent from land use.

There is also the argument that indigenous people are intrinsically and spiritually linked to the land and have historically lived in synchronisation with the natural environment prior to their social organisation being disturbed by the intrusion of European colonialists (International Support Centre for Sustainable Tourism 2003). A case in point is that of the Aborigines in Australia who since colonialism have struggled to secure their spiritual link to the land from which they have been forcibly removed and only recently being restituted (Stillwell 2002).

There is increasing evidence that protected areas in most parts of the world have become extremely vulnerable owing to human action thereby resulting in irreversible damage to the natural environment (Cater 1994; Tubb 2003). For instance in Australia, protected areas are found to be susceptible to increasing pressures from both within and outside of the country. The two major contributing factors towards these pressures or strains are the allocation of protected areas for the sole purpose of ecotourism and the decreasing funding towards protected parks by government (Wearing & Neil 2000). On the other hand many western countries have set aside areas for conservation that have become ecotourism destinations resulting in the natural heritage of the destination area taking precedence over human settlement (Hall 1994). In most, if not all cases, humans have been coerced to move from their place of settlement. Nonetheless, some governments are slowly recognising the inextricably interwoven relationship between the cultural aspects and the natural heritage of a National Park.

Since designated natural areas, almost always, cause local inhabitants to be forcibly removed from their land, there still remains a moral obligation for the local people to have a stake in the ecotourism sector (Wallace & Pierce 1996). This is more compelling in light of the fact that since the mid 19th century, the creation of large forest areas meant that millions of rural inhabitants had to be displaced (Poffenberger 1994). The bargaining power of those displaced is greatly enhanced when they enjoy tenure rights over land and natural resources. Those that have been forcibly removed are excluded from participating in the ecotourism sector and this becomes a source of volatile contestation (Ashley *et al.* 2000). Such is the case of the Sabang community which forms the gateway to St Paul's National Park in the Phillipines. In 1998, in Rowok and Lombok, Indonesia, indigenous people who refused to sell their land, for fear of losing their livelihood and for fear of having their beautiful natural and wilderness areas being tamed and destroyed by big investors, were attacked by police and the military and had their homes burnt to the ground (Fallon 2001).

In Kenya, Weaver (1998) notes that the original network of protected areas came into existence through the expropriation of traditional tribal lands. Wildlife tours or safaris were considered the domain of local and foreign white elites. Okello *et al.* (2003) affirm that in the case of the Maasai people of Kenya, the traditional lands were taken away from them to make way for the National Park. They were neither compensated nor consulted on this issue. The creation of the Amboseli National Park in Kenya in the 1950s reduced access by the Maasai people to water and land pastures (Woodhouse 1997). With independence, the situation had somewhat improved. However, with large tracts of land being set aside for wildlife ecotourism, the interests of the ecotourism industry has come into conflict with cultivators and those that seek to work the land for a living. The above suggests that in many parts of the world the natural environment is of vital importance to the local inhabitants for economic as well as social reasons. Human society and the economy continue to be dependent on the earth's biodiversity (Hall 1994).

In South Africa the politics of parks is rooted in a brutal system of forced removals with a painful history of land dispossession being relived by communities as they seek restitution in terms of the Restitution of Land Rights Act (1994). Forced removals meant that Africans were squeezed into

small parcels of lands thereby leading to overcrowding and limited access to agricultural lands. The problems of livelihood strategies were compounded through the denial of hunting and fishing licences to these communities. These parks were mainly for the pleasure of the white elite who enjoyed nature's pleasure at the expense of enormous hardship to local communities who were confined to the margins of society. Ramutsindela (2002) in his study of the Makuleke community in the Northern Province, who were forcibly removed from the Kruger National Park for several decades, and which is known to be the first large-scale community-based rural land claims in South Africa post-apartheid, illustrates not only the hardships endured by the displaced communities, but also the pains of securing their land in a new political dispensation. The study highlights the complexity of land claims in South African parks. With a wide variety of stakeholders pursuing vested and conflicting interests, difficult choices have to be considered between land reform goals for victims of forced removals and economic benefits from tourism and conservation. The politics of parks in South Africa is far from being resolved and complicated by very slow land reform process, conflicting interests among different government departments, contradictory policy guidelines and overall effects of neo-liberalism (Ramutsindela 2002:16). Given the extent of political contestations on parks in different parts of the world, the World Conservation Union (IUCN 2003:63) at its 2003 5th World Parks Congress acknowledged:

Many protected areas of the world encroach and are found within and overlap with lands, territories and resources of indigenous and traditional peoples. In many cases the establishment of these protected areas has affected the rights, interests and livelihoods of indigenous peoples and traditional peoples and subsequently resulted in persistent conflict.

It is therefore necessary to address these issues in a way that empowers local communities and enhances their access to natural resources and sustainable livelihoods.

A Brief Overview of the Historical Factors Shaping the iSimangaliso Wetland Park

iSWP was declared a World Heritage Site in 1999 due to its unique ecosystems and its spectacular natural beauty (Aylward & Lutz 2003). Covering a distance of approximately 220 km and comprising 325 000 hectares, the Park extends from the border of Mozambique south to Cape St. Lucia. Hidden in this marshland are imprints of early human settlements dating back to the iron ages. Historically, the indigenous people of this prestigious coastal land attached enormous importance to the sea as it was a provider for their sustenance through a diversity of marine and vegetation life. The lakes provided a wide variety of marine life which was a rich source of protein and the grassy plains was used to herd cattle which were an important form of family asset and food source. The fertile land on the banks of the lake was used for subsistence farming and the vegetation provided material for the construction of dwellings and a source of energy (Skelcher 2003:762).

Early history records that the British penetration of the area plundered many of the wild life in pursuit of adventure (Skelcher 2003). The social organisation of the indigenous people was based on a system of traditional leadership and the area was inhabited by six tribes under the tutelage of the *Amakhosi* (tribal authority system). Soon after the Anglo-Zulu War in 1879 the local Zulu kingdom was divided into 13 independent chiefdoms and temporarily relocated to the southern part of Lake St. Lucia. By 1904 the British colonialists expropriated 40% of the land in the region and designated it as Crown land. Following on this devastating experience of colonial displacement, the promulgation of the 1913 Land Act provided a seal of permanence to this area prohibiting the indigenous people from acquiring any land beyond the confines of native reserves (Walker 2005:4).

South African history records the systematic attempts by both the colonialists and the apartheid regime to ensure that blacks were kept out of their way in order to promote their self preservation (Ntsebeza 2000). Much has been written on the different forms of legislations and policies used to keep South African natural resources solely to sustain the political economy to benefit the minority white population (Govender *et al.* 2005). In keeping with this goal of self preservation, a new wave of clearing black spots in Lake St. Lucia area occurred between 1956 and 1974 through forced

removals to entrench territorial apartheid (Skelcher 2003). The rationale was to ensure that black Africans were confined strictly to native reserves under the tutelage of traditional leaders who, through their tribal courts regulated the movement of people, recorded birth and death, approved the allocation of homestead sites and reinforced the custodianship of cultural practices and traditions (McIntosh *et al.* 1996:341) This paved the way for increased commercial forestry, agricultural and irrigation projects in the region much to the detriment of the natural environment, capitalised largely by Afrikaner agri-business (Unterhalter 1987:93).

The political uprising from the majority of disenfranchised in the 1970s and 1980s forced a heightened military presence in the area, especially for fear of ANC freedom fighters infiltrating the native reserves from neighbouring Mozambique and Angola. Consequently, the apartheid regime maintained rigid control on its borders and the movement of people from the native reserves in the region to towns and cities. Poverty, unemployment, overpopulation, low levels of social and physical infrastructure resulted in hardships among the local communities living in the native reserves. The region being a high risk area for waterborne and related illnesses (cholera, malaria and tuberculosis) resulted in high mortality rates. Broadly, forced removals left indigenous communities paralysed for over 50 years, unable to reclaim their land and natural resources (Skelcher 2003).

The Complexity of Restitution Dynamics in the iSWP in the Post-Apartheid Era

In the 1990s, a new sense of hope gripped South Africans with the prospect of apartheid being defeated. The ANC, at the negotiating table in the transition to democracy phase, promised to restore people to the land as a consequence of forced removals. In the St. Lucia region, like in many parts of the country, new contestations emerged with local people beginning to organise themselves to reclaim their lost land.

Walker (2005) in her study on the nature and extent of land claims in St. Lucia asserted that the original residents have a sense of identity with the lost land and a sense of place while the younger ones see it differently. This is largely because historically, the community is fragmented and dispersed

and the logistics of contacting them and proving descent have been very complicated. Moreover, a generation of children have been dislocated from their natural heritage and lack an understanding of its importance and their rights. Added to this complication was the negative effect of forced removals which resulted in people having rebuilt their lives elsewhere. Furthermore, Walker (2005) found that they could no longer return to the land of their origin. Hence, this signals that the land restitution process in the iSWP would be complicated and protracted demanding a case-specific approach.

The case of two tribes *Mbuyazi* and *Mpukunyoni* are compelling to note as communities organised to stake a claim to their lost land. The two communities first lodged a claim in 1995 after a series of negotiations with the De Klerk government. They provided a rich oral record of their history, their ancestral lineage and anecdotal evidence of their claims. After a series of investigations in 1997 the Land Claims Commission concluded that they could only validate one claim in the region. After a period of standoff between the two tribes on who should be in the forefront of the claim, they formed themselves into the Bhangazi Land Claims Committee (BLCC) whose claim for restitution was finalised in 1999 (Interview, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, 07/2004).

The victory won by the BLCC was short-lived. Although the National Lands Claims Commission ruled that the land surrounding Lake St. Lucia totalling 26 360 hectares be restored to the claimants from the BLCC, this decision posed a dilemma for the custodians of the new democracy to implement. This occurred after it was argued by the Department of Land Affairs (DLA) that the iSWP was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, hence placing constraints on the area being re-inhabited. After further negotiations with the BLCC, the final settlement was in the form of a restitution award amounting to R17 million with each beneficiary family (556 in total) receiving R30 000 each which was placed in a trust account. In addition, 80% of the revenue generated from the iSWP will be awarded to the Bhangazi community with 5 hectares of the land at Lake Bhangazi dedicated for a heritage centre. With such a hefty offer it would seem that the communities 'ancestral claim' was put to rest finally and the principles of retribution honoured. In 2001 this victory was short-lived when the descendents of another clan (*Lokotwayo*) filed a legal objection to the awarding of the settlement to the BLCC on the grounds of being excluded

from the restitution process (Interview, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, 07/2004).

There is another community who chose to remain in the forests of the iSWP so as to sustain a livelihood off the natural resources. The residents of Dukuduku Forest have been a controversial community since the mid-1980s. During the late 1970s, public outrage began to build against squatters who were clearing priceless indigenous forests in order to build houses and plant crops. In 1989 a section of land was set aside for them to live on, but only a few of them moved across to resettle. A minimal fee payable to the KZN Nature Conservation Services, during the *Nceme* (thatching grass) harvest season, incensed the forest dwellers who felt that their natural resources were being sold. They protested that they have the sole rights to harvest on land that belonged to them resulting in violent clashes between them and the police. Some forest dwellers armed with AK47 and R1 rifles opened fire on police trying to break up the protest (Phalane 1999a).

A further attempt was made by the community in 2003 to the Regional Lands Claim Court (RLCC) to secure their rights to own land so that they may have access to natural resources to support their livelihood. The community won, resulting in a ruling by the presiding judge in the Land Claims Court instructing the Land Claims Commission to gazette the claim as valid within a 30-day period. After the court judgment in 2003, the RLCC gazetted the claim. However, the gazette notice did not list properties under claim. It only indicated the number of beneficiaries wanting restitution resulting in further bureaucratic delays in finalising their land claim. The Dukuduku matter is a political issue. Whilst many of the voices are concerned about the environment and economy of the area, the dispossession of land and severe limitations of access to natural resources that occurred for indigenous people in the area over years of marginalisation, sits at the heart of this unresolved land dispute. A strong force against these communities attempts to have its restitution claim finalised is the state's lobby to ensure any settlement of their claim does not include the option of residing in the forest (Bishop 2003).

Governments attempts to remove the forest dwellers was mitigated by providing alternative accommodation sites to those wanting to move voluntarily outside the forest so that dissenters of relocation can be dealt as illegal occupants of the forest. In the words of Jabulani Mjwara,

conservation and forestry director for the region that ‘a resettlement would break the chain of illegal activities amongst the forest dwellers such as selling land to illegal migrants, smuggling firearms and cultivating dagga’ captures the determination of the state to deal with the negative impact that the dissenters of relocation will bear on the land restitution process and development of the iSWP (Phalane 1999b). In 2001 government’s ingenuity to break the resistance of the forest dwellers met with success based on its resettlement scheme. Approximately 700 families registered to be allocated land on the new farms in the farming area of Monzi, which abuts the Dukuduku Forest as part of the states resettlement scheme. However, the remaining squatters could not be removed legally because of the 1994 moratorium on forced removals. Nonetheless, the newly resettled community appropriately named their settlement *Zwelisha* (New Land) in order to distance themselves from the people left in the forest that were resisting resettlement. With their newly found formal homes, the need to enter the wage economy, as compared to living of nature’s food basket, became compelling for the new settlers for reasons of survival. Many of *Zwelisha*’s residents sought employment with the Department of Water Affairs—a government initiative to use local communities to assist in the clearing of alien vegetation in protected areas (*Natal Witness* 9/11/2001 *Dukuduku Squatters to Move*).

Capitalising on the new economic opportunity emerging through the reshaping of the iSWP was another reason as to why victims of forced removals were prepared to agree for resettlement as part of restitution. A case in point is the Khula village which was offered settlement sites as early as 1993. Since this period some 600 families have settled in the village hence the name Khula which means ‘we are growing’. The community intends to grow in economic strength from the new financial opportunities provided for by the resettlement scheme. A condition of tenure between the iSWP authorities was that the indigenous forest be maintained and cared for by the community (Coan 2001). The community undertakes local tours and provides cultural experiences to tourists. It boasts that the strength of the tour, as expressed by one of the respondents: ‘given by real people in a real situation’. It is not some fake ‘Zulu cultural experience’. The vast majority of guests visiting the village are made up of international tourists. Although this community boasts a sense of collective achievement, it emerged during

the focus group discussions that the economic opportunities provided by the ecotourism sector have resulted in leadership elites having secured lucrative business deals.

Whilst some communities in the iSWP celebrate the economic opportunities following restitution, others are still angered by the foot dragging behaviour of the Department of Land Affairs in finalising their claims. One such community cited earlier is the Bhangazi Lands Claims Committee who had established a Trust in 2001 and whose claim was finalised in 1999. In 2005 they have been informed that the land that was allocated to them was subsequently subjected to geotechnical tests which proved to be unsuitable for development. With no title deed the community was unable to kick-start development. Groups of angry Bhangazi villagers, amongst them 560 beneficiaries, threatened to tear up the settlement documents and repossess their ancestral land if the land claims did not deliver on the promised title deeds. They alleged that development was taking place in other areas of the park and that they wished the same for themselves (Chikanga 2005).

Arising from a focus group interview with representatives of the Dukuduku Forest community, their anxiety about the protracted land claims settlement and the encroachment of big businesses onto their locality becomes more apparent. They could not reconcile that big private sector development was progressing at a rapid pace, with development sites being made available at short notice. They cited that the iSWP Authority was in the process of awarding tenders worth R450 million on 14 lucrative development sites where tourist facilities are to be developed by international investors. The community could not reconcile the relative ease with which these sites were awarded to international investors whilst they were still waiting since 1997 to enjoy the economic benefits of restitution. A legitimate question raised by the community was the prospects for them to compete with big business and whether any opportunities will remain for them to develop their lands given the protracted nature of the restitution process.

It is fourteen years since democracy and the iSWP land restitution debacle continues. Since 1999 the entire iSWP was under land claims and to date a further 25% of the claims are yet to be finalised. In total 220 000ha of the GSLWP has been subjected to claims (Gowans 2007). In 2004 the World

Body on International Heritage sites, although welcoming the speed with which land restitution claims were being finalised, expressed strong concerns and fears that luxury hotel development would affect the unique sense of place in this environmentally sensitive area (Jenkins 2004).

In 2007 the GSWLP changed its name to iSWP. The name change of the area was prompted by the confusion caused by the island country of St. Lucia in the Caribbean with its own listed World Heritage Site.

Emerging Concerns on the Sustainability of the iSWP and Beneficiary Communities

In ascertaining whether the restitution process can help sustain beneficiary communities in the iSWP and the prospects it holds for socio-economic advancement for those historically disadvantaged, it is compelling to examine some of the popular voices expressed by victims and observers on developments and events unfolding post restitution in the region. By examining some of the more recent socio-historical processes emerging in the iSWP one is able to raise concerns on the sustainable effects or otherwise of restitution on the lives of communities in the near future.

The rush to secure natural spaces post democracy prompted interest from a wide range of people. Private investors, the state, conservationists and former victims of land dispossession made a dash to get a slice of the wilderness cake. The first to lay claim to the exploitation of the natural wealth of the region was Richard Bay Minerals (RBM) in 1989. RBM for over 27 years had established a lucrative mining business in the area providing permanent jobs to more than 1 750 people and work for 800 contractors (Hill 2005:19-20). It contributed R760m in company tax for the 2007 financial year and in the same period claims to have provided social responsibility programmes to local communities in the field of education amounting to R2.5 million. Social responsibility programmes aimed at fighting poverty in the region and directed towards job creation, agricultural and local capacity development projects through technical training for the youth is part of the companies social investment focus (RBM Sustainable Development Report 2007).

Nonetheless, in keeping with private sector initiative to expand its economic base, RBM considered the prospects for extracting more mineral

wealth from the region in 1989. Considering the fact that this area was environmentally sensitive there was little certainty that even though RBM had restored the dunes to its natural state, that the ecosystem would reproduce itself to its original form. This was confirmed by an independent environmental impact study conducted by the Ramsar Advisory Mission (Report No. 29, 1992:14-15) on the feasibility of dune mining in the region.

Concerns about private sector mining in the area culminated in both national and international campaigns to save St. Lucia. Local communities staged several protest marches in opposition to the mining operation. It is asserted that the mining dispute coincided with the worst political violence engulfing KwaZulu-Natal (Marshall 2005). The Save St. Lucia Campaign launched in 1989 became a vociferous national environmental lobby group and endured almost six years filtering into the new democracy. A series of environmental impact studies were conducted including those initiated by RBM. RBM contended that strip mining would help rehabilitate environs of St. Lucia considering the damage caused by commercial forestry. Given the fact that 70% of the area was invaded by pine plantations and 30% by alien grass and bush, strip mining, it was perceived, would help clear the area and restore it to its natural beauty. A further argument was that the area in which mining operations was identified was not a nature reserve. Despite such geo-scientific arguments being advanced by the private sector, it did very little to persuade environmentalists and the task team tasked with an independent environmental impact study by the Ramasar Advisory Mission (Report No. 29, 1992). Those opposed to mining argued that ecotourism would bring greater economic prosperity to the local community and provide more jobs compared to the 180 by those favouring mining (Nel 2003).

The contestation between business motives and environmentalist interests was mediated by the government. Amidst mounting pressure from environmentalists with 500 000 anti-mining signatories including that of the first democratic president, Nelson Mandela and the local community, the cabinet did not support mining in the area in 1996 (Gowans 2007). The Save St. Lucia lobby eventually celebrated victory and the area was declared the country's first World Heritage Site in 1999. Since government made the announcement in 1996 to stop mining initiatives forever, no visible signs of development took place in the region. In 2003 some 3 000 Kosi Bay community members marched to protest the lack of jobs and development in

the area and the mushrooming of illegal lodges. The protagonists of the no-mining campaign in the community alleged that ecotourism did not deliver on its promises (Nel 2003). This is despite the fact that the government made an R630 million investment in development of critical infrastructure through the Lubombo Spatial Development Initiative region to convert the iSWP into a flagship for economic growth and job creation and responsible forms of tourism investment. To endorse its commitment to the development of the ecotourism sector, a memorandum of agreement with different stakeholders including the national government, the KwaZulu-Natal provincial government, the Industrial Development Corporation, the Development Bank of Southern Africa and Khula Enterprise. Since its inauguration the agreement approved fourteen exclusive tourism sites in the iSWP ranging from beach resorts to boutique hotels and game lodges (Greater St. Lucia Wetlands Park Authority Media Report, 2002). A precondition with private sector investors was that when the concession period ends, the buildings will become the property of the iSWP. This illustrates that local people in the region are unlikely to benefit from investments from the private sector. Further, big businesses are taking up the most lucrative development opportunities to extract wealth in the short-term with the long-term beneficiary being the iSWP authority by way of ownership and management of the hotels and lodges.

At a workshop organised by the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa, the Botanical Society of South Africa, the Zululand Environmental Alliance, Earthlife Africa, the Greater St. Lucia Wetland Parks Authority (GSLWPA) and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and other conservationists in 2003, various stakeholders expressed misgivings about turning the iSWP into a commodity. More than 90 delegates, ranging from veteran anti-mining campaigners and representatives of the Bhangazi community, came together for two days to assess progress. A major theme that emerged was community frustration at the slow delivery of tourism benefits, weighed against conservationists' concerns about inappropriate development in the park. It was reported that even the locals of St. Lucia expressed their fears of losing business to the iSWP Authority. It was contended that the town already had some 2 300 tourist beds which was adequate accommodation for the area compared to the number of tourists visiting the locality. They did not see any reason why more was being set up

on environmentally sensitive ground (Interview with WESSA 07/2004).

In relation to whether local communities adjacent to the Park benefit from ecotourism, both Wild Life and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA) and Ezemvelo-KZN Wildlife stated that there were limited benefits. The main benefits for local communities were identified as the selling of crafts which was significant only during peak tourism seasons. A concern with regards to ecotourism development was that the incremental increase in economic development may occur at the expense of the natural environment. Other concerns emerging from two stakeholders who stated that a 'few get richer with very little trickle down effects especially to poor communities' and as 'economic imperatives drive the industry the profit motive will dominate', respectively.

During the focus group discussions, community members of Khula Village indicated that no or limited access to land together with unemployment were key problems facing the community. This suggests that residents, in general, are disengaged from both the subsistence and the money economy.

The focus group participants stated that several households rely on the natural resource base for their survival. They indicated that some 200 illegal farmers eke out a living from the natural resources provided for in the park. These are members from the 500 000 strong local community living on the fringes of the park who are desperate for survival. There was also a prediction that inward migration to the iSWP was likely to grow in the future as land claims were being finalised. These are largely from members of the communities who had left the area as a result of forced removals and are now returning to stake a claim on their lost land. It was envisaged that many of those returning were likely to be joined by other family members in search of employment and other economic opportunities from surrounding towns and villages in the park. This corroborates with the sample survey study of 100 households in the Khula community and Dukuduku Forest homesteads where access was granted. The study notes that 61% of the respondents were originally from the study region and they had left the area to live in neighbouring towns but chose to return to the locality motivated by perceived prospects for better development opportunities.

The above analysis corroborates with the findings of the sample study undertaken in the Khula village. Of the hundred respondents only four

were employed in a tourism related occupation. This finding strongly supports the notion that the development of the region through ecotourism has not appreciably impacted on the local community.

The quantity and types of jobs of the community members surveyed is best summed up by Goudie *et al.* (1999:22):

For many communities there is the sad reality that the promised benefits of tourism seldom amount to more than mundane, low-paid, and seasonal jobs instead of real empowerment.

Conclusion

The article highlights that the wilderness race to secure natural spaces in the iSWP area has been historically shaped and styled by colonialism and subsequently by the apartheid regime. Forced removals, underdevelopment of displaced communities and systematic social engineering of the identities of indigenous communities was a challenge that the post-apartheid government had to deal with it. As much as it has come to grips with the complexities of the past in some measure through a land restitution process, it is torn between the basic needs of its citizens on the one hand and on the other, it risks the credibility to preserve the region in keeping with World Heritage Site standards. The region is caught between two opposing forces, poverty amongst its local citizenry and privilege accorded to the private developers to capitalise on the regions natural assets. Maintaining a balance between the diverse social and economic interests in the region is placing an enormous strain on the natural environment and there are already strong indicators that the government's ecotourism plans are failing. This was evidenced by the limited amount of economic opportunities created for the locals in the tourist sector.

It becomes evident from the article that conservation attempts are increasingly becoming precarious as big businesses, local communities and the state are competing to extract wealth from a common nature basket. This aggressive encroachment is hardly likely to abate unless more radical approaches are considered. Limiting the extent of development growth, managing the influx of tourists and migrants, and promoting local economic development outside of the immediate precincts of the park are critical

challenges facing the area. At present the restitution process has in a way provided power to the people through ownership of land and other restitution rewards, but the findings suggest that they are at the same time becoming economically powerless, as big investors move into the region resulting in them becoming powerful economic stakeholders at the expense of the local community and the natural environment.

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