

Wetlands are among the Earth's most productive ecosystems. Communities around the world, and in South Africa, are dependent on wetlands for their livelihoods. The Water Research Commission (WRC) studied one of these wetlands, Mbongolwane, to investigate its potential role in generating economic development for the surrounding rural community in a sustainable way.

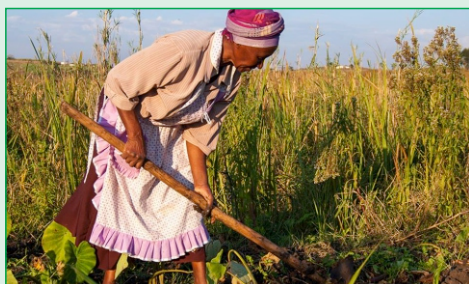
Mbongolwane is a large wetland (around 400 ha) located at the headwaters of the Amatigulu River in the KwaNtuli Tribal Authority, one of 14 tribal authorities located in the uMlalazi Local Municipality, 20 km west of Eshowe, in rural KwaZulu-Natal.

The overall aim of the WRC study was to investigate the viability of the Mbongolwane wetland to economically support the local community economically through the sustainable utilisation of natural resources. Among others, the study identified the key interventions required to enhance opportunities available in Mbongolwane; developed value chain opportunities for natural resources or ecosystem services available in the wetland; and developed a fundable business plan for five years for the development of the area.

Main results of the study

Agriculture and craft production value chains were selected for the investigations as these two activities account for the largest economic use of the wetland by the Mbongolwane community. Agriculture included wetland cropping (especially aMadumbe), livestock and sugarcane production around the wetland. From a craft perspective, fibre-based craft as well as other forms of craft were considered in the value chain analyses.

Most agricultural production was found to be for subsistence purposes, and most challenges were experienced in the input and primary production components of the value chain. This indicates that extension support and training is necessary as a first step to increase yields. Little, if any value addition was observed. Demand for agricultural produce locally was found to be substantial, and this is suggested as the first marketing point for agricultural produce. Specifically aMadumbe has the potential to be beneficiated into further products, such as chips (similar to potato chips).



A member of the Mbongolwane community harvesting aMadumbe from the wetland.

In the case of craft production, barriers and regulators were identified along the value chain. However, the greatest challenge for craft was found to be securing markets for products, and new product development. This suggests that novel production methods should be supported. At the same time, support is necessary to re-establish relationships with existing markets while also engaging with new markets to develop this value chain further.

International exports have been tried, but the demand needs to be met by improving on enablers, such as better quality wetland plants (specifically reeds), and reliable stock or inputs, as well as investment in equipment to produce marketable products at the required speed.

From a wetland use and governance perspective, the study found that while there is a trend of declining use of the wetland for agriculture and harvesting of craft raw materials, many households still considered the wetland to be important for their livelihoods – for the production of crops in particular.



A member of the Mbongolwane community collecting reeds for weaving baskets.

Managing the wetland for the different economic uses is important. For example, the study showed rising conflict between wetland farmers and livestock owners as most cropping lands within the wetland are not fenced. Crafters who make use of wetland plants also expressed concern regarding livestock damage to their craft raw materials.

Finally, there was an overriding concern from wetland users in Mbongolwane that the wetland is drying out. While this needs to be considered within the context of the drought that is currently occurring in the area, users indicate that this is a trend that has been occurring over some time.

Recommendations

Effective governance of the use and management of the Mbongolwane wetland is necessary to ensure equitable, sustainable use of its resources. Current legislation prohibits wetland agriculture without the necessary permits. However, farmers will continue to farm the wetland, regardless of legislation limiting this, especially that wetlands retain water much longer during drought/low flows, concentrating users into a confined space which may lead to the degradation of this sensitive ecosystem.

The study found that the highest proportion of people deriving benefit from the wetland is those engaged in agriculture. This requires a new approach to regulating wetland use in a manner that accommodates both the need to protect the wetland and the important contributions that wetlands make to local livelihoods.

Training, extension support and mentorship – there are substantial capacity constraints within the Mbongolwane community in terms of technology ability and institutional capacity. A fundamentally developmental approach is therefore required.

Long-term support, training and mentorship are necessary to realise effective enterprise development associated with the wetland. Coordinated support, which is currently sorely lacking from provincial departments, in partnership with non-government and research organisations is necessary to increase primary production and to facilitate value-adding in order to build a vibrant local economy.

Finally, the participation by various organs of state in supporting the Mbongolwane community is critical, although it is acknowledged that the capacity of many agencies at a local scale is severely constrained. This means that the provision of support requires the participation in both the state and development practitioners, primarily non-government organisations (NGOs) and pro-poor market players.

Based on the findings of the field research, a business plan has been drawn up for the Mbongolwane community, particularly around supporting value chain development and for achieving better management of the wetland. In turn, this will enhance the ecosystem services provided by the wetland.