



PARTNERSHIP

PERCEPTION

POACHING

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Fifteen of the past thirty months have been spent at my field site in the Kruger to Canyons Biosphere, South Africa. I lived in a small house on the boundary between the Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces, with the Kruger National Park (KNP) twenty minutes to the east and the Blyde River Canyon twenty minutes to the west. The Kruger to Canyons Biosphere (K2C) is a 4.8 million hectare region designated by UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme as being of high economic development and conservation importance. The aim of the Biosphere programme is to establish a scientific basis for the improvement of relationships between people and their environments.

The eastern portion of the K2C encompasses a section of the continent's flagship national park, Kruger National Park, from just north of the Phalaborwa Gate to the Paul Kruger Gate in the south. KNP is iconic; a world-renowned wildlife reserve roughly the size of New Jersey. It borders Zimbabwe to the north and forms a ~360km border with Mozambique to the east. To the west and south of the Kruger is a patchwork of private, provincial, and community owned protected areas managed for conservation. This network of protected spaces is collectively known as the Greater Kruger. The western portion of the K2C Biosphere includes the Blyde River Canyon, which is one of the largest canyons in the world and is also impressively biodiverse. In between the Kruger and the Canyon are the network of protected spaces, mining operations, and over 1.6 million people living in relatively high-density rural communities.



As much as the K2C is an impressive combination of geology, flora, and fauna, it also encapsulates a confluence of historical and current human conflict and challenges. While there was historically settlement in the region, forced relocations under the Apartheid government's homeland policies, as well as displacement during the creation of protected areas (e.g. national parks), caused the human population to both concentrate and grow. And though eco-tourism and mining in the areas provides some employment, there are few industry sectors to provide significant employment to support the population. And as is the case in protected area management around the world, these human dimensions have the capacity to undermine conservation activities.

The Greater Kruger area has long been renowned for ecotourism, but more recently the world is turning its eyes to the region as the epicentre of the 'War on Poaching'. In response to a rapid rise in rhino poaching, protected areas in the Greater Kruger have turned to militaristic tactics to curb rhino population declines. While this militaristic response may be seen as a stop-gap solution to the ultimate resolution

of eliminating demand for wildlife products, it is still critical to understand the effects these tactics (namely, 'Green Militarization') and rhetoric have on the communities surrounding protected areas. That is, it is important to identify potentially unintended consequences or second-order problems that may ultimately further threaten the integrity of protected areas and species within them.

The aim of my study is to determine the effectiveness of private nature reserve partnership programs at addressing development priorities in communities and alleviating conflict between private reserves and nearby communities related to development and wildlife conservation. Partnerships are transboundary management programs between private reserves and nearby communities. They are activities initiated or sponsored by the private reserve that act

to build constituency between the reserve and community. They include programs such as employment in the reserve, education programs held within the reserve or community, or financing infrastructure development in communities. Rhino poaching is most topical internationally, but I am also interested in occurrences of other types of conflict such as community demonstrations and complaints against the reserve, or wildlife damaging community property or killing livestock.



White rhinos with poached horns in rehabilitation at the Hoedspruit Endangered Species Center in the K2C and warning signs to poachers dot the roadsides and fence lines throughout the area. (credits: Kyle Clifton)



I conducted semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from private nature reserves and members from three case-study communities, each of which was adjacent to a different private reserve. I spoke with reserve stakeholders about (a) community partnership programs with which their respective lodge or reserve was engaged, (b) deterrents to initiating or engaging in these programs, and (c) their perceptions of the degree of conflict with communities and of the efficacy of these programs to address development goals or alleviate conflict. The general topics of the study—conflict with communities, the efficacy of development programs, and rhino poaching—are all sensitive subject matter for the reserves. Information regarding anti-poaching initiatives in particular is held very close to the chest. Detection, response, and intelligence operations are largely carried out as covertly as possible. Because of this, it was crucial for me to spend time in the area to meet at least once with key stakeholders. This helped stakeholders to understand the aims and desired outcomes of my study and to establish a relationship to build trust.

Interviews with community members were conducted with the aid of an interpreter, Lydia Mashabane, when necessary. Lydia is affiliated with a local organization called Plough Back to the Communities. They collaborate with the University of the Witwatersrand and local tribal authorities in assisting researchers working in communities in the area. The motive of their work is to provide research findings back to the communities to facilitate interventions that contribute to the improvement of the standard of living of communities [ploughback.org]. Linking with Plough Back to the Communities facilitated my community entry and helped to establish trust with community leaders, and it will also assist in the crucial final step of providing findings back to the communities within which I collected data.

While there, I lived at the University of the Witwatersrand Rural Facility (WRF). This is a large property that offers accommodations for short-term,



Article title images: White rhino and the Blyde River Canyon in the K2C. Above: a community member showing off the mat she just completed. Left: Lydia Mashabane and the author. (credits: Kyle Clifton)

long-term, and permanent researchers, students, or tourists. WRF provided an environment that allowed me to mingle with other researchers studying a variety of topics—from HIV intervention, to the economics of natural resource use, to witchcraft beliefs in local cultures. I was able to link with professors there to receive guidance and feedback on the design and implementation of my project. I also collaborated with and was aided by researchers at the South African

Wildlife College. Affiliation with known, South African institutions helped to validate me as a researcher and will help in the future to disseminate findings to both groups of stakeholders, and add my work to the broad body of knowledge and research on the area.

Results of my study will be provided to participating reserve wardens and executive committees, as well as Tribal authorities and Community Development Forums of participating communities. It is my goal to provide communities with relevant information to support effective communication with adjacent reserves, as well as to aid reserves in tailoring their partnerships with communities to improve relationships, reduce conflict, and achieve conservation goals.

Collaboration with local actors and institutions enabled my fieldwork by facilitating access and encouraging trust. But, more fundamentally, it instilled value in my project by shaping its design to ensure it was addressing a needed knowledge gap and by integrating it into the broader body of work in the region. The merit of the connections and collaborations I mentioned here, as well as others I have been able to make, is one of the biggest takeaways of my time in South Africa. While I came to study the effects of partnerships between reserves and communities, I quickly found how much my study itself was affected by partnerships.

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