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# Relationship matters in conservation: Mngobokazi community and Phinda Private Game Reserve, South Africa

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**Abstract:** Local community members play a critical role in the success of conservation projects, which in turn have the potential to influence the perceptions of local people. Relationships matter when it comes to sustainable long-term conservation and community well-being. The study aims to establish the relationship between local communities and wildlife conservation organizations in the context of Phinda Private Game Reserve and the Mngobokazi community, located in South Africa. Data was collected using the qualitative methods of interviews and focus group discussions. The findings show that a symbiotic relationship between conservation organizations and local community members is critical in conserving the environment. The research indicates that both participation and benefits result in improved perceptions towards the protected area and a strong positive relationship. The accrual of benefits also appears to result in pro-environmental consciousness amongst community members. Several existing studies examine participation or benefit-sharing in community-based tourism in developing nations. However, less is known about the relationships between local communities and conservation organizations and the effect of participation and beneficitation on these relationships. This research narrows this gap in the body of knowledge by qualitatively examining a single case study. The findings add value to global collaborative efforts aimed at achieving positive relationships between communities and conservation management.

**Keywords:** benefits; local communities; participation; perceptions; pro-environmental consciousness

## 1. Introduction

Participation is important in the building of strong relationships (Gohori and van der Merwe, 2022; Htoo et al., 2023). Relationships are anchored on elements such as trustworthiness, communication, fairness and participation (Musavengane and Kloppers, 2020). Participation appears to have several positive results. Ogawa et al., (2021), in the context of Japanese municipalities, found that it played a significant role in communities being part of biodiversity conservation, while Liu et al. (2014), in their study of two ecotourism destinations in China, and the research by Matarrita-Cascante et al. (2010) on sustainable tourism in Costa Rica, determined that participation increased residents' environmentally sustainable practices. Similarly, Stoll-Kleemann et al. (2010) concluded that participation has a positive effect on the likelihood of

successful conservation-development integration. Their study, in the context of biosphere reserves, found that the two most positive results of participation were improved conservation success and improved social acceptance (Stoll-Kleemann et al., 2010). Another positive result of participation was found by De Pourcq et al. (2015) whose research with local people bordering or living in protected areas in Colombia found effective participation to be a decisive factor in reducing conflict and improving co-management. This research was conducted in South Africa, which has a history of exclusionary apartheid practices and laws, where local communities were excluded from power and participation in decision-making on conservation and other economic activity (Kamuti, 2018; Kepe, 2009; Musavengane and Leonard, 2019). This heightens the need to investigate participation and people-park relationships in the conservation sector in a post-apartheid South Africa.

The accrual of benefits by local people due to the presence of tourism and conservation initiatives also appears to be important in building relationships (Jamal and Camargo, 2014; Jhala et al., 2019; Nchanji et al., 2023; Pfueller et al., 2011; Snyman, 2012a, 2012b; Tran and Walter, 2014). There are various ways to classify benefits. Stronza and Gordillo (2008) distinguish between economic and non-economic benefits and characterize the latter as community empowerment benefits, while other authors class them as facets of social capital that help strengthen local institutions for resource management (Lee, 2013; Liu et al., 2014; Musavengane and Leonard, 2019; Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2010; Stronza and Gordillo 2008). They can also be referred to as intangible benefits (Mbaiwa and Stronza, 2010) or indirect benefits (Gadd, 2005; Stem et al., 2003) and include, among others, skills training, participating in decision-making, cultural exchange, education, heightened cultural identity and intrinsic appreciation of nature (Queiros, 2020). The most dominant category, however, is that of direct benefits, also referred to as economic, financial or tangible benefits, which include formal/informal employment, payment for conservation actions, harvesting natural resources, infrastructure, fees from conservation or tourism revenue, etc. (Queiros, 2020). For this article, the terms tangible/direct and intangible/indirect benefits are used. Benefits “can come directly from the protected area or offered in collaboration with other organizations and government bodies” (Queiros and Mearns, 2019).

An interesting link of benefits to participation is that participation in decision-making, ownership and management is viewed by some as an important benefit which builds social capital (such as leadership skills, building local institutions, new learning and greater local cohesion) and which results in conservation by communities (Doyle-Capitman et al., 2018; Stronza and Gordillo, 2008). The social capital concept is defined by varied interlinking factors, such as trust, solidarity, fairness, networks, social inclusion and cohesion, communication and empowerment (Blewit, 2015). Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition”. Musavengane and Kloppers (2020) assert that social capital can also be equated to human and financial capital.

Furthermore, Stronza and Gordillo (2008) noted that “an increasing number of scholars hypothesize that ecotourism’s real connection to conservation comes through

participation in ownership and management rather than through economic benefits alone”. Participation appears to result in positive perceptions towards conservation. Allendorf et al. (2006), in studying protected areas in Myanmar, found that, in turn, positive perceptions regarding protected areas had a far greater effect on attitudes than socio-economic variables did. Bennett et al. (2019) established that these positive perceptions were associated with greater support for protected areas. In the context of the literature, it appears therefore that protected area management should focus on a combination of benefits and participation for communities surrounding protected areas, as this can be powerful in encouraging positive perceptions towards conservation.

In the context of a single case study, this research therefore aims to investigate the relationship between indigenous community members and wildlife conservation organizations in South Africa. Several existing studies have looked at benefit-sharing in community-based tourism in developing nations (Muzirambi et al., 2020; Shereni and Saarinen, 2021). Less is known about the link between the participation of local communities and their relationship with conservation organizations (Musavengane and Simatele, 2016). The study seeks to narrow this gap in the body of knowledge by examining the case of Phinda Private Game Reserve (PPGR) and the Mngqobokazi community in the KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa. The findings of this study add value to global collaborative efforts aimed at achieving positive relationships between communities and conservation management. It further adds to the existing conservation literature that transcends the discourse on social equity, and environmental and social justice. Participation is embedded in all facets of socio-economic and environmental justice conservation spaces.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1. Case study site**

This study expands on initial research emanating from the first author’s PhD thesis. The case study site consists of Phinda Private Game Reserve (PPGR) and the Mngqobokazi community. PPGR is in the northern part of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province. It forms part of the Mun-Ya-Wana Conservancy, which comprises Phinda, Zuka Private Game Reserve and SKS Estates (which represents a property known as Bumbeni) (Martindale and Naylor, 2017). The conservancy totals 28 000 ha and lies between Mkuze Game Reserve (which is government-managed) and iSimangaliso Wetland Park (IWP) (managed by the iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority, on behalf of the government). The Mun-Ya-Wana Conservancy Controllers Association manages the whole reserve (Martindale and Naylor, 2017). In accordance with the ‘National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act’, Biodiversity Stewardship Agreements have been negotiated between Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife and the landowners of the Mun-Ya-Wana Conservancy, where the latter has been proclaimed a nature reserve (Martindale and Naylor, 2017). **Figure 1** depicts the location of the reserve and community within the KwaZulu-Natal province.



**Figure 1.** Phinda Private Game Reserve and Mnqobokazi within KwaZulu-Natal province (Queiros, 2020).

PPGR is run by &Beyond (previously known as Conservation Corporation Africa), which is an award-winning luxury travel company specializing in tailor-made tours and safaris in Africa, Asia and South America (&Beyond, 2018). It contains seven distinct habitats and is home to, among others, the Big Five and 415 bird species (South African Lodges 2018). It also contains a portion of the critically endangered sand forest (&Beyond, 2018).

&Beyond has a three-fold vision: care of the land, care of wildlife and care of the people, and has followed a model which shows that “by harnessing international capital through low-impact, high-yield tourism, conservation land could prove its economic viability whilst affording rural communities a meaningful share of the benefits” (&Beyond, 2018).

Due to the commitment to work with the communities surrounding Phinda, the Rural Investment Fund was started in 1992 (Varty, 2008). Today it is known as Africa Foundation, a non-governmental organization (NGO), affiliated with &Beyond. Funded by Africa Foundation UK and Africa Foundation USA, its purpose is to uplift, provide skills training and empower rural communities near key conservation areas (Africa Foundation, 2018). The Foundation concentrates on fighting poverty through rural development in communities around &Beyond’s lodges and reserves, but via projects that are identified and championed by communities. This approach aids the long-term sustainability of the projects within the communities (Africa Foundation, 2018; &Beyond, 2018).

The Mnqobokazi community shares its western boundary with Phinda, its northern and eastern boundaries with iSimangaliso Wetland Park, and another part of

its western boundary with Mkuze Game Reserve. This predominantly Zulu-speaking community falls within the Big 5 Hlabisa Local Municipality. The communities surrounding Phinda are administered by the Ingonyama Trust Board (Personal communication with Mr Bheki Ntuli, Regional Manager, Africa Foundation).

Mnqobokazi has a population density of above 150 people per square kilometre (Executive Department IDP/PMS Section 2017) with a population of 11 199 (Personal communication with Magakwe Kgope, Statistical Collection and Outreach Branch, Stats SA). Of the homes in this municipality, 79.6% are formal dwellings. The majority of the population range in age from 15 to 64 (58%), with 37.5% being under the age of 15. Regarding education levels, 26% have no schooling, 24.4% hold matric, and 5% have had higher education. The unemployment rate is 26.5% and the youth unemployment rate (ages 15 to 34) is 31.6% (Stats SA 2012). The average annual household income in the wider district is R14 600 (Wazimap, 2011).

Since 1994, power and responsibilities have been shared between traditional leadership structures and local government. The inkosi (chief) allocates communal land to households, while a government Councillor elected by the community provides the link between the municipal and the provincial government (Burlando and Dahlberg, 2014; Dahlberg and Burlando, 2009).

Mnqobokazi residents rely predominantly on subsistence and small-scale commercial farming, small businesses, child grants, pensions, salaries from government positions (Burlando and Dahlberg, 2014; Dahlberg and Burlando, 2009) and income from tourism-related employment (&Beyond, 2015). Another source of income is the gathering of natural resources such as reeds, papyrus and ilala palm (mainly by women) from the wetland for, among others, building, thatching and crafts (Burlando and Dahlberg, 2014).

Since Phinda's inception, a significant amount of land that had been taken from the community in the 1900s has been returned to its original owners following land claims. Phinda now partners with the Mnqobokazi community to rent the land from the community, who have decided that the best financial return is to keep the land under conservation (&Beyond, 2018). The beneficiaries of the land claim are represented by the Qhubekani Mnqobokazi Community Trust and receive rentals annually (&Beyond, 2015; Rylance and Spenceley, 2016). Phinda is currently leasing five properties from the Qhubekani Mnqobokazi Community Trust. These total 4 966 ha and all form part of the Mun-Ya-Wana Conservancy (Martindale and Naylor, 2017). Employment, skills transfer, capacity building, business opportunities and community-based project benefits are also linked to the successful land claim (Martindale and Naylor, 2017).

## **2.2. Research design and population**

In this qualitative study, two groups of people (constituencies) were involved to achieve richness and enable comparison, triangulation and data verification (Bann, 2001; Cohen et al., 2011). Both constituencies are central role players in the people-parks relationship.

Constituency 1 (C1) refers to the Mnqobokazi local community bordering the protected area. As is protocol in South Africa, the primary researcher worked with

community leadership who invited participants to partake in the research. The criteria were that participants were over the age of 18, and a mix of ages, gender and positions in society (i.e. not only those in leadership). The final sample consisted of 12 females and 12 males. Constituency 2 (C2) refers to conservation authorities such as the reserve manager, conservationists, as well as others involved in the management of the tourism venture/s within PPGR. Via non-probability purposive sampling, five participants were selected who work closely with the local community.

Ethical clearance for this research was granted by the University of South Africa, College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee, reference number: 2015/CAES/016. All participants signed informed consent following an explanation of the research (verbal and in writing). Participants were free to leave at any time.

A case study approach was chosen to understand the dynamic interaction between people and parks (Berkes, 2004). Case studies investigate and describe phenomena in their real-life context (Yin, 2009). Within the case study, the unit of analysis (Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2009) is C1 and C2. A descriptive case study approach was adopted which aims to measure the phenomena in as much detail as possible to present a rounded picture (Coles et al., 2013).

### **2.3. Data collection and analysis**

With C1, data was collected via focus group interviews held at a local school. The larger group of 24 self-divided into two smaller groups so that two focus groups could be conducted. The smaller groups facilitated more discussion as well as triangulation between the groups. Focus Group 1 consisted of seven females and five males, while Focus Group 2 had five females and seven males. With C2, individual interviews were held at the participants' places of work or a venue of their choice.

Thematic analysis was adopted to analyze the qualitative data. All interviews (with C1 and C2) were recorded and then transcribed. Data analysis was done inductively, with codes emerging from the data itself (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014). A code set was developed and refined as coding continued. The primary researcher's interpretations are supported by actual data (MacQueen and Namey, 2012), with analysis substantiated by verbatim quotes. Each quote is identified by its primary document number (P) and the line on which the quote begins within the transcript, for example, "P352, 44" refers to primary document 352, line 44. When quotation frequencies add further insight, these are also reported on. Atlas. ti was used to assist with the coding process and analysis.

## **3. Results and discussion**

This research sought to investigate the relationship between local communities and wildlife conservation organizations in the context of PPGR and the Mnqobokazi community. The study reports on the findings of the following two questions posed to participants. Via focus group interviews, C1 was asked "Tell me about the relationship between you and the nature reserve. How do you feel about living near the reserve?". Via individual interviews, C2 was asked "Tell me about your perceptions of the

relationship between the local community and the nature reserve”. **Table 1** presents the resulting data.

**Table 1.** Code frequencies for questions on the relationship between Mnqobokazi community (C1) and Phinda private game reserve (C2).

Codes	C1 quotes	C2 quotes
	Focus group 1 & 2	Individual interviews
Actions taken/planned by the reserve	0	23
Assessment of relationship	7	14
Appreciation of actions taken by reserve	12	0
Appreciation of reserve/resources	7	0
Totals	26	37

### 3.1. Actions taken/planned by the reserve

All 23 quotes here came from C2. Many positive initiatives benefiting the community are underway. While the Mnqobokazi participants were very positive, they mentioned specific actions far less and in less detail. What does emerge from C1 (analyzed later under ‘Appreciation of actions taken by reserve’) falls mainly under educational – schools built, taking children into the reserve and the exchange programmer. The other aspect was general care, with phrases like “they come through for us”, and “they help us” and donating meat for community functions. The lack of mention of the other actions taking place suggests that communication from the reserve regarding other programmers and projects could further increase positivity.

The actions mentioned by C2 are discussed here in descending order of number of quotes per action: employment; projects that improve community wellbeing; environmental education; the need for a community development plan; paying rental to trusts; working with the trusts; strong communication networks; having a different philosophy; and access to sites of spiritual importance. The only action that is being ‘planned by reserve’ (i.e., not currently in place) is the community development plan mentioned by one of the participants.

Employment is one of the most commonly cited benefits (De los Angeles Somarriba-Chang and Gunnarsdotter, 2012; Lee, 2013). Overall economic wellbeing holds a crucial role in developing sustainable community-based tourism (Sihabutr and Nonthapot, 2021). In this research, there were five mentions of employment by C2. Participants alluded to the fact that employment at Phinda has helped to create a good example and positive perceptions (P355, 22:22; 24:24) and that many in the community have been influenced through job provision:

“the majority of the people, I would think maybe 90/92%, comes from the communities” (P352, 44).

“... at least 60% are coming from these ... five communities, Mduku, Nibela, Mnqobokasi, Kwa Jobe, Kwa Ngwenya and ... [the] 40% that is left it’s [when we] need some specialised skills for a particular job ... We have people that have started there [and] moved up the ladder. ... when there’s a position being advertised, we make sure we communicate that to the ... communities, especially the trust” (P350, 38).

The work of Muzirambi et al. (2022) suggests that this satisfaction does not extend to local people obtaining management positions. Participants perceived that black employees are trained and employed in low-ranking positions while white and foreign employees fill management positions.

Regarding projects that improve community well-being, most of the focus was on formal education, for example, the bursary scheme (P355, 22; 24) and the building of schools by the Africa Foundation (P355, 24). “[Over] the past 25 years, ... our projects [ranging] from education, primary healthcare, income generating activities [have been] identified based on a study that was done when we started to work with these communities. So, out of all the consultation [with] all the communities, it was clear that people are very concerned about the schools ... they believe that education is the way ... towards a bright future” (P350, 110).

One quote relates to clinics: “Before [Mduku] that clinic you would have to walk—I don’t know how many kilometres from Mduku to Nibela to go to Ezimpondweni clinic. So that helped the communities a lot and ... that is how the relationship started for the company being involved with the communities” (P352, 40).

While the Mnqobokasi community does have a clinic built by the government, the Mduku Clinic was built by the Africa Foundation in 1995 (&Beyond, 2018). These community projects arise because of the presence of tourism and the protected area (Mehta and Heinen, 2001) and can be in the form of infrastructure (Snyman, 2014) and improved services (Stronza and Gordillo, 2008).

Four quotes alluded to environmental education, the first intangible benefit to be discussed. Economic benefits are vital, but non-economic ones can also influence chances for conservation (Stronza and Gordillo, 2008) and are often more highly valued by communities (Campbell et al., 2007). Kaeser et al. (2018) and Waylen et al. (2010) conclude that education on conservation could successfully change attitudes, while Imran et al. (2014) and Stem et al. (2003) extend this to changing behavior as well. Moreover, Kaeser et al. (2018) found that this new knowledge (and being able to influence others regarding conservation practices) was more important than economic benefits. Ghaderi et al. (2022) note the importance of how one educates and state that this should be through traditional structures. In this research a participant referred to various workshops being held in the communities to “... keep the communities going and understand what we’re doing inside Phinda” (P355, 18). He referred to workshops on environmental impacts, the use of poisons, alien plants, etc. The other quotes refer to the environmental education programmers (EEP) for school children and the community elders and trust members. Two participants talked about these programmers in the context of population growth, explaining that the positive effect of benefits flowing from Phinda is being diluted:

“This is why [referring to the growth in communities] we started a programmer called ‘Environmental Education’... where we are enriching, ... we’re trying to make people see why we are here and what we are doing by bringing in kids almost every day to Phinda. We teach them about wildlife ... environment, ... and not forgetting about what is good also [for] them. ... They also need to know about their side ... in the communities – what they can do, what they cannot do ... it’s a win-win situation” (P355, 22).



“... for me what is key is communication and education. It’s changing people’s mindsets and behaviors. ... The problem is that in these communities, ten years ago the community was half or a quarter of the size. So, the impact that Phinda has now been diluted because it’s very hard to keep up with the growing population. So, the direct benefits have been diluted. How else do you change people’s perceptions and behavior? It’s only through education. ... And then hopefully we can bring in the elders and the trusts [for] game drives and rhino dehorning. The one we did with Makhasa was a huge success. It was the first time many of them had seen rhino, they touched a rhino. I even got some of them to fly in the helicopter and afterwards they ... said it was amazing! So, we’ll do that in the next couple of months with the other communities” (P357, 65).

The challenge of a growing population in Mngobokazi is also mentioned by Burgoyne and Kelso (2014) who explored the perceptions of three rural communities living adjacent to Mkuze Game Reserve. They report that the population grew by over 20% during the 1990s (equating to an addition of approximately 14 people per square kilometre) and that this could increase pressure on natural resources.

Planning with a community in mind is critical for any conservation project to progress (Kamuti, 2014). One conservationist mentioned the importance of a community development plan with short-, medium and long-term goals, allocating resources accordingly, determining a budget, and then being able to measure the impact (P357, 53; 68). He adds: “... Now we’ve got these conservation lessons that we’re doing, which is great, but ... the adults will tell you ... what about us? We’re making the decisions now. They’re going to make the decisions in 20 years time, but you’re not going to have rhino in 20 years ...” (P357, 57). He later continues: “... a community development plan [has] got to be specific to us, ... be effective, it’s got to be done now, it’s got to be linked with research and future research and, it’s got to address all the challenges ... the growing community and, perceptions are everything” (P357, 65).

The importance of including different groups in the community to promote conservation is highlighted by Musavengane and Simatele (2016) and Ngubane and Brooks (2013). Hence, there is a need for an inclusive training approach that takes all age groups into account.

Paying rental to trusts (due to Phinda leasing the land from the communities to use as a game reserve) is another form of tangible income as a benefit (Snyman, 2014) and emerged often in this case study in the context of benefitting the community, for example: “... Phinda is paying a rental fee on a ... yearly basis. So out of that, they see the positive of Phinda and say ‘These are our neighbors, so we need to care for that because we’ve got land there, we’ve leased that land, they’re using it and this is what we getting in return’” (P350, 36).

Furthermore, participants talked about the challenges of working with the trusts, namely that the trusts have had significant help from the reserve, but now need to self-manage; when trustees change, one has to start afresh explaining complex concepts such as inflation and investments; the influence of politics; the significant time investment required; and that expectations in other communities are raised, as they see the improved situations in these two communities and desire the same. For example: “I was very involved in both trusts ... for seven years ... We met every month. Set up

management accounts, budgets ... But I've taken a bit of a step back now, because ... they have to do it themselves, but I still [assist]. [And when their terms end] you've got a whole set of new trustees. They don't know the history, you've got to start again ... So, what's nice is that you build up trust, but it takes time. ... you also raise expectations of other communities as well, they want the same" (P357, 51).

Another two quotes coded under 'Actions taken/planned by reserve' related to strong communication networks. While Kideghesho et al. (2007) list regular contact between local communities and protected area staff as a benefit that can improve attitudes and conservation and van Putten et al. (2022) refer to direct communication as a positive that builds trusted relationships in conservation, the vital importance of communication, as revealed in this research, does not emerge strongly in the literature as an intangible benefit. The effort that Phinda staff invest into creating and maintaining these relationships is very clear, for example:

"... people who are affiliated with the structures like tribal authorities ... get to hear a lot about what is happening ... and everything comes through them. ... I think none of the indunas ['Induna', also called 'nduna', is an isiZulu word referring to a headman, leader or elder in a community] don't know about what we do and don't appreciate it. ... Also there will be people who are part of school governing bodies, ... the clinic projects, ... and as committee members, ... some who may be part of the trust or who even sit on those meetings, like the beneficiaries, because they understand why the trust is here" (P350, 36).

"We've set up appointments [with] the tribal authority [at Kwa Jobe] and re-energised the dealings with them, the focus of our relationship, and formally invite the leaders to come and do some work with us. We started with Makhasa. We did a whole dehorning exercise with them, with the tribal authority and the trust ... and that went very, very well, and next is Mnqobokasi. [With Mnqobokasi and Makhasa] I can just phone and set up dates. But with the other tribal authorities, we have to go there, talk about it, and then give them an invitation. So, it's a much more formal process. ... I've seen the last 10 years a lot more time has to be devoted to interacting with the communities" (P357, 26).

These quotes link to participation, which scholars have found to increase support for conservation (Stoll-Kleemann et al., 2010) and co-management (De Pourcq et al., 2015) and which can result in increased pro-environmental behavior (Liu et al., 2014; Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2010). Although this research found communication networks to be strong, Muzirambi et al. (2022) found that Mnqobokazi community members found the communication between PPGR, Africa Foundation, the community Trusts and the general community members to be confusing and often conflicting. This highlights the need for transparent communication channels and clear messaging to the general community. In addition, conservation efforts may clash with local community interests (Asriyani and Verheijen, 2020), and clear two-way communication can assist in mitigating these conflicts and aligning interests (Burgoyne and Mearns, 2017).

Finally, another participant working for the Africa Foundation reflected on the philosophy that Phinda was following, which was different to other parks: "[Phinda] was more keen on bringing the community on board, even for the community to come spend some time here. So, for us ... it was a new thing, a new environment, a new

culture. ... I remember we had the old Parks Board [referring to the previous National Parks Board, which changed to SANParks (South African National Parks) after apartheid rule ended in 1994, and the resultant re-conceptualization of the role of this board in the new South Africa (SANParks, 2019)] that never helped the communities. ... What the company did right - the company did not go to the community and say this is what we are going to do ... The strategy was, go out to the community, find out where we can help them” (P352, 36).

### **3.2. Assessment of relationship**

After ‘Actions taken/planned by reserve’, the second most common code was ‘Assessment of relationship’ (C1:7; C2:14). There is a noteworthy display of positivity from C1 and should be considered together with the 12 quotes from C1 coded under ‘Appreciation of actions taken by reserve’, and the seven quotes under ‘Appreciation of reserve/resources’.

Quotes from C2 revealed that the model is working well. Participants talked about the approach being novel at a time when few conservation agencies were moving away from fences, fines and brutality to an inclusive community-based approach. Several quotes mentioned the good relationship in the context of direct tangible benefits to communities, which have made a significant difference in their lives. The good relationship with the trusts featured often, as well as the good communication channels. These relationships are evidenced by tangible behavior, in that Mngobokazi have expressed their wish to move the land that they rent to iSimangaliso, to Phinda instead. In contrast to the success of this relationship (found in this research), Hansen et al. (2014) report obstructionist relationships between the iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority and land claims committees, providing the example of Mngobokazi members not observing the rules established in their co-management agreement with iSimangaliso, which had not yet been formally signed. A tribal authority representative explained that the community continued to graze cattle within the park because the iSimangaliso Wetland Park Authority was not listening to them (Hansen et al., 2015). This demonstrates actual negative behavior towards the environment when locals perceive a bad relationship. Similarly, Burgoyne and Kelso (2014) found that residents perceived the benefits derived by Mngobokazi from Phinda as greater than those from Mkuze. One participant from Kwa Jobe directly associated Phinda as the reason for better living conditions in Mngobokazi and Makhasa. Seeing how Phinda provided better employment opportunities, bursaries and support to local schools in Mngobokazi and Makhasa, as well as how differently the land claims were managed (community ownership with annual rentals in Phinda as opposed to once-off monetary compensation for Mkuze land claims), were significant causes of tension between local communities and Mkuze Game Reserve (Burgoyne and Kelso, 2014). In contrast, Phinda staff are often requested to talk about their journey/model as it is considered a success story. Finally, building relationships through education on conservation is mentioned. Two challenges are also evidenced in these C2 quotes, namely the dilution of benefits as communities grow, and the downside of success being that communities get accustomed to receiving large sums of money which raises expectations further. Specific quotes are drawn on below.

Regarding the approach being novel at the time, a participant explained: “I come from the communities where ... conservation authorities were incorrectly applying it, such that it created a lot of tension and negative attitude, where people were forcefully moved out of those places and there was no consultation and proper communication [or] direct or indirect benefits. ... people would not get an understanding of why conservation. The only thing that they could see is to hunt because they were dependent on that for meat ... I got to understand that [Africa] Foundation is ... a solution ... in terms of the attitude and understanding of conservation” (P350, 21).

Another reflects similarly, and also discusses the complexities and danger of the work in the early years: “When I started with Phinda ... conservation only depended on high fences, armed patrol, anyone that walks into the game reserve or trespasses is arrested, killed in some cases. And the poaching at the time ... was more subsistence poaching than what we see now. The scale was far different. So that’s what drew me to join the Foundation. ... [to be] part of crafting the strategies to bring the communities on board, which was a very difficult task” (P354, 46).

The following quotes relate to the good relationship in the context of direct tangible benefits for communities. One participant talked about this strategy: “...We’re always trying to push the positive direct and indirect benefits to communities and ... I do think we’re on the right track. ... money doesn’t always create benefits, but if I look at what the Foundation has achieved over the last 25 years, the amount of funding and the way that they go about their involvement, I think a lot of their projects are sustainable ... So, I do think they see this model working for them” (P357, 45). Others spoke about tangible structures and projects that have benefited communities, for example building the Mduku clinic so that people no longer had to walk far to access medical care. Further examples follow:

“Even if you go out, you talk to a youngster, you say ‘Do you know Phinda?’ ‘Yes, I know Phinda’. ‘How do you know Phinda?’ They will start telling you about the projects that Phinda has done, the relationship that Phinda has ...” (P352, 44).

“But right now I think people are seeing Phinda as a ... good example of what we are doing [for] them, in terms of offering jobs, in terms of Africa Foundation ... building schools, ... bursary schemes, in terms of we, as Phinda, directly paying rentals to communities and then communities doing something with that money ...” (P355, 25).

A recurring theme is the success of the relationship with the trusts as well as good communication channels, which are largely due to the well-functioning relationship with the trusts. Participants convey how leases have been obtained for the reserve to rent the land for over 70 years, with the trusts being operational and having a very good relationship with PPGR (P350, 40 and P352, 42); and that the conservation side interacts mostly with the trusts and works hard on those relationships (P355, 22).

“And with the trusts that have now been developed to channel the funds for community development ... [it seems] to be working very well. That has created an additional platform for engagement and dialogue between Phinda and the community, over and above the channel that was open a long time ago, which is the traditional council and Phinda management. So, I think the relationship is very strong, very cordial, and there’s constant communication in terms of

ensuring the safety and security of the game reserve. And I think the community view the game reserve now as an asset that is truly of value to them” (P354, 59).

“We’ve been asked to attend numerous conferences to present, and I can only think that it’s [because] people want to hear what’s happened here because it is [a success story] and you hear so many failures” (P357, 49).

Successful relationships and partnerships with local communities reduce involvement in related criminal activities when conservation livelihoods are at stake, prevent disaffection and encourage local people to become active stewards of wildlife conservation and of the natural environments upon which they depend (Kiss et al., 2022). Musavengane and Kloppers (2020) concur, noting that if community members realise benefits, they tend to care for the environment.

Education on conservation as a relationship builder emerged from one interviewee who suggests that a good relationship is the wall between the community and the reserve: “I got to see that we can change people’s minds by educating them about the importance of conservation and ... the importance of getting into a working relationship with the communities. Creating that relationship ... as much as we see the fence and there’s a lion on the other side, there’s a transparent wall between the two. That’s [the] relationship that you need, and you need to strengthen [it] so that you can have successful conservation ...” (P350, 21).

In terms of challenges, one has already been highlighted, but surfaced again here, namely the dilution of benefits due to population growth in communities (P355, 24). The other challenge is that, with the trusts receiving rentals over R22 million, “... they get used to it and then they want more ... You will never satisfy everyone ... So, every year you have to do something more to satisfy ... the community” (P357, 49). He explained further that they have found it beneficial to expose key community members to other failed projects and to get them to interact with other areas so that they can realise the success of their relationship with the reserve.

The answers from the C1 focus group interviews were far shorter but very positive. Two participants talked about there being a good relationship, for example: “Yes, indeed there is a good relationship between us and the game reserve” (P353, 65). Another said: “The relationship we have with the game reserve is like a brotherhood relationship” (P353, 75). The other three quotes refer to specifics of why the relationship is good, mentioning the earnings of the traditional dance group and the chance for children to learn, for example:

“We have a relationship with Phinda as the young people who’ve got traditional dance groups ... so they hire us to come and perform for their guests and then we get paid ... which helps very much” (P356, 68).

“The relationship is very good in such a way that Phinda opens up opportunities for children to come and learn about nature” (P356, 70).

### **3.3. Appreciation of actions taken by the reserve**

This next group of quotes about the relationship between the reserve and community are all understandably from C1 and are in the context of the community expressing appreciation for actions taken. Out of the 12, six relate to educational benefits. Participants talked about schools being built [“because now there are more

schools that are built by Phinda” (P353, 66)], bursaries for tertiary education, environmental education for children and the exchange program. Examples follow:

“Because when [school children] come out of there they have a good understanding of what to do and how to conserve nature” (P356, 70).

“With tourists around, here at school, we have developed a relationship with people abroad and we have benefited in terms of educational exchange programmers. Their learners and parents come to this side ... and three of us went overseas for an exchange programmer with educators ...” (P356, 75).

Three comments related to Phinda caring for the community, with two specifically mentioning aid when people are in need: “We have a good relationship because, ... when we are in need they come through for us ...” (P353, 63); and “... unlike before when they were arriving in this area, times were very tough, but now the relationship is very good because ... they also help us and we benefit a lot from them” (P353, 75). The third participant referred to Phinda donating meat for large community functions (P356, 74).

Two quotes relayed appreciation because employment opportunities are provided: “There is a good relationship between us and the game reserve because our children get some job opportunities there” (P353, 65); and entrepreneurs such as the traditional dance group can earn money (P356, 68). The importance of community-based tourism supporting entrepreneurs is highlighted by Sihabutr (2021). A third quote voiced appreciation that they have a “better understanding of what to do when they see a wild animal just roaming around” (P356, 72).

### **3.4. Appreciation of reserve/resources**

Six of these seven quotes (all from C1) indicated appreciation for Phinda because the environment is conserved. Appreciation of nature and its conservation for future generations was evident, for example: “We are very pleased to have a game reserve and I think the relationship is very good because our grandchildren can be able to see the nature that we have close by” (P356, 64). There was also the acknowledgement that the land is in good hands and that not having it conserved would be negative. One participant cited an example at Mkuze and commented that if the fence was removed, “people are unable to manage or to make profitable decisions when they are given the land” (P356, 133). Another commented “It’s good that we keep the game reserve as it is because it helps to conserve the nature for the generation to come [who] will be lucky to see the animals. ... If the game reserve is demolished, the animals will be eaten and used for other uses [and] come to extinction” (P353, 147). The final quote acknowledged the economic benefit: “The tourists that come to visit Phinda also contribute to the economy ... because Phinda always shares with the community” (P353, 149). The quotes support the literature which states that positive perceptions are linked to greater support of protected areas (Bennett et al., 2019). Allendorf et al. (2006) take this further by suggesting that positive perceptions can have a greater influence on attitudes than socio-economic variables.

## 4. Conclusions

This research investigated the relationship between local communities and wildlife conservation organizations in the context of PPGR and the Mngobokazi community, shedding light on some of the factors that influence relationships. In investigating the relationship between PPGR and the Mngobokazi community, the findings suggest that Phinda has a leading model, which has been entrenched over many years. Participants talked about Phinda and Africa Foundation following a new philosophy that placed relationships with the community as a priority and with Africa Foundation and Beyond working diligently at this. Outsiders view Phinda as a success and Phinda staff are often asked to share their story. One of the hopes for the future is to take this to a new level with a community development plan. This data showed that both the community members and conservation management perceive the relationship to be good and strong. Overall, reserve staff (C2) have more to say on actions taken and on having a good relationship; while community members (C1) are vocal on appreciation of actions taken and the reserve/resources, as well as the good relationship.

Cutting across all the codes discussed, employment emerges in the context of it making a significant impact in the community and benefiting a good percentage of people. Direct tangible benefits emerge strongly, particularly from C2 who mention a wider range of benefits. Education is the most prominent across both C1 and C2; and apart from general community care, it is the only other specific benefit emerging strongly from C1. Many examples of education-related benefits are mentioned by both constituencies, such as schools being built, the EEP for children, bursaries, and the exchange program. It is these educational benefits and the general care (in the sense that Phinda looks out for them and assists them) that C1 appreciate most.

The trusts are mentioned often by C2, but not by C1. C2 attests to the success of this—the rentals and the good working relationship. The strong communication networks highlighted by C2 also extend to the tribal authorities. Phinda management and staff work diligently at these relationships, and community members in leadership are invited into the reserve to experience it, for example, being part of rhino dehorning. Burgoyne and Kelso (2014) also found that communities living adjacent to Phinda are more positive than other communities regarding their relationship with the reserve. Furthermore, it is a very positive finding of this study that C1 showed appreciation of nature and its conservation for future generations, thus demonstrating an understanding of sustainability. The community feels that the land is in good hands.

Challenges emerging were that the trusts need to become more independent from reserve staff; benefits are diluted due to growing populations; and with the success experienced in Phinda's neighboring communities, C1's expectations have increased.

The findings indicate that benefits received do result in improved attitudes and positive perceptions towards Phinda. This in turn appears to have resulted in a clear pro-environmental consciousness amongst community members and a strengthening of the relationship between the community and the reserve. Both constituencies are very clear regarding the strong relationship that they have. In terms of participation and its link to perceptions, C2 report how the interactions with trustees and tribal authorities entering the reserve as guests and being part of rhino dehorning, have done

much to change mindsets and bring community members on board. The same applies to school children being brought in to experience PPGR. These activities, as well as that of taking school children into the reserve, show that where participation of community members in conservation or tourism is possible, this needs to be fostered as it is powerful in changing mindsets. This is a key finding in this research. Findings suggest that, for other community members, it is the benefits (more than actual participation) that have resulted in positive perceptions and improved relationships.

The findings reveal several implications for parks and their neighboring communities. First, relationships need to be carefully managed to ensure that the interests of all stakeholders are taken into consideration and that a trusting relationship is kindled through clear and transparent communication. Because of the impact of benefits on positive perceptions, it is recommended that conservation management and reserve staff, who are often more aware of the wide range of benefits than the community, regularly communicate these to communities living around parks. This can include building awareness of how the presence of a protected area and tourism venture has resulted in general infrastructural improvements to the area. Communication is also required in terms of explaining how the park functions and what the connections are between parks, trusts and other bodies. In light of the challenges identified in this research, further communication is required between reserve staff and communities in the form of openly discussing the limits of beneficiation in the context of growing communities. This can assist in managing expectations. The fact that communication is valued as an intangible benefit is a novel finding emerging from this research. Different channels through which this can be achieved should therefore be explored.

Second, a further finding insufficiently explored in current literature is the power of intangible benefits. In many African parks, budgets are small, and staff are few and have multiple responsibilities. In these contexts, staff can focus more on intangible benefits which are less costly to implement yet can contribute to building social capital and community well-being. When budgets are large, park management should not neglect the power of intangible benefits in supporting local communities and gaining support from local communities.

Third, the power of participation in the form of visiting the reserve or being involved in a conservation project should not be underestimated. Management can focus on bringing more community members of all ages into the park. Visiting the park creates custodians of the park.

Finally, this research showed the importance of education as a benefit and its power in changing mindsets towards the park and its conservation. Protected areas therefore need to focus on direct benefits to schools and tertiary institutions as well as the intangible benefit of environmental education. Communities often have an environmental ethic and value conservation, and further education can build on this foundation.

Future research can be conducted on women's participation in conservation, which Sherka (2023) found to be essential for project sustainability and inclusiveness. Sherka (2023) found that soil and water conservation was best done when women participated in decision-making at all levels. Studies focusing on the relationships between women and protected areas would be valuable. Furthermore, land tenure is



receiving much focus in the African context. The success of conservation is often strongly linked to the type of land tenure, for example, Etsay et al. (2023) found that rural people in Tigray, Ethiopia tend to participate in conservation if provided land. It will be of interest to undertake studies on the conservation participation of rural Southern African people under different land tenure statuses. Finally, future research could also focus more on the linkage between benefits and specific positive behavioral actions towards the environment.

In contexts such as Africa, where rural communities bordering parks have numerous needs, a balanced environmental conservation approach is important. Participation in conservation and varied benefits can help to build strong relationships which can complement sustainable long-term conservation and community well-being.

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