

## **ABSTRACT**

Environmental justice has emerged as one of the core concepts in environmental and nature conservation discourse in recent years, prompted by the growing focus on human development and the promotion of the rights of indigenous peoples. Numerous indigenous groups were displaced and marginalised with the advent of protected area declarations and establishment of nature reserves and wildlife parks throughout the world, and especially in Africa. These groups, who previously achieved their livelihood provisions from these areas rich in biodiversity, found themselves having to find alternative means of living, which were often unsustainable. The injustice of these historical actions, which are perpetuated even today, have led to a focus on adopting social justice tenets into the environmental space, and making strides to redress the situation and reintegrate indigenous groups into protected areas, providing an opportunity to continue nurturing biodiversity but without compromising the ability of local communities to sustainably utilise natural resources.

The environmental justice framework is explored in this research using a protected landscape approach lens within the context of a biodiversity conservation development project in Swaziland. Environmental justice principles of inclusion and exclusion, equitable access and distribution of resource, as well as the unanticipated impact of power relations upon such justice issues, constitute the bulk of my findings in my empirical chapters. The results from the research revealed that the role of power was so entrenched in the rural societies used as cases in this study, and was a representation of the general experience of all rural, traditional communities in Swaziland, indicative of the manner in which power, as possessed and exercised by the elite, permeates most thinking and action by the masses, who are subject to that power. This kind of power held by traditional leaders in the rural areas ultimately hinders the fulfilment of environmental justice, and only partially satisfies the conditions of the landscape approach, wherein, although significant time and money is spent by development agents towards people-integration into a primarily conservation-based programme, the preservation of nature - under protectionist modes – prevails.

Within the Eco-Lubombo Programme in the Lubombo region of Swaziland, interviews were conducted with a plethora of stakeholders, using interview guides that focused these interactions on environmental justice themes, without restricting the participants' general experience with conservation development projects. Project documents were made available to me, and these were tremendously in assisting me to acquire a sense of the complexity of such community development projects. Whilst the project planning and guides for implementation appear to be impeccable on paper, the contextual conditions continue to highlight the simmering tensions amongst such traditional spaces, which often prove to undermine the many hours of planning put in by project proponents. These tensions are generally divorced from the actual project, and precede the introduction of the project, but if unattended, they are often disruptive to the achievement of project goals. These potentially explosive community dynamics remain contained due to the reach of traditional powers, but people exercise covert resistance by remaining passive in development projects and excluding themselves from development activities.

The power of the rule of law in Swaziland, and its numerous devolved traditional institutions ensures that the individuals living and depending on these traditional systems remain subjects. Indeed, it fosters dependence on the ruling elite, as people's livelihoods at the most basic level are directly dependent on the prevailing traditional tenure system. My research found most community members to be very aware of their tenuous position as citizens and were either unable or reticent to speak up openly against their traditional leaders for fear of compromising their status within the community, as well as their potential to access and benefit from resources in in their many forms. The majority of the community is primarily dependent on subsistence farming, which is dependent on having good quality land, and access to sufficient grazing lands, as well as access to natural resources; the lack of secure tenure therefore may serve to incapacitate many members of a community, and provide surety that they will continue to support the traditional institutions.

It is important to note that since this research report was compiled and submitted for examination, the country name 'Swaziland' was changed to 'Eswatini' (officially confirmed through a National Gazette: 'Legal Notice No. 80 of 2018' published on the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 2018 and signed by His Majesty King Mswati III). 'Eswatini' is the vernacular translation of Swaziland, and has been used informally in the country for several years, as well as when speaking in the local SiSwati language. A number of national institutions have also changed their company names to reflect this name change.