

Chapter 13

The use of traditional knowledge in the South African National Parks Imbewu Youth Programme: planting a seed of environmental awareness

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Introduction

South Africa National Parks (SANParks) has been undergoing a transformation towards a “socio-ecology” management approach, increasing participation in conservation. As part of this effort, the Imbewu Youth Programme focuses on traditional knowledge of retired indigenous park rangers – ‘wise elders’. The African oral tradition is used by the elders to communicate with youth during a four-day wilderness experience in the National Parks, hoping to promote interest in the natural environment and subsequent participation in conservation efforts. This is further encouraged in a six to nine month, outcome-based follow-up programme – the Junior Honorary Ranger Orientation Course – developing capacity to identify and address environmental problems.

South African National Parks – SANParks

Mission: To acquire and manage a system of national parks which represent the indigenous wildlife, vegetation, landscapes and significant cultural assets of South Africa for the pride and benefit of the nation.

Vision: To be the pride and joy of all South Africans

Transformation statement: South African National Parks (SANParks) is striving to transfer power and control of resources from the minority that had been appointed and privileged by an undemocratic system, to the majority that participates in the new democratic process. It is also directing the benefits of its activities to providing for all South Africans, rather than the wealthier and more privileged sections of society.

A new look at conservation

In the past, conservation areas in South Africa were largely established through enforcement and compulsory exclusion. The history of our national parks was often characterized by conflict between the Parks and neighbouring communities, mainly due to disrespect for local, indigenous knowledge and traditional conservation practices. The preservationist view, that conservation can only succeed if people and Parks are kept separate and that communities ‘contaminate’ natural wilderness, resulted in a rift between those who lived around national parks and those who were responsible for running the Parks. This adversarial relationship was exacerbated by the fact that communities often paid heavily for conservation in terms of loss of land, loss of access to natural resources and, hence, reduced economic opportunities.

International trends and the broad transformation of South African society demand that we revisit the ‘people *versus* Parks’ or ‘fences and fines’ approach that has characterized conservation for the greater part of this century. Successful long-term management of South Africa’s national parks depends on the co-operation and support of the local people. The time has come to look at how best the rift between Parks and people can be narrowed.

Local people must be involved in conservation once again. Parks cannot exist in isolation. If they are to be of relevance in a transformed South Africa, Parks will have to see themselves as part of the community in which they are situated and strive to be ‘good citizens’. This means they will need to recognize their links with and dependence on local communities, include local people in their planning and management programmes and, where possible, contribute to or facilitate community development. There is a critical link between development and conservation, and national parks are well placed to encourage sustainable living in the surrounding communities.

We also have to realize that our cultural heritage is inextricably linked to the biodiversity of our country. V M Toledo, in 1988, wrote the following about conservation in Mexico, and it is equally true in respect of South Africa:

In a country that is characterized by the cultural diversity of its rural inhabitants, it is difficult to design a conservation policy without taking into account the cultural dimension; the profound relationship that has existed since time immemorial between nature and culture. Each species of plant, group of animals, type of soil and landscape nearly always has a corresponding linguistic expression, a category of knowledge, a practical use, a religious meaning, a role in ritual, an individual or collective vitality. To safeguard the natural heritage of the country without safeguarding the cultures which have given it feeling is to reduce nature to something beyond recognition; static, distant, nearly dead.

V. M. Toledo (1988).

Intangible Heritage: Traditional knowledge

In Africa, great emphasis and importance is placed on the intangible heritage — that which exists intellectually in a culture, such as songs, myths, beliefs, superstition, oral history and poetry, and various other forms of traditional knowledge systems manifesting in cultural practices. Nature figures profoundly in this intangible heritage, which often encompasses the associations or histories of animals, plants and landscapes in oral traditions, and the knowledge stored in this way manifests in practices such as medicinal uses of plants, taboos and rituals related to species etc.

When colonialists arrived in Africa, they arrived with the myth that the indigenous peoples of Africa were barbarians, irresponsibly destroying resources due to a lack of law and ethics. They were unable to appreciate the local, indigenous knowledge – stored in intangible African heritage – about natural resources and cultural practices ensuring their conservation. Conservation is now, necessarily, undergoing transformation in order to address this lack of appreciation and respect for indigenous, local people and their heritage.

Transformation: Conservation and “social ecology”

Part of SANParks’ present transformational efforts (statement above) is the “social ecology” programme. This represents the fundamental shift from traditional conservation practices to a more holistic, integrated natural and cultural heritage management approach. It includes not only the management of biodiversity in conservation, but also the pursuit of “social ecology” – the long neglected but crucial people aspect in conservation. Social ecology brings vital people’s participation into conservation. Without it, the mission of SANParks would simply be unachievable. If conservation is the business of SANParks, then its key ingredients must be natural resources and people. For practical considerations, the focus of the social ecology programme is on the historically disadvantaged communities living in the neighbourhood of national parks.

SANParks' Imbewu Youth Programme (IYP): Environmental Awareness

The Imbewu Youth Programme follows the “social ecology” approach to conservation, contributing to the new political, economic and social realities of South Africa. It addresses the need to recognise the value of local, indigenous and intangible heritage. Focusing on the historically disadvantaged youth of townships and rural communities labelled as the “lost generation”, Imbewu aims to re-ignite self-identity within and amongst youth, acknowledging the cultural perspective in the broadening of environmental interpretation and education.

Aims and objectives:

- to contribute and support the development of a better understanding and appreciation of the conservation of biodiversity and its associated cultural assets among young people;
- to offer potential youth leaders a unique and personal experience of wilderness so that they may appreciate the importance of nature to humankind;
- to encourage and promote local indigenous ecological knowledge and interpretation of the environment.

Programme beneficiaries:

- secondary school going children and community youth;
- ages thirteen to twenty-one years;
- previously disadvantaged youth groups from townships and rural areas.

Programme Background

Imbewu (literally meaning seed) Youth Programme is a four-day entry point wilderness experience and environmental awareness programme that started in 1996. A joint venture between the South African National Parks (SANParks) and the Wilderness Foundation South Africa¹ (WF-SA), it enables South African youth to reclaim their birthright; a quality experience in South African National Parks.

One of the unique aspects of the Imbewu programme is that retired indigenous park rangers (‘wise elders’) are selected and trained as Imbewu teachers. Staff and local community members help in identifying these elders/retired game rangers as potential teachers. They are screened according to criteria including age (not younger than fifty-four), health, communication skills, knowledge, background and previous practice of cultural activities. The elders are trained in a number of fields to build their confidence in their new ‘job’.

As former employees of the National Parks, each elder/retired park ranger has on average thirty years experience working in the parks, mainly on foot. Most of them cannot read or write but they have traditional knowledge which they can disseminate through the Imbewu educational programme. Their lifetime experiences are a great resource for learning, both for other elders, Imbewu programme facilitators and youth. They can share their knowledge in home languages using the African oral traditions in an afro-centric context. The emphasis is on learning instead of teaching, and participants are involved through relating questions and discussions to their experiences and knowledge base.

Imbewu counters the euro-centrally biased approach to interpreting and communicating conservation messages among indigenous Africans – an approach that lacks association with local heritage and therefore tends to be difficult for indigenous peoples to comprehend and apply. Moreover, it presents the opening of doors for ordinary local people to freely share their stories and their understanding of nature, their intangible heritage, with youth.

Programme content

For four days, groups of eight to sixteen young people are exposed to the wilderness within a National Park. This time is spent, accompanied by the retired park rangers and field rangers (for safety) in a bush camp. It is intended that this personal experience will build an emotional attachment to the environment and National Parks. On return to their communities and schools, the youth are expected to start conservation clubs, school or community based environmental projects.

Each year geographical areas of operation are identified from which prospective participants will be selected. Eight youth (sixteen in Imbewu-Kruger) are selected for the Imbewu Course by the management at selected schools. The age group ranges from thirteen to twenty-one year-olds but can be over with community-based youth groups. The majority are from secondary schools (Grades eight to twelve). Most of them have never before set foot in their parks! The course/trail takes four days and three nights. Courses run throughout the year except during school examinations and some holidays.

Rustic, low-impact bush camps have been established as sites/camps for the Imbewu course. Currently there are four fully operational bush camps in our parks (Kruger, Addo Elephant, Tsitsikama and Namaqua National Parks). No structures are erected other than ablutions facilities where the (potential) impact has been assessed. Participants sleep out in the bush, in the shelter of trees under an open sky. In cases where there are dangerous animals in the vicinity, an electric fence is put up for participants to reside within. During the day time the participants go on trails with the elders.

• ***Environmental interpretation and African traditions***

The importance of the natural environment to African indigenous communities is apparent at all levels and is stored in and by the people. Respect for the environment, and the precarious balance between culture and nature, is manifest in cultural values, beliefs and taboos, and expressed in all manner of ways, from local language, taxonomy, proverbs, songs, folk lore and stories, to dances, myths, rituals, totems, agricultural practices, equipment and materials. However, with the changing times, the younger generations are often not inheriting this wealth of knowledge and the inherent concern for ecosystem management.

Whilst sitting around the campfires at night, as well as during the trails and visits to local cultural site (for example Masorini in Kruger), the retired game-ranger elders draw on traditional knowledge – intangible heritage – interpreting the natural environment for the youth. They share knowledge about the flora, fauna and topography of sites, historical links, conservation ethics and community wildlife laws with the youth.

Participants identify and learn about species, discovering, for example, the medicinal properties of plants. Examples include the weeping wattle tree used for cleansing bad spells in a village or yard; Aloe which can be used for blood cleansing and for the treatment of burns; and the use of Buffalo-thorn tree – *Ziziphus mucronata* – to heal abscesses having mixed the leaves in hot water.

Using the oral tradition of sharing knowledge, subjects discussed include taxonomy, proverbs and taboos related to nature and conservation. African folk stories are of great use having didactic ethical elements (parallel to Aesop's fables in Europe).

• ***Local language: taxonomy***

Various places are named according to the totem animal of the clan, or because of animals or plants found in or dominating the area. For example, *Lesetlheng* is so-called because 'mosetlha' (Weeping wattle – *Peltophorum africanum*) are the dominant trees in the area, and the place name *Dithabaneng* translates as 'place of the hills'.

In addition to places, examples of animal taxonomy related to local language are common. An example is the story of the Batswana people who, when migrating, encountered hundreds of herds of buffalo for the first time and asked themselves in shock: “*Nare ke eng dilo tse?*” (What are these?). From this exclamation ‘*nare*’ came to mean buffalo in Setswana (the language spoken by the Batswana people in Botswana).

- **Local language: proverbs**

Proverbs are another example of intangible heritage (said to express the gravity of meaning). Different indigenous communities have proverbs peculiar to their environmental setting, upholding their values, morals and overall way of life. These proverbs are mainly composed of natural things such as animals, plants, landscapes and extraterrestrial objects like clouds, sun, moon and lightning.

For example, African proverbs include “*Ose bone thola borethe, teng gay one go a baba*” which translates ‘Do not adore the smoothness of the bitter-apple, it is acrid inside’. Through reference to experiences with apples, the proverb warns “Do not be deceived by a pleasing exterior, people can be deceitful”. Another example is the proverb “*Lesilwana la go leswafatsa sediba, letla bonwa le nwa kae?*” which translates “Idiot who dirties the pool where will he drink?” The meaning of this proverb: “If you use something now do not waste it as you may need it tomorrow”. Relating to daily life, this proverb communicates a strong and clear conservation message.

- **Local beliefs**

Unique natural features are often regarded as sacred. As such, it is a taboo to do certain things in such places. For instance there are/were customs and traditional practices surrounding water. Children were warned that urinating in a river would change them to the opposite sex! This myth was probably sufficiently frightening to prevent people urinating in streams. This would have limited a disease like bilharzias. The bilharzias parasite is passed on from human urine and faeces to small water snails and then through its life cycle back to people via the water.

Another belief influencing people collecting waters is that of Nguni water collectors. They say that where there are frogs one does not find sweet water. Frogs are eaten by hammerkops *Scopus umbretta* (“the lighting bird” or “bird of the witches”), and the prospect of collecting water by a ‘witch bird’ was a terrifying prospect.

Moreover, large bodies of perennial water are believed to have a big snake ‘*mmamogaswa*’/‘*kgwanyape*’ deep inside (e.g. Zambezi River and Nyami nyami legend). Some *sangoma* (traditional healer) initiates have to go deep into such waters to be licked by “the snake”. The “snake” should never be disturbed – suggesting a conservative treatment of the river. Once disturbed it flies from with a tornado-like gale force wheel wind disturbing anything in its way.

- **Community law and traditional control over the destruction and consumption of wild animals**

Community laws have traditionally controlled the use of common species for the benefit of the community as well as enabling population protection. For example, community law reserved the destruction and consumption of highly endangered and ecologically important species (such as vultures, ox-peckers, egrets, secretary birds, pythons, and monitor lizards) for traditional healing and today some communities do not eat these species. Similarly, the community chief would dictate (and thus control) the frequency with which a regiment of males from the community could carry out a traditional game hunt.

- **Taboos**

A number of interesting taboos reinforce traditional community laws. For example, swallows, frogs and millipedes are viewed as God's children of rain; therefore their appearance is regarded as a forecast of rain. Accordingly it is believed that the destruction of these animals would result in a severe drought. It follows that although the millipede provides a very effective medicinal powder for eye infection, this powder may only be obtained from millipedes dying from natural causes. If killed either deliberately or by accident, the culprit must exonerate himself by counting the millipede's legs. Considering the number of legs on a millipede and the complicated traditional counting method, this constituted an extremely arduous task, deterring people from killing them.

- **Indigenous African games**

Whilst on the Imbewu course, the young people also play indigenous African games such as morufa/ncuva, a board game, requiring a high degree of thinking and problem solving. The game used to be played by men in the late afternoon under the shade of a tree, using the pips of the *morula* fruit.

- **Solitaire**

Another experience is a 'solitaire'. The youth spread out in a safe place and observe, feel and smell the natural environment for up to thirty minutes. During the solitaire participants contemplate how they "communicated" with Mother Nature and later share their experience this through poems, drawings or written songs. Participants react positively to these activities, as the following example proves:

*"Nature is beautiful
Interesting things on earth
Trees are green and rivers are flowing to Mozambique
Birds singing songs with different languages
Skies are blue
Wind blowing, from north to south
Good smelling from tree flowers
All things bright and beautiful
The lord made them all"*

Douglas Hlatswayo

- **Workshop session**

Part of the camp programme is a workshop session which takes place on the afternoon of the second day. The aim is for participants to share information on what they are/are not doing within their various schools. They also discuss their impressions, the potential for sharing experiences and the need for youth involvement in environmental awareness. Participants are also guided on what they can do as ambassadors for conservation when they return home. This includes establishing conservation clubs and registering for the Junior Honorary Rangers Orientation Course that will give them additional guidance regarding positive involvement in conservation. Once they have established a club or become a Junior Honorary Ranger, participants are expected to take further conservation courses annually. This is in order to keep up their membership, expand their knowledge and increase their influence in learning institutions and ambassadorial tasks. Results are satisfactory since quite a few do go back and make a visible difference.

Junior Honorary Ranger Orientation Course – follow up

A four day Imbewu course/trail is not enough to empower participants (especially those without any prior involvement in conservation related matters) to develop action-competence that will lead them to be proactive in conservation projects. A follow-up is a

must. As a result the Junior Honorary Rangers Orientation Course (JHROC) was adopted in 2001, created in response to the requests of participants who attended the Imbewu course and established clubs at their respective schools/communities. These participants now commonly apply to do this follow-up course, indicating the success of the Imbewu project.

The course is the joint effort of the SANParks Honorary Rangers, Imbewu management and the University of South Africa. The focus of the course is to empower youth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills and positive attitudes, so that they will be able to help SANParks and their communities at large. The Junior Honorary Rangers Orientation Course is a distance learning course. The course takes six to nine months. The training package for the Junior Honorary Rangers (JHR's) consists of:

- an interactive workbook;
- a one-day practical workshop;
- a portfolio;
- a practical group project based on another environmental course (e.g. cleaning campaign, donga reclamation, indigenous name of local tree and their uses, etc.).

The interactive workbook has to be completed by each applicant and must be submitted before the practical workshop as this will build on knowledge acquired through the completion of the workbook. The JHR facilitator in each region will present the practical workshop. The portfolio must be compiled throughout the year and must be submitted at the end of the year.

To qualify for appointment an applicant must successfully achieve the outcomes set for each of the above aspects of training. Once a qualified Junior Honorary Ranger, you have to secure this status by at least doing one other environmental related course (e.g. bird watching, tree identification etc.) and a project.

The interactive course workbook constitutes an orientation course, covering many aspects considered important for the Junior Honorary Ranger's, though not exploring these in depth. The underlying philosophy of the workbook is an outcome-based education which is learner-centred and the emphasis is not on what the facilitator wants to achieve, but rather on what the learner should know, understand, be able to do and to become. This means that:

- learners do not only have to gain knowledge, they must understand what they learn and must be able to develop appropriate skills, attitudes and values during the learning process;
- learners become active participants in the learning process and have to take responsibility for their own learning;
- learners are given the opportunity to work at their own pace and in different ways according to their individual abilities and levels of development.

The following research skills are included in the learning programme through the interactive workbook and associated small-group projects and/or portfolios:

- recognizing environmental problems;
- defining environmental problems;
- listening with understanding;
- collecting information;
- organizing information;
- analyzing information;
- generating alternative solutions;
- selecting a solution;
- developing a plan of action.

Evaluation

Strengths/successes of the Imbewu programme and JHROC

- using the social ecology approach and bringing people's participation into conservation;
- acknowledging South Africa's cultural diversity and ensuring an afro-centric, context-specific approach;
- broadening environmental interpretation and education;
- valuing, encouraging and promoting local indigenous and traditional empirical knowledge and language(s);
- improving understanding and appreciation of the conservation of biodiversity and its associated cultural assets;
- drawing on the great resources presented by the elders' lifetime experiences;
- identifying continuity between past practice and present conservation efforts;
- bridging the generations between elders and youth;
- reclaiming a birthright (quality experience in SANParks) and re-kindling self-identity within and amongst the "lost generation" of youth from townships and rural communities;
- taking a 'bottom-up' (school-based) approach with youth and helping them to come up with constructive proposals;
- developing positive perceptions among previously disadvantaged communities;
- stimulating ambassadorship at school, community and even national levels;
- emphasizing learner-centred (rather than teacher-centred), outcome-based education, empowering youth through knowledge, skills and positive attitude;
- using an experiential, participatory and interactive approach and facilitating sharing;
- enabling Imbewu programme facilitators (in addition to youth and other elders) to learn from the elders' knowledge and experience;
- following the Imbewu programme with the Junior Honorary Ranger Orientation Course;
- involving over 4500 youth leaders from six provinces in the programme (since 1996);
- establishing conservation clubs;
- spreading conservation messages to other schools through presentations and word of mouth;
- stimulating people to pursue training courses with other conservation institutions;
- celebrating environmental calendar days;
- motivating volunteer work (e.g. for local zoological gardens);
- having then potential to grow;
- attracting invitation to participate and present experiences elsewhere, such as during the Parks debate at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg 2002 and at the World Parks Congress in Durban 2003;
- achieving successes which provide good indicators of the programme's potential.

Weaknesses/threats/opportunities for improvement

- The success stories are isolated and just a drop in the ocean as most of the young participants disappear.
- Developing the elders' confidence in their role within the Imbewu programme is challenging as they do not necessarily see themselves as cornerstones of indigenous knowledge.
- When there is great linguistic diversity within an Imbewu group, language can present a challenge.
- The initial Imbewu experience is very short (four days) and there is no guarantee that it will be repeated.
- Pre and post-programme contact is required to enhance the experience.

- The follow-up programme should be sequentially linked to the experience – at the moment it is not sufficiently integrated with the Imbewu wilderness experience (it does not continue interaction with the elders and the use of traditional knowledge).
- The directorate’s priorities affect the operation of the programme due to resource allocation.
- The project is not cheap to run as very few participants can be taken each time.
- Funding dependency presents issues of sustainability.
- Organisational networking should be encouraged to share costs – however, collaboration/partnership (with the University of South African and the Wilderness Foundation SA) does not always work well and needs improvement.
- Thorough evaluation should be undertaken and necessary improvements made.

Conclusion

It is hoped that both SANParks and others can learn from the Imbewu programme experiences and work towards democratically empowering people to participate in the management of National Parks. Too often conservationists still underestimate the importance of a social ecology approach, or rather a ‘peoples’ approach to park management. Identifying and using the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples has significant potential for bridging the gap between the practices of the past and the needs of today. Focusing on commonality and learning, individuals, communities and conservation management bodies can productively work together towards goals for the greater good.

Notes

1. Wilderness Foundation South Africa is an NGO. www.wild.org/southern_africa/wf.html

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