Conservation and community in the new South Africa: A case study of the Mahushe Shongwe Game Reserve

Brian H. King

Department of Geography and the Environment, The University of Texas at Austin, 1 University Station – A3100, Austin, TX 78712-1098, USA

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Abstract

The idealization of natural landscapes and peoples during colonialism, coupled with the popularity of sustainable development in the postcolonial era, has contributed to the expansion of conservation planning throughout the African continent. Concerns surrounding the promotion of national and international conservation agendas at the expense of local livelihood needs have generated interest in community conservation projects that attempt to include local participation and knowledge in natural resource management. The early excitement associated with community conservation has waned in light of recent assessments that it has been unsuccessful in meeting its ecological and social goals. This parallels other research that suggests communities are understood in generic or homogenous ways that influence how these initiatives are understood. Using a case study of the Mahushe Shongwe Game Reserve, this paper evaluates how rural households access environmental and economic resources to produce livelihoods, and how these access patterns impact their views of the project. It is argued that there are significant livelihood variations within the community that shape the ways households engage with, and benefit from, conservation planning. Rather than strictly viewing Mahushe Shongwe as a constraint to environmental resource access or site for limited employment, community members identify a number of benefits from its existence including education and development opportunities. Additionally, transformations in governance systems in the region impact community views of the project since younger residents are less likely to engage with the Matsamo Tribal Authority, which participates in managing the reserve. The consequence is that conservation has various impacts and meanings within a specific community that remain tied to the livelihood and governance systems being renegotiated in the post-apartheid era.

Keywords: South Africa; Mahushe Shongwe Game Reserve; Conservation; Community conservation; Livelihood; Development

1. Introduction

The colonial era marked the beginning of a lengthy history of external intervention in Africa typified by the romanticization of African landscapes and peoples for the benefit of colonial powers (Adams and McShane, 1992; Adams and Mulligan, 2003; Anderson and Grove, 1987; Beinart, 1989; Beinart and McGregor, 2003; Grove, 1992, 1995; Schroeder, 1999). As numerous authors argue, this resulted in the expansion of conservation throughout the continent and separation of indigenous populations from natural resources and territories on which they depended for their survival (Colchester, 1993; Ghimire, 1994; Ghimire and Pimbert, 1997; McCabe et al., 1992; Neumann, 1998; Peluso, 1993). Concerns about the impacts of conservation upon human populations have generated interest in community conservation initiatives that, at least rhetorically, embrace the need for local input and participation. The African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources was adopted in 1968 and broadened the definition of conservation to include attention to local resources (Adams, 2001). In 1980, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) published the World Conservation Strategy, which forcefully argued that successful environmental conservation depends upon the involvement and
participation of local communities (IUCN, 1980). As Hulme and Murphree (1999) assert, these events contributed to a new orthodoxy for natural resource management in Africa through the merging of conservation and development goals.

The popularity of community conservation is largely attributable to the impacts of conservation upon rural livelihoods and the rise of sustainable development as the guiding discourse for environment and development planning. The initial enthusiasm associated with community conservation has been challenged in recent years by a growing skepticism about its effectiveness, in addition to the willingness of international agencies to participate with local populations in natural resource management (Chapin, 2004; McShane, 2003; McShane and Newby, 2004; Songorwa, 1999; Wilshusen et al., 2002, 2003). These concerns parallel other research that questions the underlying assumptions of decentralized conservation including an understanding of community, which is often theorized as generic or homogenous (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999, 2001; Brosius et al., 1998; Brown, 2002; Campbell and Vainio-Mattila, 2003; Leach et al., 1999; McShane and Newby, 2004; Tsing et al., 2005). Agrawal and Gibson (1999) argue that this conceptualization fails to account for community differentiation that has implications for the effectiveness of conservation planning. Recent research demonstrates that understanding differentiated social processes reveals that certain stakeholders access benefits and perceive of conservation projects differently (Belsky, 2003; Brown, 2002; Li, 2001; Songorwa, 1999).

Concerns over the application of community in natural resource management demonstrate the need to rigorously examine partnering communities to understand how social differentiation shapes the effectiveness of these initiatives. This is made all the more necessary with the rising critique from some sectors as to the social and ecological effectiveness of community conservation. Although the academic literature has been important in showing that communities are narrowly understood, it provides less attention to evaluating empirically how social differentiation shapes the impacts and views of conservation planning. This paper addresses this by utilizing a case study of the Mahushe Shongwe game reserve, which was the first conservation project initiated in the former KaNgwane homeland of South Africa. The purpose of this paper is to interrogate socio-spatial variations within the Mzinti community in order to evaluate the differential impacts and views of community conservation. The case study demonstrates that individuals and households within the community utilize a diverse range of livelihood strategies that contribute in shaping the ways they engage with, and benefit from, conservation and development initiatives. Additionally, the presence of conservation agencies and expansion of new municipal structures has reworked environmental governance systems in ways that impact community views of Mahushe Shongwe. The consequence is that conservation has various impacts and meanings within a specific community that remain tied to the livelihood and governance systems being renegotiated in the post-apartheid era.

2. Community conservation in the postcolonial era

The insistence from scientific and policy circles that the world has entered an environmental crisis has contributed to the recognition that natural areas need to be protected from certain types of human use. The growth of sustainable development and its call for nature preservation has played a central role in the expansion of conservation throughout the developing world, as these spaces are presented as key areas of protection for threatened flora and fauna species while generating economic development through investment and tourism (Adams, 2001, 2003; Brown, 2002; Brown and Rosendo, 2000; Bryant and Bailey, 1997; Campbell and Vainio-Mattila, 2003; Redclift, 1987; Schmink and Wood, 1987; Stocking and Perkin, 1992; WCED, 1987; World Bank, 1992, 2003). Globally, there has been an increase in the number of national parks since 1950. Between 1900 and 1949, less than six hundred protected areas were established worldwide. Between 1950 and 1990, however, this figure grew to nearly three thousand, of which thirteen hundred were established just in the 1970s with the majority located in the developing world (Ghimire, 1983). Expanding the unit of analysis to conservation areas that permit different degrees of human use increases the total number significantly. The IUCN, for example, has categorized protected areas into eight separate management domains: scientific reserve/strict nature reserve; national park; national monument/national landmark; managed nature reserve/wildlife sanctuary; protected landscape; resource reserve; natural biotic area/anthropological reserve; and multiple-use management area/managed resource (IUCN, 1985 in IIEED, 1994, p. 10). At the end of the twentieth century, more than twenty-five thousand protected areas existed worldwide (McNeely et al., 1994 in Sayre et al., 1998) and Sayre et al. (1998) report that approximately 5% of the land surface of the planet had been set aside as protected areas with a variety of management goals and structures. More recently, the 2003 United Nations List of Protected Areas identified 102,102 protected areas that constituted 11.5% of the land surface of the planet (IUCN and UNEP, 2003).

Although there is general acceptance that protected areas meet national and international conservation priorities, a growing body of research demonstrates that excluding local communities from geographic spaces reduces the ability of these populations to access resources and produce livelihoods (Brown, 2002; Ghimire, 1994; Ghimire and Pimbert, 1997; Hulme and Murphree, 2001; McCabe et al., 1992; Neumann, 1998; Slater, 2002a; Songorwa et al., 2000). Other critiques of traditional conservation planning range from concern over the reification of the international scale (Sachs, 1993; Schroeder and Neumann, 1995), links to Western and colonial conservation models (Adams and Mulligan, 2003; Beinart, 1989; Brockington, 2002; Grove, 1995), inattention to local land tenure systems (Bruce et al., 1993), and...
opportunities

2.1. Debating community conservation: limitations and opportunities

Advocates of community conservation have been effective in asserting the need for greater local control of environmental resources while challenging an environmental mandate that privileges state and international agencies over communities and individuals. Regardless, there is a growing disenchantment with community conservation within the academic and policy communities resulting from concerns that these initiatives are largely ineffective in meeting their ecological and social goals (Campbell and Vainio-Mattila, 2003; Chapin, 2004; McShane, 2003; McShane and Newby, 2004; Songorwa, 1999). Wilshusen et al. (2002, 2003) review several recent critiques including Oates (1999) and Terborgh (1999), and argue that international conservation is increasingly typified by a resurgent protectionism. Similarly, McShane (2003, p. 2) comments:

Encouraged by the frantic quest for examples of sustainable development, ICDPs exploded in popularity, rapidly advancing from an untested idea attracting seed money to ‘best practice’ for biodiversity conservation. The fact that conservation organizations were perhaps not suited to work in the social and economic realms was missed in all the excitement. Successes have been few and far between, and today an expanding barrage of mostly critical literature has fuelled concern among organizations implementing and financing ICDPs.

In a particularly provocative assessment, Chapin (2004) asserts that the leading international conservation agencies are less willing to participate with local communities and are using science and sophisticated technologies to push for larger-scale projects, including hot spots, ecoregions, and living landscapes. The consequence has been a move away from locally-based conservation projects that include a development component. As Chapin (2004, p. 21) comments, “Although they won’t say it openly, the attitude of many conservationists is that they have the money and they are going to call the shots. They have cordoned off certain areas for conservation, and in their own minds they have a clear idea of what should be done.”

These challenges to community conservation have been accompanied by concerns about the underlying assumptions and implementation of these initiatives. Although there is a growing awareness that conservation planning requires careful scrutiny to the specific social, political and economic processes within local contexts, recent research argues there remains a tendency to analyze communities as generic or homogenous (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999, 2001; Brosius et al., 1998; Brown, 2002; Campbell and Vainio-Mattila, 2003; Leach et al., 1999; McShane and Newby, 2004; Tsing et al., 2005). As Magome and Murombedzi (2003, p. 129) assert, a weakness of conservation planning is “the dogged belief by most policy-makers and practitioners that the ‘community’ exists and that it is the best vehicle for implementing biodiversity conservation programmes.”

Leach et al. (1999) suggest that community conservation focuses on “the people of a local administrative unit...of a cultural or ethnic group...or of a local urban or rural area, such as the people of a neighborhood or valley” (IUCN/WWF/UNEP, 1991 in Leach et al., 1999, p. 228). Agrawal and Gibson (1999) argue local resource management is predicated on the idea that community is a small spatial unit, has a homogenous social structure, and involves shared norms. This assumption presents communities as relatively homogeneous with distinguishing characteristics from outside populations. According to this view, participant communities need only be included in project formulation and decision-making since the established cultural systems and local knowledge will ensure sustainable resource management.

Presenting communities as homogenous obscures the social differentiation that exists within specific settings, which subsequently shapes the effectiveness of project development and implementation. As Agrawal and Gibson (1999, p. 633) argue: “The vision of small, integrated communities using locally-evolved norms and rules to manage resources sustainably and equitably is powerful. But because it views community as a unified, organic whole, this vision fails to attend to differences within communities, and ignores how these differences affect resource management outcomes.” This claim is supported by recent research that reveals how social differences translate into divergent impacts within participant communities. Brown (2002) argues that ethnicity, gender, religion, caste, and economic and political variations structure the flow of benefits generated by natural resource management. In a case study of an ecotourism project in Belize, Belsky (2003) shows that the limited benefits and local conflicts generated by the project were rooted and exacerbated by preexisting social systems. Additionally, Li (2001) asserts that theorizations of community imply a separation from state or market-driven...
processes that may be more relevant to local livelihoods than the romantic and populist visions purported by conservation or indigenous rights advocates. While these studies demonstrate the importance of examining the varied impacts of conservation within local settings, they provide less empirical detail of how social differentiation shapes the impacts of conservation planning. In order to address this, the remainder of this paper uses a case study of the Mahushe Shongwe Game Reserve to understand how social differentiation produces local variations in the views and benefits of community conservation.

3. Community conservation in South Africa: the Mahushe Shongwe Game Reserve

South African national and provincial agencies have increasingly endorsed an expanded conservation agenda in order to attract international tourism and generate economic growth for previously disenfranchised communities in the post-apartheid era (Honey, 1999; Magome and Murombokedzi, 2003; Tapela and Omara-Ojungu, 1999; Timbila, 1999). This shift makes the country particularly compelling to address the impacts of conservation planning upon rural communities, although as Slater (2002a, p. 116) comments, the response to shifts in conservation ideology has been “patchy and uneven” within the country. Additionally, Els and Bothma (2000) conclude that community concerns have been an add-on, rather than a paradigmatic shift, to national policy. Conservation within South Africa requires the participation and coordination of a variety of agencies at the national, provincial and local scales. The role of provincial conservation agencies is quite significant, as an estimated 56.5% of formal conservation activities within South Africa occur at the provincial governmental level (Hanks and Glavovic, 1992 in Els and Bothma, 2000). Community conservation initiatives exist throughout South Africa, with provincial conservation agencies pursuing these projects as a means of generating local support for nature preservation. One example is the Mahushe Shongwe Game Reserve, which was initiated in 1986 as the first community conservation project within the former KaNgwane homeland. Revenues generated from hunting and game meat sales are shared between the Mpumalanga Parks Board (MPB) and the Mzinti community. Additionally, a small number of part-time and full-time jobs are generated by the project. Mahushe Shongwe is 1200ha and is located just north of the Mawewe Cattle-Game project, which is a 9000ha integrated wildlife and livestock area that was created in 1994. The entire region is under heavy environmental pressure, mainly because of high population densities due to apartheid spatial planning, irrigation development for sugar cane, the expansion of urban and semi-urban areas, the cutting of trees for energy fuel, and livestock grazing (Peel and Stalmans, 1997; Stalmans, 2001). Fig. 1 is a map of the study area.
The region comprises much of the eastern lowveld (low-lands) of Mpumalanga province, extending directly south of the Kruger National Park, west of Mozambique and north of Swaziland. Urban and peri-urban areas include Nelspruit, the provincial capital, Malelane, Komatipoort, and KaNyamazane, which is a township located near Nelspruit. As Rangan and Gilmartin (2002) report, the Mpumalanga lowveld has been a source of fruit and vegetables for South African and international markets for at least half a century. During the late 1940s and 1950s, land that lay within the agriculturally productive catchments of the Komati and Crocodile rivers were removed from African control and given to white farmers to produce citrus and subtropical fruit crops for regional and international markets. From the 1970s onwards, the expansion of sugar cane production shifted agricultural systems, and commercial farmers began growing a combination of fruits, vegetables and sugar cane. Mather (2000) suggests that the capital and labor-intensive agricultural production systems in the region have historically depended upon labor from the neighboring homelands and migrants from Mozambique. According to the MPB, the Mzinti community has an estimated 20,000 residents dispersed across 4000 households. Between 1981 and 1991, informal activities increased as a greater number of people lost their formal employment outside the area and returned to their home villages. As a result, the unemployment rate for the region increased from 1.8% to 33.3% during that time (Mpumalanga Parks Board, 1997).

There are a variety of activities that take place within Mahushe Shongwe, including trophy hunting, live capture of surplus game, harvesting of thatch grass and wood by the surrounding community, and emergency grazing of livestock during times of extreme drought. Additionally, the MPB identifies a variety of non-consumptive activities including overnight visits to the Mthomeni tented camp with associated game drives and hikes, visits by neighboring communities at the day visitor center, education trips by school groups, and community training and development programs in the community hall (Mpumalanga Parks Board, 2000). Prior to the completion of the restructuring process in 2002, Mahushe Shongwe employed 2 senior reserve managers, 12 field rangers, 13 laborers, 1 community relations officer, 1 environmental education officer, 4 facility managers and 1 administration officer (Mpumalanga Parks Board, 2000). The community and reserve fall under the jurisdiction of the Matsamo Tribal Authority, although local municipalities and new legislation is challenging the legitimacy of the traditional authorities (King, 2005). Mahushe Shongwe is managed by a committee comprised of representatives from the community and the tribal authority. As will be discussed, the structure of the committee directly impacts the distribution of direct benefits to the community and local perceptions of the effectiveness of the reserve.

In order to evaluate the impacts and views of Mahushe Shongwe within the Mzinti community, this paper draws upon research completed from May 2000–July 2000 and August 2001–August 2002. The research methodology was designed to evaluate socio-spatial differentiation within Mzinti in order to critically address the differential impacts and views of community conservation. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods were utilized to address household livelihood production strategies, access to environmental resources, and perceptions on the role of the Matsamo Tribal Authority and newly created municipal structures in managing conservation and development within the region. Data for this paper was collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews with community residents and a structured survey. Fifty semi-structured interviews were completed with household heads from the Mzinti community that provide detail on the impacts and future potential of Mahushe Shongwe, as well as the role of the MPB and the Matsamo Tribal Authority. These interviews were complemented with a structured survey of 478 randomly selected households using an asset-based livelihood framework to collect data on financial, physical, human, and social assets. Aerial photography and interviews with enumerators from the 2001 South African census were used to ensure a representative sample from the community. The survey data were analyzed with particular attention to variations in livelihood production systems, benefit distribution from the reserve, and local perceptions of the project. As the next section demonstrates, examining social differentiation within the Mzinti community is necessary to properly understand the impacts of community conservation.

4. Differentiating the impacts and views of community conservation

Paralleling other rural areas in South Africa, households within the Mzinti community pursue a variety of livelihood production strategies, ranging from complete dependence upon environmental resources to an engagement with formal and informal economic activities (Francis, 2002; Levin et al., 1997; Shackleton et al., 2000; Slater, 2002a,b; Twine et al., 2003). The result is a complexity of livelihood systems that remain tied to household history, amount of formal education, and degree of connection with historical and contemporary governance institutions. Regardless of livelihood diversification, most community residents continue to depend upon environmental resources, particularly land for agricultural plots near their homes, and communal space.
for the collection of wood and medicinal plants, and livestock grazing. Table 1 documents a number of environmental resource use patterns for households within the Mzinti community.

Table 1 demonstrates that Mzinti households utilize a variety of environmental resources to produce livelihoods, however, dependency is highest for sand that is purchased and used for construction purposes, land at the home stand for farming, and wood for energy fuel. In addition to these dominant use patterns, a smaller number of households continue to collect wood and thatch grass for building, graze livestock and utilize traditional medicine. The collection of environmental resources occurs in communal space surrounding the Mzinti community, although access to these resources is increasingly constrained by the Matsamo Tribal Authority and the MPB.

One of the main consequences of apartheid spatial planning was the restriction of large populations to small geographic spaces with questionable agricultural value. Although many rural communities are bordered by communal land, there remain few agricultural opportunities and residents are forced to engage in other activities in order to survive. As a result, it is a common practice for households to have small farming plots next to their houses, with more than two-thirds of households growing fruit and vegetables at their stands. There are a variety of crops that are grown, with mango, maize, guava, papaya and banana used by at least half of the households. The majority of households grow these crops for domestic consumption, however, 5% of households growing crops report selling them in local and regional markets. In addition to these activities, households participate in formal and informal employment strategies in order to generate income and build their asset base. Wage labor remains a critical component to livelihood systems for many households, as 34% have a member with a full-time position. Part-time or informal employment within Mzinti is roughly similar with 29% of households reporting having a member engaged in a part-time position and 27% of households report earning additional income through the informal economy. Informal work is extremely varied, as household members sell uncombothi (traditional beer), repair shoes and make traditional mats for sale. Finally, dependence upon state pension remains an important component of household incomes. At least 40% of households have a member that receives a pension, the majority of which are for older residents. As evidenced by other research (Slater, 2002a), state pension payments remain important in rural South Africa with shifting labor markets and seasonal fluctuations.

In addition to livelihood diversification, the Mzinti community is experiencing political and economic transformations that impact the ways individuals engage with, and benefit from, conservation and development in the post-apartheid era. The population has expanded due to internal growth and migration from surrounding communities drawn to Mzinti’s proximity to larger urban centers that provide employment or other opportunities. The region has been incorporated within the municipal ward system that involves interfacing national and provincial governmental agencies with traditional authorities. The consequence of these shifts is that household histories, demographics, and livelihood systems produce differentiated interpretations of conservation planning. In order to trace out the varied impacts and views of Mahushe Shongwe, the following sections analyze how community differentiation and social change help explain the opportunities and constraints generated by community conservation. Particular attention is directed towards two dominant community views of Mahushe Shongwe; specifically, the reserve is alternatively viewed by Mzinti residents as a constraint to environmental resource access and livelihood production or as an economic opportunity that also provides mixed benefits to the community.

4.1. Conservation as resource constraint

There are diverse opinions within the Mzinti community about the existence and benefits generated by Mahushe Shongwe. Roughly 20% of the community views the reserve in strictly negative terms, which was assessed by two questions from the structured survey. When asked whether Mahushe Shongwe is good for the community, 17% of respondents said no compared to 63% who indicated yes and 20% that indicated they did not know. Secondly, when residents were asked whether Mahushe Shongwe provides benefits for the community, 20% said no compared to 51% who said yes and 29% who indicated they did not know. The varied responses show that while some residents have clearly decontextualized since some residents criticized the reserve but want to see it expanded in the future because of the poten-
tional job opportunities. Other respondents want Mahushe Shongwe to be reduced in size but not completely eliminated, because it currently provides jobs for some community members. These perspectives differ from individuals who view the reserve in strictly negative terms, which is considered here.

Although Mahushe Shongwe covers only a small portion of communal space surrounding the Mzinti community, there are clear relationships between livelihood systems and perceptions of community conservation. The relationships between livelihood patterns and perceptions of the project are reported in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that there are statistically significant relationships between employment patterns and certain environmental resource uses and perceptions of Mahushe Shongwe. Households engaged in full-time employment and those that own cattle or fish show a statistically significant association with the survey question probing whether Mahushe Shongwe is good or bad for the community. Additionally, there is a statistically significant association between sand collectors and the survey question about whether the project provides benefits to the community. In order to trace out these relationships, Table 3 compares households engaged in particular livelihood strategies and negative perceptions of the reserve.

Tables 2 and 3 reveal several findings regarding the relationships between livelihoods and perceptions of community conservation. Firstly, it is clear that residents with higher dependence upon the natural resource base are more likely to interpret Mahushe Shongwe as a direct constraint to environmental resource access and want to see the project reduced in size or removed. This is shown by comparing the perceptions between households engaged in various livelihood strategies since negative views appear to be less a reflection of employment patterns than the use of environmental resources. The relationship between environmental resource use and views of the project is also supported by interviews completed with residents who often articulated negative views because of the livelihood impacts of Mahushe Shongwe. As one respondent suggested:

I am tired of this reserve because we are not able to collect wood. Our cattle have no land to graze and now we are suffering because of this game reserve and I see no use for it. We are not benefiting from the reserve.

Another resident complained:

The game reserve has taken all of the place where we used to graze our animals in the old days...We used to get meat, we used to get wood. We were proud of our natural scenery, but the introduction of the reserve has taken all of our natural resources.

These comments reflect the view that the creation of Mahushe Shongwe has effectively removed communal space from use. Rather than interpreting the project as an opportunity for employment or possible revenue generator for the community, a number of community members described the reserve strictly as a constraint upon environmental resource access.

Secondly, these data demonstrate the necessity of disaggregating the households that utilize environmental resources since there are varied perceptions depending upon the particular resource. Table 2 shows that there are statistically significant relationships between households that either own cattle or fish with perceptions about whether Mahushe Shongwe is good or bad for the community. In comparing households in Table 3, these same resource users show the highest divergence in opinion about Mahushe Shongwe. Nearly half of the households that own cattle report that the reserve is not good for the
community compared to 15% of non-cattle households. Thirty-five percent of households that fish report Mahushe Shongwe is not good for the community compared to 16% of non-fishing households. Other resource use systems, such as the collection of wood or traditional medicine, show less severe divergence in negative views of the reserve. The specific environmental resource use strategy, therefore, is important in shaping perceptions of community conservation. Thirdly, these data reveal that not all environmental resource patterns correspond with negative perceptions of conservation planning. Table 3 demonstrates that grass collectors are less likely to report that Mahushe Shongwe is not good for the community than households that do not collect grasses. The likely explanation for this variation is that the MPB allows a small group from the community to collect grass seasonally from within Mahushe Shongwe. It is possible that this limited access reduces the perception of the reserve as a livelihood constraint and increases positive sentiment for these specific residents.

Finally, these data suggest that location is also a factor shaping perceptions of community conservation. Households further away from Mahushe Shongwe are able to access certain environmental resources in communal areas not directly adjacent to the project. Medicinal plant and thatch grass collectors, for example, spoke less frequently of the reserve as a constraint to environmental resource access. Wood collection occurs in various areas and many collectors were more likely to complain about the recently established sugar cane farms than Mahushe Shongwe in reducing available resources. The importance of location as an explanatory factor is best demonstrated by the negative views held by many cattle owners. The possession of livestock is concentrated in the western section of the community directly adjacent to Mahushe Shongwe. As a result, cattle owners are more likely to perceive of the project as a restriction to grazing space and often commented that the MPB should allow grazing within the reserve as is done with the Mawewe Cattle-Game project to the south. Additionally, cattle owners often indicated that Mahushe Shongwe should be reduced in size or removed from the community to expand available grazing space for livestock. It is important to note that location is not necessarily significant by itself, but taken together with the varied livelihood systems in the community it helps explain the differentiated views of Mahushe Shongwe.

In addition to the direct constraints upon individual households within the Mzinti community, the existence of Mahushe Shongwe has enabled the MPB to establish a presence in the region and influence the management of environmental resources in the communal areas. The MPB has expanded its regulatory authority over environmental resource collection, which has exacerbated conflicts with historical governance systems including the traditional authorities. During the apartheid era, the Matsamo Tribal Authority worked with the KaNgwane government in shaping household patterns of access to a variety of resources that resulted in locally understood rules. Although the Matsamo Tribal Authority has diminished in power since the 1994 elections, it still serves as a barrier to accessing environmental resources within, and around, Mahushe Shongwe. Community members must approach the local representative, or induna, for a permit to cut poles for construction, and the induna grants permission for wood collection within the reserve for functions. In most cases, the wood is collected for funerals, however, some residents access wood for other purposes, including weddings. Wood access for purposes beyond funerals appears linked to privilege, as collectors are either family members of the tribal authority or know the induna personally. Additionally, the induna admitted that he collects wood weekly from the reserve for cooking. Although the MPB claims wood collection only occurs for funerals, the conservation agency obviously defers to the tribal authority by giving the induna preferential treatment.

With the passage of the Mpumalanga Nature Conservation Act, the Wildlife Protection Service (WPS) of the MPB has been empowered to enforce new restrictions on wood collection, medicinal plant collection, and fishing, which has increased tensions within the region and had subsequent effects upon community views of Mahushe Shongwe. Community relations officers regularly complained that the WPS was making their job more difficult because of community resentment over fines and arrests. Tribal authority permits are also being renegotiated with the MPB in light of the new environmental legislation and challenging the legitimacy of the Matsamo Tribal Authority in managing resources to which it has historical claim (King, 2005). In addition to conflicts between the MPB and tribal authority, Mzinti residents explained that the MPB is arresting people for the collection of resources to which they traditionally had open access. One community member who was arrested for fishing in the Nkomazi River explained:

They [the MPB] said they do not want anyone to go fishing in the river. Then they said I should go and pay for a permission letter, which is about 20 Rand. I said they should fence the river because the aim of the reserve is not to give us problems here and we do not see the use of the reserve.

When asked why he does not get a permission letter from the MPB in order to fish, he responded:

Because the Nkomazi River is not a dam for someone, or a camp for the Parks Board. The Nkomazi is from where it starts until where it is going. It is not fenced, so if the Parks Board is concerned they should fence it. Even now as I am talking I hope there are people fishing because the place belongs to no one. The duty of the Parks Board is to protect the game reserve that they own.

Another respondent, who sells wood to supplement household income, commented that the role of the MPB
outside of the reserve is having an impact on his perception of the project’s benefits:

I think it is not good for Mzinti because before we were not arrested for collecting wood. Before there was no electricity and we used wood for cooking and living and now the Parks Board is arresting us. The worst part is that we are not collecting wood inside the reserve, so I do not understand because electricity has just come recently and we have been using wood for a long time. So electricity was not there in 1993, 1994 and 1995, so it means the Parks Board is troubling us. Because I am selling wood it means I should stop collecting wood and steal the animals at the Parks Board. I am not stealing the wood and I am cutting the dry wood but they say I am destroying nature. I think they should arrest people who go inside the park to collect wood. Even if you want wood for a funeral they give you just a small bundle of wood and it is not enough, so I do not see any importance of the game reserve.

These respondents demonstrate a growing frustration with the presence of Mahushe Shongwe and its ability to extend the influence of the MPB in restricting environmental resource access within the region. The MPB has a local office in the neighboring town of Tonga, which increases the presence of conservation officials within the Mzinti community. The conflicts between traditional and newly-elected structures surrounding resource access, in addition to the increasing surveillance of the region by the MPB, also contribute to the negative community views of Mahushe Shongwe.

4.2. Community benefits and distribution

More than half of the community has positive views of the reserve and list a number of benefits from its existence. As with the negative perceptions of the project, positive views are complex and link to household histories and livelihood production strategies. Mahushe Shongwe had a relatively large operating budget in 2000–2001 for a project its size, however, revenues from game sales and other benefits only resulted in roughly $5000 to the community budget that year. Revenue generated from the reserve has been used for a number of projects, including the fencing of the school and the purchasing of chairs for the community. Regardless of the constraints Mahushe Shongwe places upon environmental resource access, and the relatively small financial distribution stream from its existence, the majority of community residents view the reserve in positive terms. As evidence of this, household surveys probed whether residents felt that Mahushe Shongwe offered benefits to the community. These responses are documented in Table 4.

Table 4  Mahushe Shongwe and community benefits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits from Mahushe Shongwe</th>
<th>% of households (n = 478)</th>
<th>% listing most important (n = 277)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No benefit</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some benefit</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lots of benefit</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not know</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know Mahushe Shongwe</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5  Mahushe Shongwe and specific benefits

<table>
<thead>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservation</td>
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<td>34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
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<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (wood collection, etc.)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 demonstrates that many residents believe that Mahushe Shongwe provides benefits to the community, which suggests that community conservation is not strictly viewed as a restriction upon environmental resource access. Additionally, it confirms the idea that there are indirect benefits that can be undervalued by focusing upon the economic capital generated from these initiatives. In order to understand whether community conservation provides non-economic benefits to Mzinti residents, household surveys asked residents to identify specific types of benefits, including “conservation,” “education,” “recreation,” “development,” “employment,” and “other.” Additionally, residents that identified benefits were then asked to rank which of the benefits was most important to them. Table 5 outlines community views of Mahushe Shongwe benefits.

The mix of community views regarding the benefits of Mahushe Shongwe can be linked to livelihood diversification and engagement with economic activities. Households less dependent upon environmental resources are more likely to view the presence and future opportunities of Mahushe Shongwe in economic terms and identify benefits from its existence. Younger community members, particularly those that live in the newer sections of the community,

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2 The $5000 is close to the average distributed to the community each year. The lease agreement between the community and MPB stipulates that all tourism revenues belong to the MPB, while the community and the MPB evenly split the earnings from game sales and hunting.

3 Surveys asked respondents whether they knew about Mahushe Shongwe in order to evaluate their opinions of the project. Six percent of households reported not knowing about Mahushe Shongwe with 85% of these respondents living in a recently completed Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) housing project. It is worth noting that these residents are more likely to have recently moved from a neighboring village and therefore are less likely to know about the project. Respondents who indicated they knew Mahushe Shongwe were then asked whether the project provides “no benefit” to the community, “some benefit,” “lots of benefit,” or “I do not know.”
want the reserve to be expanded in size to provide additional employment opportunities. As one resident explained:

If the game reserve could be expanded to provide more job opportunities that would be good for the community.

Another resident stated:

I think as a camp maybe it can develop in such a way that it can accommodate people who may want to come and visit for a couple of days. Maybe if there are roads inside that are made to be conducive to cars they can see what is there. Other than plants, I think that more animals can be added so that they can attract other people.

In addition to employment, other residents identify other benefits including education since school groups are able to visit Mahushe Shongwe for environmental education programs. As one community member explained:

I know that they have kept nature there. When kids grow they have a chance to go and see nature and different types of animals near at Mahushe. They renovated the school for us, built the crèche, fenced our schools and many things like that. When there are functions they provide us with meat and they also create job opportunities. Also there’s a hotel inside the camp so kids no longer go to town to a hotel, they simply go to Mahushe. That’s what I know.

As a community conservation project, Mahushe Shongwe is supposedly positioned to balance the goals of conservation and development. Some residents identify the development opportunities of Mahushe Shongwe as a benefit to the community, specifically the possibility of attracting tourism to the area and creating employment opportunities. Thirty-five percent of households identify development as a benefit of Mahushe Shongwe and 6% identify this as the most important benefit. Perhaps the most tangible and direct benefit of Mahushe Shongwe is the full-time, part-time and seasonal jobs that are created. Most of the full-time employees live outside Mzinti and are brought in by the MPB based upon their training in game management or environmental interpretation. There are part-time positions, however, that are created during the year and Mzinti residents are hired to do cleaning, painting or other jobs. Thirty-four percent of households identify employment as a benefit of the project, with 34% saying it is the most important benefit. The reality for the MPB is that a section of the community identifies the development opportunities of the project, as opposed to viewing it as strictly reducing environmental resource access. The future viability of the reserve, therefore, depends on actualizing the material opportunities and ensuring their direct transfer to residents.

Although it is tempting to interpret the effects of community conservation in general terms, the case study suggests that there are differentiated views about the benefits and opportunities presented by Mahushe Shongwe. Regardless of mixed community support for the reserve, it is clear that the project needs to improve its distribution of information and benefits to the community. A common complaint from both the household surveys and interviews is that the employment opportunities are too small and that the MPB continues to hire people from outside the community. This view is primarily a reflection of the fact that most of the reserve manager positions are held by individuals from other areas. Additionally, the decision-making process for employment positions is not transparent and the MPB and community committee need to be clearer about how community members are hired for full-time and part-time work. The need for transparency is particularly urgent since employment is one of the primary direct benefits of the project. Additionally, it appears that the committee continues to hire family members and residents from the older section of the community for the majority of part-time positions.

The participation of the tribal authority in managing Mahushe Shongwe impacts the differential benefit patterns and perceptions within the community. Tribal authority councilors participate on the community committee and this shapes how the community responds to this organization. MPB officers complain that only members of the older section of the community attend the meetings, which then impacts the distribution of benefits. Additionally, the changing governance patterns are impacting how the MPB deals with the community since the role of the tribal authority is unclear and being usurped by newly-created structures. As one MPB officer explained:

In the days before the changes, it was easier because we worked with the tribal authority. The headman would have meetings with the community and tell the people everything about Mahushe Shongwe. Now, because of the new government, everyone belongs to one party or another and they will not attend a meeting called by the headman. It is more difficult to work with the community.

Older community residents do report a greater awareness of the history of the reserve and the governing structures designed to manage the project. Additionally, there appears to be differentiation in access to resource benefits and information about Mahushe Shongwe, as households in the older section are more likely to know about the committee and receive wood and other direct benefits.

5. Conclusion

The forced displacement of human populations for the advancement of wildlife conservation and national tourism goals has occurred in various parts of Africa and has been well documented in the conservation literature. The rise of ecological crisis scenarios, coupled with sustainable development as the guiding discourse for international develop-
ment, has expanded, rather than reduced, external control of African landscapes in the postcolonial era. These trends have contributed to the popularity of community conservation, which attempts to balance local livelihoods with national and international conservation priorities. The initial enthusiasm with community conservation has been challenged by an emergence of studies attesting to their failure to meet their social and ecological goals. These critiques have coincided with other research attesting that these initiatives have simplistic understandings of community, which shapes the ways that community conservation is implemented and assessed. As has been noted elsewhere (Belsky, 2003; Brown, 2002; Li, 2001; Songorwa, 1999), there remains a need to examine the impacts of community conservation upon partnering communities while providing empirical detail of its potentially differentiated effects within various settings.

In order to engage with these concerns, this paper utilized a methodological approach that addressed intra-community variation to understand the differential impacts of the Mahushe Shongwe Game Reserve. Social differentiation within the Mzinti community means that conservation and development projects such as Mahushe Shongwe do not have a single impact upon a unified collection of households. Community residents view the reserve in strikingly different terms, ranging from its impact upon material access to environmental resources, as well as a diverse set of benefits, including educational and conservation benefits, and employment and recreational opportunities. The case study demonstrates that disaggregating the community to investigate various livelihood systems reveals that certain patterns produce negative perceptions of community conservation. Individuals that depend upon environmental resources are more likely to describe the project as a resource constraint; however, some forms of collection, such as grass collection, correspond with more positive views of Mahushe Shongwe. Cattle owners and those that fish have particularly negative views of the project because of its impact upon their specific livelihood needs. In contrast to these respondents, households less dependent upon environmental resources are more likely to view the presence and future opportunities of Mahushe Shongwe in economic terms and identify benefits from its existence. Younger community members often explained that the reserve should be expanded in size to provide additional employment opportunities. These diverse perceptions reveal a complexity of views that link with specific household production strategies, and to the sense of security they attach to their livelihoods.

In addition to livelihood systems and environmental resource access, community members view the future potential of the reserve in varied ways, which are intertwined with their perceptions of the governance systems managing environmental resources in the region. While some residents view the presence of the MPB as a potential source of employment, others resent its expanding authority in renegotiating environmental access patterns. The ongoing negotiations between the MPB, local municipalities, and tribal authorities have material and symbolic impact upon residents and influence their perceptions of conservation and development projects. These views form complex local ideologies about Mahushe Shongwe, which suggest that viewing conservation solely as a constraint upon material access to environmental resources restricts attention to other perspectives. The case study demonstrates that community conservation has multiple meanings that reveal other processes at play within a given context while providing an entry point for addressing larger transformations in livelihood and governance systems in the post-apartheid era.

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