



Plants for Health, Life and Spirit in Africa

Implications for biodiversity and cultural diversity conservation

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Natural resources are often only perceived as contributing to rural livelihoods through food production and household welfare. There is a growing wealth of information capturing the direct-use values of the environment and consequent recognition of natural resources as being “the poor man's overcoat”.

These approaches, however, have failed to fully account for the various ways in which different groups of people make use of, and find value in biodiversity. New developments within the field of anthropology have begun to explore the relationship between biodiversity and human diversity. This view has largely come about because many of the areas of highest biological diversity are inhabited by indigenous and traditional people, providing what the Declaration of Belem (1988) calls an 'inextricable link' between biological and cultural diversity (Posey 1999). The term bio-cultural diversity was introduced by Posey in 1999 to describe the concept denoting this link.

“As the national (and international) conservation policy arena changes to incorporate concepts of cultural rights, as some formerly marginalised groups claim increasing power while others feel even more marginalised, the credibility of the conservation movement depends on its ability to deal with the complex relation between history, culture and conservation”.

Bio-cultural diversity conservation

Most of the discussions on the intricate relationship between the conservation of biodiversity and cultural diversity centre on the argument that cultural diversity can sustain a wide variety of use practices and conservation of natural resources (Posey 1999). These very same processes are being noted for their potential to act as a tool and a model for biodiversity conservation. It has been argued “promoting conservation in the context of local culture would endow protected areas with a significance that an emphasis on biological diversity, landscape, or economies does not”. This is especially relevant in South Africa, where people can ill-afford the luxury of a species-focused conservation ethic but recognize the importance of cultural diversity.

“The importance of cultural diversity may form an important stimulus to the adoption of sustainable use practices rather than extractive practices”

Recent research in Peddie, Eastern Cape, has shown that almost half of the total amounts of wild harvested plant resources, and a third of the total number of species are used for spiritual and ritual purposes in both rural and urban communities to sustain cultural practices and maintain cultural identity (Cocks & Wiersum 2003). Artefacts previously documented as fulfilling only utilitarian functions, such as grass brooms (*imitshayelo*), are culturally important (Cocks & Dold 2004). These examples demonstrate the significance of wild plants in maintaining the cultural traditions of the amaXhosa people. Unfortunately the

current level of consumption is far from sustainable. These findings indicate on the one hand, that cultural practices are threatened by the loss of biodiversity, and, conversely, the cultural value attributed to many plant species could be used as an argument to support the conservation of biodiversity.

Policy implications

In a recent address, Deputy Director-General for Biodiversity and Conservation, Mr Fundisile Mketeni stressed the importance and urgency of documenting indigenous knowledge and added that government is in the process of formulating new policies on biodiversity and welcomes new partnerships to “mainstream biodiversity”. The challenge, however, is to find new and innovative ways of implementing bio-cultural diversity conservation.

“The use of wild plant products is not restricted to utilitarian use but also provides an important means for indigenous people to perform and conserve their cultural practices and traditions”

If biodiversity conservation is considered to refer to managing change in dynamic environmental systems, evolving cultures should obviously be reflected in conservation programs (Cocks in press). In our view it is of paramount importance that biodiversity conservation programs develop campaigns, which emphasize the link between cultural diversity and biodiversity conservation. Biodiversity conservation programs must take cognisance of the multitude of cultural values that affect biodiversity, as these factors are an integral part of the newly emerging socio-economic conditions. This message needs to become the central thrust in biodiversity programs.

Conservationists need to be made aware not only of the link between the loss of the natural habitat and cultural practices, but also of the options for incorporating cultural values in novel biodiversity conservation approaches. It is believed that the implementation of such educational campaigns would have far greater success than species-focused conservation approaches, which are perceived to benefit only the elite and not the ordinary person in the street.

Evidence of the cultural significance of livestock enclosures (*linthlanti*)

linthlanti (pl.) in the Eastern Cape are most commonly represented in environmental literature simply as livestock enclosures. In the past, however, various anthropologists have documented important cultural functions of *ubuhlanti* (sing.). For example Berglund describes the enclosure as a temple where the ancestral shades (ancestral spirits) reside and “brood” over their decedents with “a benevolent eye”. Within these ‘temples’ ritual sacrifices are performed to facilitate communion with the ancestral spirits. These rituals are performed to elicit ancestral blessings and protection from malevolent forces such as sorcery and invariably involve the slaughter of a domestic animal, usually an ox or a goat. Rituals are still commonly preformed in both rural and urban households where a representative temporary *ubuhlanti* is constructed in keeping with tradition. Like *amagoqo* (household woodpiles) the shape is determined by the ethnic identity of the family. Mfengu *ubuhlanti* are square, whereas those of the Xhosa are round. An average *ubuhlanti* comprises 470 kg of material, valued at ±R170 per annum. Almost 100 plant species are selected for the construction of *linthlanti* in the Peddie district.

Further reading

- Cocks, M.L. and Wiersum, K.F.: 2003, 'The Significance of Biodiversity to Rural Households in Eastern Cape Province of South Africa', *Forests, Trees and Livelihoods*, 13, 39-58.
- Cocks, M.L. and Dold, A.P.: 2004, 'A New Broom Sweeps Clean. The Economic and Cultural Value of Grass Brooms in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa', *Forests, Trees and Livelihoods* 14: 33-42.
- Posey, D.A. 1988. The Declaration of Belem In: *Proceedings of the First International Congress of Ethnobiology*, (eds) Posey, D.A. & Overal, W. Museu Paraense Goeldi, Belem.
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All photographs by **Tony Dold**

Funding was received from the **South Africa-Netherlands Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD)** and the **International Foundation of Science (IFS)**