

“Sukuzincandela umgalagala”

Finding solutions to poverty and conservation without biting off more than can be chewed.

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I discovered a traditional Xhosa idiom “*Sukuzincandela umgalagala*” while conducting my research in a rural community on the Wild Coast, in the Eastern Cape. The idiom means “do not cut more of the *umgalagala* tree than you can handle”. It is a Xhosa version of the English “don’t bite off more than you can chew”. This saying, *Sukuzincandela umgalagala* came from the process of cutting the *umgalagala* tree (*Buxus macowanii*). It produces an acidic sap that burns the eyes of the person cutting it, causing much pain and discomfort. Although the tree bares a ‘bite’ the wood that it provides is beautiful, strong, resistant to pests and very versatile; therefore the discomfort is worth the reward.

The relationship between the rural people of this village and their surrounding forests is a complicated one. It is an old, mysterious relationship that has not only survived the impact of colonialists, but also the wrath of the apartheid era. Today this relationship is challenged by poverty and unemployment, amongst other underlying factors. These forests are important support structures for people during times of need. Drought, unemployment and sickness can strike at anytime, and often rural people do not have the financial support to help them out of these difficult periods. These forests provide freely available ‘ecological shops’, that contain firewood for cooking, timber for building, food for sustenance, medicines to cure illness, clean water, clean air, not to mention all the aesthetic and spiritual benefits they provide. In this village the forests play hosts to rituals with meanings that run deeper than those of cutting wood or collecting food. Divine traditional healer rituals in the woodlands decipher the ancestor’s riddles. Young boys become men in these forests through initiation camps, and the forests act as teachers, educating children about the complexities of nature, while they play in the trees. Today natural resource managers and governmental organisations are beginning to realise the importance of traditional social systems in resource management, and new tools are being used to combine indigenous management with more contemporary management approaches. Community based natural resource management (CBNRM) is such a tool, used to integrate economic development and natural resource conservation. This tool tries to find practical ways in which people can continue to use their surrounding environment to complement their daily lives, but also find ways of maintaining healthy ecosystems that can benefit all. This is not as easy as it sounds. Understanding the underlying ecological, economic, social and physical factors influencing these systems requires some scientific acrobatics. Another challenge is finding ways to communicate with everyone involved: teachers, farmers, children, governmental personnel, resource managers, policy makers, and so on. However, science is universal. Realising this, and using science in the creative way of

its founding fathers, without all its contemporary “complicated-and-sterile” connotations, makes overcoming those communication challenges less problematic. This science is sensitive and complex, and understanding it requires a multidisciplinary approach. In my research I created a picture of what was in the forests. I looked at what trees and plant species filled the forests, what useful species were hiding in them, how dense the forests were and how the forests had been used by different groups of people. I took all these different factors and grouped the forests according to what made them similar and what made them different. I then worked with the surrounding communities spending much time discussing their relationships with the forests, what they used from them and how they appreciated them. I worked with traditional healers, old men, young women, children; no group was left out. With the combined ecological knowledge I gained through botanical surveys, and the interviews with people, I managed to map out the people-forest relationships. With these findings from my research, the community later designed their own forest management plan, and are now actively involved in the process of regaining control of their own surrounding natural resources. Taking on this project for my Environmental Science Honours degree at Rhodes University, I felt initially that I may be biting off more than I could chew. In hindsight, I realise that practical solutions to safeguarding important ecological safety nets for the rural poor are achievable, as long as one maintains a healthy balance between sound science, and creative human input. In reality its collective understanding, with everyone contributing in their own way bound by a common goal is like cutting the *umgalagala* tree: the challenge is worth the reward.