

CASE STUDY:

The Umgano community livestock initiative

Written by Emily Botts (July 2013)

BACKGROUND

Within the foothills of the awe-inspiring Ukhahlamba-Drakensberg Mountains, live the Mabandla community. Mabandla can be translated as “coming together” in isiZulu. They are united under the hereditary leadership of iNkosi (Chief) Lawrence Baleni, a respected leader like his father. The 22 000 people manage without electricity or piped water and receive limited income mostly from social grants. To these people, cattle are a form of sustenance, a way of life and a sign of wealth. This is the story of how the Mabandla community took their traditional values, and adapted them for a world of changing priorities, in order to uplift their society.

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The area in southwestern KwaZulu-Natal where the community lives was once part of the Transkei homeland. It is a land of rolling hills and mountain streams. It is also one of the last remaining tracts of moist grasslands in South Africa. These biodiverse grasslands are home to some iconic grassland species, from the graceful Oribi, to the regal Grey Crowned Crane and the striking Ground Hornbill. Beautiful flowering bulb species like *Watsonia* and Arum Lilies bloom naturally in this area.

ACTION

The Umgano Project began in 1998 with the vision of establishing a multiple land-use plan for the community. One of these land uses was commercial afforestation. Fifteen years later, the plantation has been certified as responsibly managed by the Forestry Stewardship Council. The timber is being harvested, and it is providing jobs and income for the community. The profits have been

used to build a much-needed clinic, as well as to fund initiatives like the commercial cattle herd. In traditional Nguni culture, grazing land is communal. This traditional concept has been used as the basis for a new system, in which the community own and manage a cattle business. Community members can own shares in the commercial cattle herd by donating cattle or by monetary buy-in.



Photo: Anthea Stephens

NGUNI CATTLE

Nguni cattle have curving horns, black tipped noses and randomly patterned hides. They are indigenous to South Africa, developed as a heritage breed by the Nguni people to be well adapted to African conditions. They are hardy and more resistant to many cattle sicknesses than other breeds, and require less tick control and veterinary care. Nguni cattle can survive and maintain weight under poor grazing conditions. They are docile and were originally used as draft animals. Today, Ngunis are raised as beef cattle, with the demand for their beautiful hides adding to their commercial value. Nguni cattle are better for the grasslands than other breeds. They are lighter bodied, reducing the effects of trampling on the grasslands. They are also efficient eaters, gaining more weight for less graze.



Left: A Grey Crowned Crane (Emily Botts)

Middle: Scenic Mabandla (Timothy Boucher)

Right: Nkosi Baleni (Timothy Boucher)

A R6 million LandCare grant from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs provided initial funds for the cattle herd. This allowed the community to erect the vital fences necessary to prevent cattle being stolen or driven off the land. The money was also used to buy high-quality breeding bulls, as pure bred Nguni cattle command higher prices.

The Mabandla Development Company is responsible for running the business. It is advised by a competent Steering Committee made up of members of the community, government and professional advisors, including the Grasslands Programme (a partnership initiative between the forestry, agriculture and biodiversity sectors). The Grasslands Programme has helped to conduct veld condition assessments and develop a scientifically based grazing system for the herd. The grazing land is managed with applied burns and limited grazing periods followed by rest. This protects the delicate moist grasslands from overgrazing. Spatial zoning (see box) is used to manage the different land uses on the communal land.

COMMUNITY SPATIAL ZONING

Community spatial zoning ensures that the commercial plantation and cattle herd can provide ongoing income for the community while protecting the grasslands on which they depend. The communal lands are divided into three zones:

The **grazing zone** of 4200 hectares is used as rangeland for the commercial cattle herd according to sustainable grazing practices.

In the 1500 hectare **plantation zone**, the plantation has been certified by the Forestry Stewardship Council, which verifies that it is responsibly managed.

The **conservation zone** of 1300 hectares includes the grasslands with the highest conservation value. The conservation zone is going to be officially declared as the Umgano Nature Reserve under the Protected Areas Act.

ACHIEVEMENTS

The triumph of the Umgano Project has been twofold: people and grasslands. It has allowed a community to uplift itself, bringing more pride and prosperity to the people of Mabandla, under the strong leadership of iNkosi Baleni. The businesses have created employment for local people. More jobs means higher incomes, and better livelihoods for all involved. Continued profits can be used to further improve the lives and prospects of the community.

“The triumph has been twofold: people and grasslands”

The Umgano Project is also working to achieve the conservation of the valuable grasslands. Studies have shown that the Umgano grasslands are more similar to a nearby nature reserve than to the surrounding overgrazed areas. Tourists visit the area to see the beautiful grasslands and to experience the cultural hospitality of the people. The voluntary release of land by the community for the proclamation of the Umgano Nature Reserve will be the next conservation victory.

