

THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY IN THE USE AND MANAGEMENT OF FOREST RESOURCES AT ONGOYE FOREST

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Abstract

Traditional authorities have the capacity to determine whether forest resources under their jurisdiction are actively managed or unsustainably used. This capacity is critical given recent government policy to devolve responsibility for the management of natural resources to local communities; traditional authorities (tribal chiefs) are key stakeholders in this process. At Ongoye forest the local chief (*Inkosi Mzimela*) is also chairperson of the National House of Traditional Leaders in South Africa and commands wide respect from the community who adhere to rules on forest use prescribed by him. These rules supercede those of the local wildlife authority who are tasked with the management and conservation of this state owned forest. Fortunately, these rules are ecologically sustainable and support Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife (EKZNW) conservation policy.

From a questionnaire survey of 103 households (16%), 64% acknowledged the *Inkosi's* influence on forest management. However, 61% of households were dissatisfied with the *Inkosi's* autonomy over their right to use and access forest resources. The latter arises not from disrespect for the *Inkosi* but because the user community would prefer unrestricted access to forest resources. Because the introduction of new management structures by government, such as community forestry management initiatives, where the local community has the majority say in managing the forest, have proven to be divisive, causing conflicts of interest among stakeholders at the local level, it is suggested that more participatory management structures be sensitive to the role that the *Inkosi* and his council play. Furthermore, existing local structures, particularly the local tribal council should be trained and strengthened in basic forest management principles, to increase their legitimacy to users and EKZNW and efficacy in cooperatively managing local resources.

1. Introduction

Traditional authorities (chiefs and tribal councils) have the capacity to determine whether forest resources under their jurisdiction are actively managed or unsustainably used. This capacity depends largely on their relative strength and/or weakness, and is critical given recent government policy to devolve responsibility for the management of natural resources to local communities. In South Africa, prior to 1994, rural people were mostly led by traditional authorities, which were largely responsible for setting and enforcing controls and regulations with respect to access and use of indigenous resources. These authorities were powerful institutions with absolute authority that were respected and obeyed (Keulder, 1998; Oomen, 2005).

Since 1994, the South African government has introduced legislation designed to establish accountable, democratic local institutions (Ntsebeza, 2000). Alongside this there has been a move to strengthen traditional authorities' power, particularly in the ownership and administration of land rights (Ntsebeza, 2005). However, despite this, traditional leadership has become increasingly weak and is losing legitimacy among people relative to local government and other structures (Nomtshongwana, 1999; Rihoy, 1999; Mukamuri, 2000; Obiri & Lawes, 2002; Robertson & Lawes, 2005): 'Two Bulls in a Kraal' (Oomen, 2005). Ironically, the move by government to introduce new legislation has disempowered traditional institutions, often denying them statutory responsibility over land and resources (Grundy *et al.*, 2002). For instance, at villages surroundings KwaYili and iGxalingenwa State Forests in KwaZulu-Natal, local communities do not consider the *Inkosi* as the custodian of the forests and his authority is weak relative to the local party political councilor (Nomtshongwana, 1999) – resulting in the overexploitation of these forests (Nomtshongwana, 1999; Robertson & Lawes 2005).

Where traditional authorities are strong, they can have a positive effect on the management of resource use, particularly where forests have been regarded as sacred places where chiefs and headmen are buried, such as the Thathe forest in Limpopo (Sikhitha, 1999), Nkandla forest in Zululand (CEAD, 1999) and Dukuzza forest in the Drakensburg Mountains (K. Cooper, pers. comm). In these situations, local communities respect traditional authorities and adhere to traditional norms and values (Keulder, 1998). Yet even though local level and traditional institutions are important in the management of forest resources,

there are conflicting views on their effectiveness (Nomtshongwana, 1999; Virtanen, 2000; Robertson & Lawes, 2005), for the following reasons: (1) chiefs can introduce traditional policies that are sometimes in conflict with government policies (CEAD, 1999; Virtanen, 2000; Grundy & Michell, 2004); (2) Amakhosi may ignore/disregard prescribed conservation policy from government if it contradicts a common traditional practice (CEAD, 1999); and (3) Amakhosi may abuse their authority for their personal benefit (Appiah, 2001; Shackleton *et al.*, 2000).

This study investigates the power dynamics in the local community at Ongoye forest, KwaZulu-Natal, with regard to forest control; including the power and influence of traditional local authorities over the use and management of forest resources. In particular we examine whether the influence of the traditional authority has benefited or been detrimental to the conservation of Ongoye forest.

2. Methods

The study was carried out at Ongoye forest in KwaZulu-Natal province (28°48'-28°53'S, 31°38'- 31°46'E) in the uMlalazi Municipality, about 10 km northwest of Mtunzini and 24 km east of Eshowe. Ongoye forest is located in a ward with a particularly powerful traditional leader, *Inkosi* Mzimela, who is also chairman of the National House of Traditional Leaders in South Africa. He is known to have strong views regarding the ownership and use of Ongoye forest (Hendry, 1998; Lewis *et al.*, 1999). Ongoye forest has been formally protected since about 1920 when it came under the control of the forestry department. In 1978 control was passed to the then KwaZulu Bureau of Natural Resources and in 1994 to EKZNW. However, traditional authority has also had considerable influence during and prior to this period (when the forest was a favoured haunt of the Zulu kings). Issues of use and access to Ongoye forest are important as the local community is dependent the forest particularly for fuelwood.

A questionnaire survey was carried out over 103 households (approximately 16%) in the Endlovini, Amanzamyama and Qwayinduku communities around Ongoye. The survey comprised a series of closed (symmetric five point Likert (1974) scale, binomial and multinomial) and open questions.

The following themes were central to the structure of the questionnaire:

- the demography of the user community, including respondent's age, gender, level of education, period of stay in the area, distance from the forest, income sources, and household size;
- stakeholder (EKZNW, users, local authority) interaction and their respective objectives and perceptions of the management of Ongoye forest;
- user perception and preference of forest ownership, access and law enforcement, and forest management systems;
- The *Inkosi's* authority over the use of forest resources.

The perceptions and attitudes of respondents to questions on the authority of the *Inkosi* and his influence on use and access to forest resources were determined using the most commonly-selected response (i.e., the modal class) from a frequency distribution of responses on the Likert scale (Likert 1974). Differences in opinion or choice were tested using the Chi-square goodness-of-fit statistic. Logistic regression was used to examine the putative influence of demographic and socio-economic variables on the power and influence of traditional authority on use and access. Two critical questions were examined; (1) The *Inkosi* has the power to decide who has the right to forest resources, and (2) who is the most influential person/institution when it comes to controlling the use of the forest at this time?

3. Results

3.1 Community demography and socio-economic status

Mean household size was 11.9 persons (± 10.0) and 76% ($n = 79$) of households had been resident in the area for >30 years. Over half of the community (51.5%) was unemployed, with almost all households (83.5%) dependent on government grants, supplemented by their small vegetable gardens. An equal number (83.5%) of households grew crops for subsistence purposes. Annual household income for ward 26 (the ward including the forest) of Umlalazi municipality in 2001 was R16 677 (Statistics South Africa: Census 2003). This is probably an inflated estimate as it includes all households in the ward, and not just those from the user community living immediately around the forest. The community did not have access to electricity and all the interviewed households were dependent on the forest for fuelwood.

3.2 Control and management of Ongoye

No local institution has sole responsibility for managing Ongoye forest. Although the state, through EKZNW, owns and is responsible for managing the Ongoye forest reserve, 31% of respondents thought that the *Inkosi* (through his tribal council) was responsible for managing the forest, while 29% were of the view that the forest was under the Community's control.

Many community members (40%) were in favour of the forest being under the *Inkosi's* control, while 30% felt that the community (independent of the *Inkosi's* tribal council) should take control of forest resources. About 20% did not have an opinion and 7.8% felt that EKZNW should have control over forest resources. Most respondents (70%) felt that the forest should be under community management, independent of the *Inkosi*. There was consensus (67%) that although the local authority ostensibly controlled and managed the forest, the residing committee (formed by the local authority) did not have capacity to ensure sustainable harvesting. Users (93%) felt there was a need for training the local committee to effectively manage resource use from Ongoye forest. Distance from the forest ($\chi^2 = 20.881$, $p < 0.0001$) and education level ($p < 0.025$) of respondents influenced respondents' opinions on who should control forest resources. The least educated respondents indicated that the *Inkosi* should control forest resources, those with only junior-primary school education felt that EKZNW or the community should control resources, while users with grade 10 (standard 8) education believed that the community, independent of the tribal council, should have control. People who stayed within 0.2 kilometres from the forest wanted the community to control the forest, while those who lived further from the forest indicated that the *Inkosi* and EKZNW were better placed to control the use of forest resources.

3.3 Power and influence of Traditional Authority (TL) at Ongoye

Most users (64%) thought that the *Inkosi* Mzimela (or his tribal council) was the most influential person/institution in terms of controlling forest use and access. 18.4% of the respondents thought that the *Inkosi* and EKZNW (they are regarded as working together) were most influential in controlling forest use. However, most respondents (61%; $\chi^2 = 40.641$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.0001$) felt that the *Inkosi* should not decide who has access to forest resources; only 30.9% supported the *Inkosi's* powers in this regard and 7.8% were ambivalent. Despite the community's obvious concern about the *Inkosi's* power to influence their use of the forest, half (50.5%; $\chi^2 = 90.519$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.0001$) of all respondents reported that the *Inkosi* was the most respected authority controlling the forest, while 33% thought that both the *Inkosi* and EKZNW commanded the same respect and 12.6% felt that EKZNW was more respected than the *Inkosi*. Users (58.3%) were most likely to obey rules imposed by either the *Inkosi* or EKZNW with regard to forest use and access, 33% were more likely to obey the *Inkosi* than EKZNW, and only 6.8% were more likely to obey EKZNW than the *Inkosi*. These findings illustrate the power, respect and influence that the *Inkosi* has among the local community with regard to access and use of the forest, but also reveal some dissatisfaction among community members with the *Inkosi's* almost autonomous power in this regard.

Household size, site of settlement and gender affected users' opinions on the influence of traditional authority in controlling use and access to forest resources (Table 1; Likelihood ratio = 132.589, $\chi^2 = 69.409$, $df = 30$, $p < 0.0001$). Larger households (8 to 19 members) regarded the *Inkosi* as the most influential authority with regard to controlling the forest use, probably because larger households make greater demands on forest resources and have had to confront the rules of use and access to the forest imposed by the *Inkosi*. Both men and women thought that the *Inkosi* was more influential in controlling forest use and access, but more women than men thought that EKZNW was equally influential. This is because women typically collect resources and use the forest more often than men, and therefore more frequently encounter EKZNW officers. Users at Qwayinduku did not mention the *Inkosi* as an influential person/institution, while those at Amanzamyama regarded the *Inkosi* as the only important person/institution in controlling forest use and access. Endlovini dwellers were spread across those who thought the *Inkosi* was solely influential (as the majority) and those who also included EKZNW (Figure 1). Overall, it appeared that the reason users have refrained from openly harvesting forest resources is that conservation practices at Ongoye forest were underpinned by strong traditional (traditional leadership) practice.

4. Discussion

The local traditional authority, *Inkosi* Mzimela, and his tribal council is the most powerful institution at Ongoye forest with regard to controlling the use of and access to forest resources. Users feared the *Inkosi* and as a result did not wish to appear before his traditional court, which adjudicated matters of illegal forest

use. The *Inkosi* was also widely regarded as working with EKZNW, and together the two institutions are largely responsible for the maintenance of sustainable harvesting levels in the forest (Boudreau *et al.*, 2005). Unlike other South African forests (Sikhitha, 1999: Thate forest in Limpopo; CEAD, 1999: Nkandla forest in KZN), protection of resources was not based on any sacred value, nor was it based on traditional authority's capacity to manage sustainable off-take from the forest. The *Inkosi's* (local authority's) positive contribution was only an implementation of rules that were favorable to the policies of EKZNW. Thus there is a need to train the local authority in managing Ongoye forest. Furthermore, and because of *Inkosi's* power there was no conflict between democratic and hereditary institution (TA), unlike other forests in South Africa (Robertson & Lawes, 2005; Nomtshongwana, 1999).

Recent changes in government policy have created a participatory role for communities in managing natural resources. This approach has arisen from the finding that local communities are frequently unwilling to be the sole custodians and managers of forest resources because they lack the skills and finances to do so (Obiri & Lawes, 2002). The devolution of management powers to the local level has put the spot-light on the complex dynamics of local management institutions. At issue is the ownership, power relations (relative to other local stakeholders and in relation to forest resources) and influence of traditional authority (the *Inkosi*) on the management of natural resources. At Ongoye, EKZNW currently manages the forest and is willing to engage in cooperative management with the community, but to some extent is deterred from doing so by the authoritarian approach of the *Inkosi*. Furthermore, the powerful *Inkosi* affects the participatory role that the community currently plays, and the community has indicated that they would like more involvement in making management decisions. However, the community's willingness to control the forest was intrinsically linked to their interest in accessing and using forest resources and not necessarily with the sustainable management of these resources. The power and influence of the *Inkosi* was seen by the community as restricting user access and control of forest resources. Thus, in terms of the conservation of the forest, the *Inkosi's* dominant role is vital at this time. In creating any future participatory management institution it will be necessary to balance community opinion against their respect for traditional authority in developing a suitable committee structure for meaningful conservation of the forest so that usage patterns continue to be sustainable.

Participatory management institutions created by the state seek to distribute power among local stakeholders in managing forest resources. For instance, in participatory forest management all the stakeholders including the community, EKZNW and the tribal authority work together in the management of forest resources. Given the general feeling by users that they needed to be more involved, and that the *Inkosi* was equally powerful and feared by the community, it is unlikely that the *Inkosi* would tolerate too much dilution of his powers and be easily receptive to a participatory institution managing the forest. However, the current *Inkosi* has a positive influence on the management of the forest, but should he be replaced by another leader less interested in managing the forest, this would have dire consequences for the management of resources as there is no participatory local structure managing the forest. Thus, it would seem prudent to develop a participatory forest management institution at Ongoye, in spite of the anticipated reluctance of the *Inkosi*, that takes cognizance of the *Inkosi's* role, but that provides a framework for the future management of the forest should the leadership change.

5. Conclusions

Inkosi Mzimela and his tribal council is the most powerful institution at Ongoye forest with regard to the use and management of forest resources. Together with EKZNW the two institutions ensure the current largely sustainable use of forest resources. There was no local participatory institution with sole responsibility of managing the forest at Ongoye. Users on the other hand, were of the view that a local structure independent from the tribal council was essential for the management of the forest. This local structure would have to be trained to manage the sustainable use of forest resources. The positive influence of the *Inkosi* on conserving the forest should be taken advantage of by EKZNW and a participatory forest management structure should be worked out that has a role for the *Inkosi* in ensuring the sustainable use and management of forest resources. Finally, given the strength of traditional leadership, the local tribal council should be trained and strengthened in terms of their capacity to manage natural resources (Lawes *et al.*, 2004; Todd *et al.*, 2004) to increase their legitimacy in the eyes of users and EKZNW.

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Addendum

Table 1. Multinomial logistic regression of relationships between socioeconomic variables and people's opinions on the influence of local stakeholders (the *Inkosi*, EKZNW, the *Inkosi* together with EKZNW) in terms of use and access to forest resources

Effect	-2 Log Likelihood of Reduced Model	Chi-Square	df	p
Intercept	132.589	0.000	0	.
Age of respondents	139.951	7.362	3	0.061
Household size	141.723	9.134	3	0.028
Duration of stay	139.392	6.803	3	0.078
Distance from forest	136.881	4.293	3	0.232
Site of Settlement	169.569	36.980	6	0.000
Gender	143.102	10.513	3	0.015
Education	140.918	8.329	9	0.501

Age = Age of respondents to questionnaire; Household size = the number of people staying in the same household; Duration of stay = the period that a respondent stayed in the community; Distance from forest = Distance from the household to the closest point of the forest; Settlement = the site at which questionnaire was administered (Endlovini, Amanzamyama or Qwayinduku); Gender = gender character of the respondent; Education = the education level of respondents (with categories from 1 = no schooling to 4 = post matric qualification)