

Transfrontier Conservation Areas in southern Africa: who owns the landscape?

By Rod de Vletter

When peace was signed in Mozambique in October 1992, the concept of a transborder park with South Africa had already fired the imagination of those who saw Mozambique as an immense clean slate where grand ideas could be played out. Thus shrinking conservation horizons could once more be widened to near infinity, and pristine wildlife landscapes - threatened elsewhere by rapidly expanding populations - could be re-established in the battered and dangerous soils of a vast country depopulated by war.

The Global Environment Fund (GEF) granted funding for the preparation of a Mozambique Transborder Parks project with support from the World Bank. During this period, the Mozambique and Bank officials concerned were regularly exposed to a supposedly a self-evident truth: that the project would bring huge benefits to Mozambique by allowing the beleaguered country to make a quantum leap in conservation and wildlife based tourism by partnering with its powerful and willing neighbor. The proposed process was often described as: "Expanding the Kruger Park into Mozambique". All that was required was for South Africa to take the lead in creating a wildlife and tourism product based on its own successful model, which was based on a complex management system to preserve a sense of 'wild Africa' or 'Big Five Landscape' from a Euro-centric perspective. Bemused officials attended meetings where they received 'awareness raising' on such 'obvious' facts as that the Kruger National Park was the 'best managed park in the world' and that nothing could be better than to have its "mirror image" in Mozambique. The South African conservation and tourism landscape was to be exported to Mozambique.

Despite these well-intentioned efforts, progress remained slow. Mozambique's priority was reconstruction. Government officials, now thoroughly urbanized by the long years of war in the countryside, were slowly re-establishing their institutions, and only making reluctant forays into the mine-infested rural areas. However, this did not deter the displaced people from returning to their homelands, including the communal lands, in the proposed transborder park. Impatience grew and pressure increased from the visionaries who saw this once in a lifetime opportunity slipping away. In one meeting, a gentleman of particular influence, upon looking at the map of southern Mozambique and the area presently the Limpopo National Park, and hearing that its population might be in the region of 6000 people, made a sweeping gesture with his arm across the map. "Only that? Why don't you just move them out?" How could such an insignificant population be an impediment to the great dream?

However, it became understood that the "Kruger Expansion Model" was a psychological impediment to the overall process, that Mozambique needed to take ownership not only of the concept but of its landscape. A more people friendly and ecosystem based approach was required. Hence the birth of the term "Transfrontier Conservation Area"(TFCA), in contrast to "Transborder Park". This retained the grand vision but also encapsulated a Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) orientation more consistent with models established in other parts of southern Africa.

Funds were allocated, but the change in concept turned out to be mostly window dressing. As explained in Clara Bocchino's recent [article](#) in SULiNews 7 on TFCA's, rural communities were still perceived as "antagonistic to conservation practices" despite the international treaties and apparent acceptance of this 'new paradigm'. Donors who may initially have been more sympathetic to community rights and ownership, were too easily persuaded that the 'simplest' approach in the complex world of post war Mozambique was the best. Resettlement was something that they were used to after all, and money did

not seem to be a problem to help facilitate what was touted as the world's greatest conservation opportunity.

A more "TFCA compliant" approach was presented in a workshop proposing an Extended Equity Model, which would allow communities to both retain land ownership inside the proposed park and to be allocated good agricultural land outside it. This proposal, however, was not seriously considered.

Fundamentally, the issue could be seen as 'who owns the landscape'. Communities were seen as 'antagonistic' for their potential impacts on the romantic and uncluttered wildlife landscape claimed by the visionaries. The new conservation paradigm, which looked at the landscape as a matrix of ecosystems to be conserved and managed for multiple conservation based opportunities, stood little chance because it was too different from the original, more simplistic and romantic TFCA vision which continues to predominate to this day.

This conflict in 'landscape visions' is aggravated by the complexity of the more inclusive approach. How does one move from the focus on charismatic species and a pristine landscape to one on communities in a matrix of sustainable land uses without losing the original appeal of TFCAs? Though the original vision may appear inequitable and anachronistic to proponents of sustainable use, it appears to have achieved its purpose as a catalyst for TFCAs. It is undeniably a vision that inspires passion, commitment, funding and political will.

The challenge for southern Africa, as articulated by Clara Bocchino, is to make conservation a land and resource use practice more consistent with the traditional African perspective, and to bring TFCAs back to their original purpose, which is to be a driver of sustainable use and development. The argument here is that the challenge goes further than this – unless we can create a 'landscape vision' that is as inspiring as the 'wild Africa' vision, we may not catalyse sufficient momentum and resources to achieve our sustainable use objectives.

An important element in addressing this challenge is to make the concept of TFCAs just as appealing to communities as they are to the 'already converted' TFCA proponents. This requires engaging at a whole new level, starting from the premise that it is their 'landscape', and by creating exciting economic opportunities based on adding maximum value to this significant asset.

In a follow up article in SULiNews 9 we hope to show how recent initiatives in Swaziland and in the Lubombo TFCA are giving much greater focus to community ownership at the landscape level, as well as creating a potential model for full equity participation of communities in TFCAs going forward.

Rod de Vletter is the project manager of the Eco Lubombo Program in Swaziland, and the owner of Phophonyane Falls Ecolodge and Nature Reserve near Pigg's Peak in Swaziland:

ecolubombo@gmail.com



Lubombo TFCA

Photo: Peace Parks Foundation