

2.6 What do the local communities say about fences?

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Introduction

Using information collected from over three years of interaction with rural communities on the north-western side of the Kruger National Park (KNP), we present here some insights into how these rural communities perceive the KNP fence. The information was collected through community workshops, focus group discussions, key informant interviews and a survey of 540 households, 270 of which owned cattle. In one of the workshops held in March 2010, several questions pertaining to how communities perceive fences were put up for discussion. Thirty seven participants, from six villages attended this workshop. Participants were divided into three groups; cattle and crop farmers (14), youths (14), and tourism business entrepreneurs (9). Each group discussed the questions and gave feedback in a plenary session where there was further discussion of the issues.

Studies by Els (1995), Mabunda (2004), and Anthony (2007), have reported different findings in attitudes of communities towards the KNP, which vary between different villages and over time. Anthony (2007) found that attitudes varied from positive, neutral to negative. Negative attitudes toward KNP were as a result of damage causing animal (DCA) problems and inadequate maintenance of the KNP border fence. These previous studies focused on the attitudes and perceptions of rural communities towards the KNP. This contribution focuses on the attitudes and perceptions of these communities toward the existence of the KNP fence.

Perceptions on the role of fences

Contrary to prior expectations that rural communities had a negative attitude towards the KNP fences, we found that community members did not in fact have a problem with the fence per se, but rather the fact that the fence did not successfully keep damage causing animals (DCAs) from crossing over into people's fields and the grazing land. Discussion about the KNP fences inevitably led to discussion on crop destruction and livestock depredation, and the losses that these communities have suffered due to lack of compensation payment. Despite these problems the communities pointed out that that they do not have a problem with the KNP fence and there was a general agreement on the need for the fence. We however, found that there were differences in understanding of the purpose of the KNP fences amongst community members.

Table 2.6.1 shows that the farmers were aware of the role that fences play in disease control. This supported our earlier findings from the survey of 270 cattle farmers, that revealed that 86% of the farmers were aware of the redline zone for disease control. In the workshop, the farmers indicated that

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they were aware that the fence around the KNP was owned by the Veterinary Section of the Department of Agriculture. They further explained that the KNP staff had communicated through the Hlanganani forum that the fence did not belong to the KNP and hence responsibility for its maintenance did not lie with the KNP. The farmers indicated that the poor state of the KNP fence had resulted in significant losses to the communities through livestock depredation, crop destruction and loss of human life. Similar to findings by Mabunda (2004), these communities view the KNP as a national heritage site to be proud of, and also appreciate the biodiversity conservation role of the park. The farmers cited two plant species that were previously available locally, but have since been destroyed and can now only be found inside the park.

Table 2.6.1. Community responses to questions pertaining fences.

Why is there a fence around the KNP?		Groups responding
<i>To prevent dangerous animals from crossing to our areas</i>		<i>All groups (100%)</i>
<i>Prevent animals with infectious diseases from the park to cross and infect our cattle; especially buffalo</i>		<i>Farmers only (33%)</i>
<i>To preserve nature</i>		<i>All groups (100%)</i>
<i>To prevent people from entering the park for poaching</i>		<i>Youth only (33%)</i>
<i>To protect the community from KNP animals</i>		<i>All groups (100%)</i>
What would happen if the KNP fences were brought down?		
Good things		Bad things
<i>People will get access to meat</i>		<i>Wildlife will kill domestic animals</i>
<i>More access to residential, grazing and cropping land</i>		<i>Wildlife will kill people</i>
<i>Free entrance to the park</i>		<i>Diseases would spread</i>
<i>Availability of traditional medicine</i>		<i>Elephants would damage our crops</i>
<i>Get access to more firewood and mopane worms</i>		
<i>We could start income generating projects that need larger amounts of land.</i>		

Communities on the northern borders of the KNP are characterized by high unemployment rates, poverty, high dependence on natural resource based livelihoods and limited livelihood opportunities (Chaminuka, et al., 2008). Whilst it is generally perceived that by being close to the KNP these communities derive benefits through employment and business opportunities, the extent to which these communities has been able to benefit economically from the KNP is limited (Mabunda 2004; Chaminuka, et al., 2008).

The KNP and the fence around it impacts both positively and negatively on the livelihoods of these rural communities. Workshop participants were asked whether or not the KNP fence prevented them from undertaking some activities to earn income. By a show of hands in the plenary, 20 out of the 37 participants (54%) agreed that the fence did in fact hinder their opportunities to generate income. There was consensus on this view in the farmer's group. This is despite the fact that the farmers also acknowledged the role the fence

played in disease control. In the youth group and the tourism entrepreneurs groups, consensus could not be reached on whether or not the fence prevented communities from performing some income generating activities. It was pointed out that whilst the fence did prevent people from accessing some natural resources, it also presented opportunities to earn income from tourism related businesses. We however, observed that compared to the other sides of the KNP such as the Paul Kruger and Numbi gates, next to the Punda Maria gate there was almost no visible tourism related business, except for the craft shop at Punda Maria, and two small privately owned lodges.

When asked what would likely happen should the KNP fence be taken down, the communities cited both the good and the bad. Table 2.6.1 shows that most of the perceived advantages that would accrue to local people, if the KNP fence was removed, have to do with access to land and land based resources inside the KNP. This was also echoed in discussions where one of the participants said: *'The KNP should not take down the fence because it is there to preserve the national heritage, they should only move it into the park for some kilometres inside to allow us to have more land'*.

The poor state of the fence and the problem of DCAs are considered to create obstacles to improving livelihoods, pursuing economic diversification particularly with regards to crop and livestock farming (Anthony, 2007). From the survey, we found that about 25% of cattle households lost cattle to depredation between and including June 2005-June 2008. Some (13%) of the households without cattle cited problems with wildlife as the main reason that they would not want to own cattle. About 23% of the cattle farmers were of the view that they were disadvantaged by being within the redline zone. The reasons for this included that it limited their opportunities for livestock marketing (32%) and also increased the risk of disease and livestock depredation.

Conclusion

Although there are some benefits that are associated with the KNP, the costs of being adjacent to the KNP for some members of the community are far higher than the benefits. Maintenance of the KNP fence is not only important for disease control and wildlife, but it may be in the best interest of all parties for the KNP fence to be maintained since wildlife also faces risk of extermination outside the park. Farmers suggested that they should be trained and employed to patrol the fence for some nominal fees. This would reduce problems of depredation whilst generating additional income for the households. Repairs of damaged fences and responses to reports of lions escaping the park should be treated as a priority by the KNP.