



LAND

Partners in conservation

RURAL COMMUNITIES ARE INVOLVED IN developing new solutions to the hunger for land and employment — biospheres, a form of conservation cooperative in which people are integrally involved in the conservation process.

The idea has its origins in Russia, where it was first introduced about 22 years ago. Today there are about 270 biosphere reserves in more than 60 countries around the world.



COMING INTO LAND: Biospheres offer a unique joint venture

In South Africa, the concept is still a new one; reserves have been introduced by the Natal Parks Board (NPB) at Bulwer, Kamberg, Pongolapoort, Underberg, Coleford and Cobham state forest.

These biospheres generally consist of three zones:

- A core area, which is essentially a wilderness area where the environment is formally protected.
- A buffer area of protected game or

nature reserve.

- A transitional area surrounding the buffer zone which involves land used for agriculture, commercial tourism and development.

The latest attempt to form a biosphere is being played out in the Weenen-Escort district, where the NPB and local farmers are starting to develop the Thukela Biosphere Reserve. They have put forward an ambitious plan for what could be the province's biggest game reserve.

Conflict and suspicion

The area has a long history of conflict between white farmers and black communities manifested in evictions, stock impounding, stock theft, assaults and deaths. Given this history of conflict, communities in the area have viewed the biosphere reserve plan with caution and suspicion.

The present economy of the region, which is mainly dependent on agriculture, is very poor. Intensive maize or cattle farming is not suitable or profitable in the area and farmers are heavily dependent on subsidies.

If it succeeds, the reserve would radically change the economy of the district. Maize and cattle farming would become insignificant.

The NPB and farmers involved in the plan feel the reserve could develop in a similar way to Mala-Mala and Londolozi. This block of north-eastern Transvaal reserves is the largest generator of income, employment and government revenue in their subregion. If the Thukela Biosphere fails to meet these expectations, the Weenen/Escort areas' economic activity will decline even further.

Role-players

There are three major role-players in the Thukela project, each with their own agenda:

- The NPB: The parks board has had difficulty securing funding to buy land. The major benefit of the biosphere plan

is that it provides a means of extending and privatising conservation. Game stock could be bought cheaply from NPB reserves, particularly in Weenen, where there is difficulty in sustaining present stock because of the drought. In turn, the NPB would be able to draw on this stock for breeding.

- White farmers: They appear most interested in the economic viability of game farming, linked to eco-tourism. Some farmers also see an opportunity to secure their farms against livestock poaching and illegal grazing.

- Local communities: Communities stand to acquire more land within the biosphere's boundaries and, possibly, increased job opportunities. They are, however, still deeply mistrustful of what the reserve could mean. They believe there could be pressure to reduce their livestock, and fear eviction from farms in the biosphere. They also believe unemployment could increase because eco-tourism may not provide enough jobs.

Several meetings have already been held between farmers and the affected communities of Cornfields and Tembalihe. The key issue to emerge was the communities' need for more land, and the farmers' willingness to look at making this land available.

The farmers also offered assistance with farming methods, livestock marketing and water provision.

A subsequent meeting saw agreement on what land the communities would acquire. Still outstanding is the issue of how communities will acquire the extra 8 000 hectares of land. Farmers are insisting that the land be bought at market values, but communities say prices should be negotiated as the farmers have benefitted from apartheid over the years while communities have been impoverished.

The Department of Regional and Land Affairs has given a verbal commitment to help the communities buy this land.

— Estelle Randall (AFRA)