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Stakeholder Dynamics and Territorial Disputes in Nature Reserves Management: A Case of Cwebe Community, Eastern Cape, South Africa

James D. Nyamahono[1*] iD

AFFILIATIONS

[1]Department of Human Settlement, Sociology and Anthropology, University of Fort Hare, East London, South Africa.

CORRESPONDENCE

Email: jamesnyamahono@yahoo.com*

Abstract: Nature reserves are important ideational spaces where global goals on environmental conservation can be achieved. However, their management is complex and challenging when multiple stakeholders claim ownership and control. This study was centered on this debate and explored stakeholder dynamics and territorial disputes around nature reserves, with a focus on Mhlanganisweni and eLalini Villages situated adjacent to Cwebe Nature Reserve (used interchangeably with 'the Nature Reserve') in South Africa. The aim was to understand the dynamics of the relationship between local communities and the Nature Reserve management, and to investigate how these factors contribute to territorial disputes and their consequences. Qualitative data was collected from women, youth, the elderly, and traditional authorities on one hand, and the management of the Nature Reserve on the other. The study found complex stakeholder relationships among stakeholders, with local communities frequently losing out in territorial disputes. This outcome is evident from the territorial disputes that arise over exclusion in decision-making, natural resource exploitation, and conservation policies within and around the Nature Reserve. The study recommends the implementation of a more inclusive conservation framework that acknowledges the perspectives of multiple stakeholders.

Keywords: Cwebe nature reserve, conservation, territorial disputes, nature reserves management.

1. Introduction

The management of natural resources in nature reserves is complicated by relationships among multiple stakeholders that influence conservation goals (Redpath et al., 2013). These relationships involve various entities, including governmental agencies, local communities, Non-Governmental Organizations, and policy frameworks, all of which must collaborate effectively to shape conservation outcomes. However, the collaboration process often involves clashes among stakeholders, primarily over which policies should be followed.

Mushonga and Matose (2020) conducted a study on the management of the Sikumi Forest Reserve in Zimbabwe and found that due to a lack of consensus on wildlife and resource protection strategies, military intervention was used as a last resort. In a separate study, Mushonga (2022) discovered that areas rich in natural resources face perpetual violence and resistance from local populations due to government practices. This issue extends beyond Africa, with military intervention and other alternatives becoming increasingly common among institutional stakeholders (Ramutsindela, Matose, & Mushonga, 2022).

A review of the literature reveals that conservation conflicts often stem from land ownership issues, raising the question of "whose land?" (Ho & Spoor, 2006; Wily, 2011; McFarlane, 2017). Traditional land tenure systems, particularly in Africa, have led to territorial disputes, especially with resistant social groups. While alternative dispute resolution (ADR) is advocated as an effective method to

address these disputes, Teff-Seker et al. (2020) found that it faces challenges that can jeopardize its success.

At the core of these territorial disputes is the presence of multiple stakeholders with differing perspectives on land ownership and resource management (Shmueli & Gal, 2005; Ratner et al., 2013; Ratner et al., 2017). This research explores the complex dynamics between the management of the Cwebe Nature Reserve and local communities, as well as the territorial disputes that arise among these stakeholders and their consequences.

1.1 Problem statement

South Africa, one of the youngest democratic countries in Africa, has been plagued by territorial disputes predominantly stemming from the land question (Xaba, 2021). These disputes have a lengthy historical background, originating from the days of colonialism and persisting beyond 1994, when the local people gained democratic control of the country and its resources. However, despite the existence of a democratic framework for environmental management, the legacy of apartheid has left a mark on the land tenure system, which to this day is responsible for the territorial disputes encountered (Sharma, 2024). Consequently, these land disputes have resulted in marginalization, with many communities having limited or no access to natural resources, their management, and the benefits that arise from them (Masuku, Mthembu & Mlambo, 2023). In cases where local communities do have access to natural resources management, Nyamahono (2024) discovered that there are complexities arising from differences in stakeholders' indigeneity, knowledge, and politics of belonging, which pose challenges to the sustainability of nature conservation. To address these complexities, Teff-Seker et al. (2020) propose the use of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms and various other approaches. However, evidence suggests that territorial disputes continue to escalate, necessitating further investigation into this matter.

The escalation of territorial disputes indicates the presence of several unresolved factors. The involvement of various stakeholders in nature reserves conservation in South Africa has been identified as one of the key factors influencing environmental conflicts (Nyamahono, 2023). However, there is a lack of research on the dynamics of these territorial disputes, particularly in formalized natural resources management, such as in government-designated protected reserves. This study therefore focuses on this gap and examines the dynamics of stakeholder relationships in the management of the Cwebe Nature Reserve in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. It also assesses whether these relationships contribute to territorial disputes and the implications thereof. By exploring these relationships, the study reveals the challenges that hinder effective and inclusive management of the nature reserve. The findings aim to provide stakeholders with a deeper understanding of the essential factors needed to enhance sustainable conservation of nature reserves. The motivation behind this conservation space is that the land question in South Africa and the management of its natural resources serve as a microcosm of global territorial disputes. Therefore, understanding the common causes and implications of territorial disputes in the Cwebe Nature Reserve can serve as a benchmarking solution that other conservation spaces can benefit from.

1.2 Research questions

- What is the nature of stakeholder relationships between the management of Cwebe Nature Reserve and the local communities in the adjacent villages?
- How does this relationship contribute to territorial disputes, if any, and what are their consequences?

2. Literature Review

Globally, nature reserves are widely acknowledged as critical spaces that contribute to the goal of environmental sustainability. There has been a growing advocacy for the adoption of collaborative

frameworks for environmental conservation, with the aim of ensuring that multiple stakeholders work together in the management of these reserves. These frameworks seek to align the efforts of government agencies, conservation organizations, and local communities, in order to create more inclusive and effective conservation strategies. Akpan, van Tol, Malambile, and Mqalo (2017), as well as Adem-Esmail and Geneletti (2018), have emphasized that collaborative management involves the involvement of various stakeholders in the conservation management frameworks. They also highlight the importance of multi-party participation in environmental conservation, as it enhances the effectiveness and legitimacy of conservation efforts.

Research findings indicate that collaborative efforts in the management of nature reserves can lead to positive outcomes. Gibson (2019) asserts that institutional stakeholders, who are directly involved in the management of these reserves, typically possess high technical expertise and provide substantial resources that can contribute to the achievement of conservation goals on a large scale. Conversely, Nkondo (2012) acknowledges the significant contribution of local communities, who bring indigenous knowledge and a nuanced understanding of their social and cultural conservation practices. This collaboration between institutional stakeholders and local communities can result in the establishment of a framework that integrates local knowledge with formalized scientific systems. Adem-Esmail and Geneletti (2018) further advocate for such a system, as it is effective in the management of nature reserves by being firmly rooted in a culturally sensitive foundation that incorporates both indigenous and scientific knowledge.

However, the inclusion of various stakeholders in the conservation of nature reserves can present challenges, as different stakeholders often hold different norms, values, beliefs, and conservation expectations (Berkes, 1993). This divergence can give rise to territorial disputes between the affected stakeholders. As institutional stakeholders typically enforce top-down conservation measures aimed at safeguarding biodiversity and ensuring compliance with broader environmental standards (Teff-Seker et al., 2020; Bukh, 2020), such measures frequently limit access to and use of natural resources that local communities have traditionally relied upon for their livelihoods. Consequently, local communities often perceive these restrictions as unjust and disruptive, leading to tensions and territorial conflicts concerning land and resource rights.

Furthermore, Distanont, Khongmalai, Rassameethes, and Distanont (2018) argue that formalized frameworks can lead to feelings of unfair treatment among local communities. These frameworks often neglect to consider the social, economic, and cultural values that are vital to the livelihoods of these communities. Compounding this issue is the fact that natural resources are typically owned and controlled by formal entities authorized by the government to lead environmental conservation efforts (De Santo, 2016). These formal entities may have conservation agendas that diverge significantly from the objectives of local communities. Aditya (2016) notes that these discrepancies make it difficult for local communities to effectively participate in managing nature reserves, particularly when they lack ownership rights and when the management systems do not align with their expectations.

Moreover, research indicates that although institutional policies often advocate for collaborative approaches, actual practices frequently fall short, resulting in continued marginalization of local communities and their knowledge systems (Altman, Larsen & Buchanan, 2018; Gibson, 2019). This issue is further exacerbated when the conservation of nature reserves is primarily managed through top-down systems that do not align with local social, economic, and cultural expectations (Smith, 2019). These top-down management structures tend to sideline local communities, as information flows primarily from the top, where institutional policies are formulated, to the bottom, where the general population is expected to adhere to these policies. This hierarchical information and decision-making flow can significantly hinder genuine collaboration and fail to integrate local insights and priorities into conservation strategies.

Additionally, the literature suggests that top-down management structures often clash with local customary systems, which serve as a social fabric that binds communities together. For example, Nyamahono (2023) points out that while local communities may consider certain indigenous resources as sacred and essential for their livelihoods, institutional parties frequently implement management structures that fail to acknowledge the value of these resources from a social and customary perspective. This disregard has been identified as a source of conflict over the ownership and use of natural resources. Nyamahono (2023) further observes that local communities often find themselves marginalized, reduced to the role of external observers rather than active, primary participants in the management of nature reserves. This dynamic exacerbates tensions and undermines the potential for genuinely collaborative conservation efforts.

From this discussion, it is evident that the involvement of multiple stakeholders in the management of nature reserves significantly impacts the management structures and, consequently, the conservation outcomes. It has been observed that local communities and their indigenous knowledge systems often bear the negative consequences of these management approaches. In order to address these inequities, there is a pressing need to develop a management framework that integrates both traditional and scientific knowledge. The existing literature highlights that integrating these knowledge systems not only enhances the sustainability of nature reserves but also ensures social justice and genuine community participation in the conservation process (Adem-Esmail & Geneletti, 2018; Akpan et al., 2017; Gibson, 2019; Nkondo, 2012). Such an approach promotes a more equitable and effective conservation strategy that aligns with the needs and values of all stakeholders involved.

Based on the literature review, it has been identified that there are complex dynamics among various participants in the management and interaction with nature reserves. In order to address these issues, it is recommended to develop conservation frameworks that are culturally inclusive and prioritize equitable participation and social justice for all stakeholders. This approach is considered fundamental for the sustainability of nature reserves. However, the creation and implementation of such a management framework present challenge. These challenges can be overcome by cultivating high levels of trust among stakeholders and establishing genuine partnerships characterized by transparency, commitment, and shared objectives. Additionally, stakeholders must collaboratively address any complex power dynamics and historical grievances that may impact the management of nature reserves, in order to ensure a cohesive and effective conservation effort.

3. Research Methodology

This section outlines the research design, study area, study population, inclusion criteria and sampling, data collection and analysis.

3.1 Research design

A qualitative research approach was utilized in this study to examine the dynamics of stakeholders and territorial disputes surrounding Cwebe Nature Reserve. This approach was selected due to its ability to delve deeply into the significant differences in perceptions among stakeholders, which are influenced by their unique environments, cultures, and social contexts. The study followed an interpretive paradigm, as guided by Creswell and Creswell (2017), in order to facilitate a thorough investigation of the issue at hand and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the diverse realities experienced by the involved stakeholders. This paradigm proved invaluable in discerning the multiple perspectives and realities of the parties affected by the conservation efforts at Cwebe Nature Reserve. Additionally, the study employed a case study research design to acquire a detailed understanding of the dynamics of stakeholders and territorial disputes among participants. This was achieved through extensive interviews and interactions with multiple stakeholders.

3.2 Study area

This research was carried out at the Cwebe Nature Reserve and its surrounding communities, specifically eLalini and Mhanganisweni villages. As shown in Figure 1, the study area is located in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, between the coordinates 32°13'03"S 28°52'31"E and 32°12'38"S 28°52'24"E. Covering approximately 17.52 km² with a perimeter of 19.03 km, this region was selected due to its strategic resources, namely the Mbhashe River and Cwebe Nature Reserve, and their significant impact on the two villages that rely on them for their livelihoods. This site was considered ideal for the research as it allows for a comprehensive understanding of the stakeholder dynamics among the parties dependent on these natural resources.

3.3 Study population, inclusion criteria and sampling

According to StatsSA (2011) and Lehohla (2015), the combined population of the Mhlanganisweni and eLalini areas was approximately 3,500 around 2011. Taking into account the estimated 10% global population increase over the past decade (Gu, Andreev & Dupre, 2021), it is projected that the population of the study area will reach nearly 4,000 by 2024. This population estimate served as the foundation for selecting the study sample. Participants were further chosen based on their proximity to the resources provided by the Cwebe Nature Reserve and the Mbhashe River. This approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of stakeholder dynamics, the impact of natural resource exploitation, and potential territorial disputes. Only individuals aged 18 and above, who were born and raised in Mhlanganisweni and eLalini (or nearby areas), were included in the study.

In each village, three focus groups were organized, with each group consisting of eight participants from distinct demographic groups: youths, women, and elders. This resulted in a total of 24 participants per village and 48 participants overall for the study. Additionally, one traditional leader from each village was included, bringing the total number of traditional leaders to two. To incorporate an institutional perspective, a key informant, specifically the representative of the Nature Reserve management, was also included to provide insights into the dynamics of territorial disputes with the local communities.
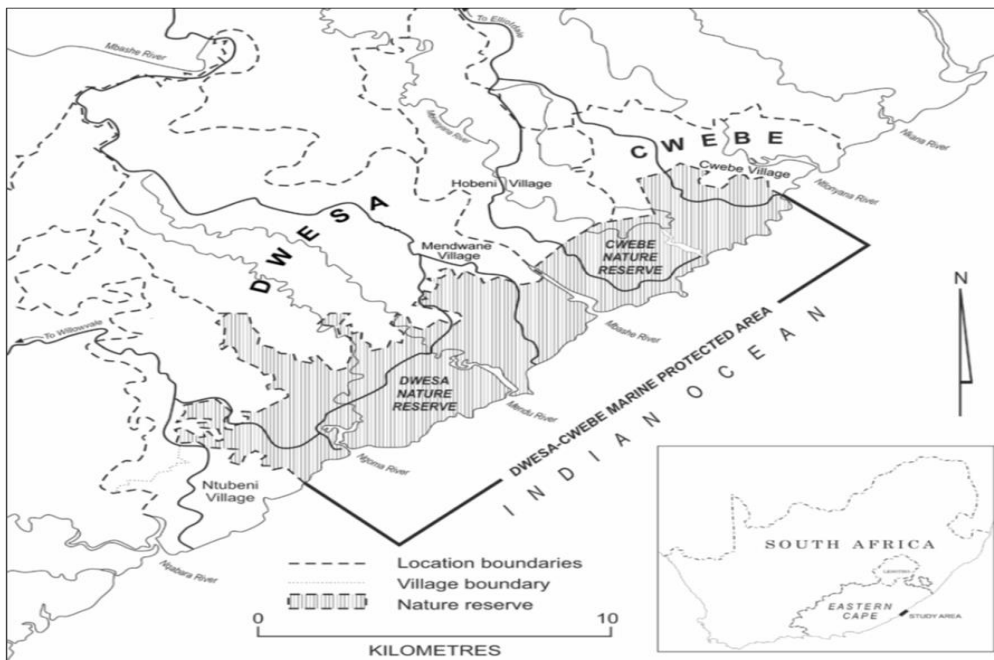

Figure 1: *Location of the study area (Fay (2007)*

3.4 Data collection

Data collection was carried out through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with traditional leaders, as well as key informant interviews with representatives of the Nature Reserve management. This methodological triangulation allowed for a rich and comprehensive gathering of data from various perspectives. The focus groups enabled interactive discussions among youths, women, and elders, fostering a diverse array of viewpoints. In-depth interviews with traditional leaders offered insights into customary aspects, while the key informant interview provided a broader institutional view.

3.5 Data analysis and ethical consideration

The data collected was analyzed using thematic analysis, a method suitable for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data. Firstly, similar data was grouped together. This was then followed by the labeling of these groups into themes that spoke to the research at hand. The themes were then reviewed, refined, and analyzed to ensure that they stayed relevant to the focus of the study. The findings were presented using direct quotations (verbatim) from participants, which helped illustrate the themes and provide authenticity to the reported results. This approach not only ensured a deep understanding of the complex interplay between the stakeholders but also highlighted the nuanced perceptions of territorial challenges in the Cwebe Nature Reserve. The study was conducted under Ethical Clearance Certificate No: AKP011SNYA01, which was provided by the University of Fort Hare Research and Ethics Committee, East London, South Africa. This clearance ensured that the researcher maintained high levels of privacy, confidentiality, integrity, and transparency. The researcher also obtained informed consent from the participants and avoided any forms of harm to them.

4. Presentation of results and findings

From the data collected, four prominent themes emerged: 'stakeholder dynamics: local communities vs. institutional stakeholders', 'disputes over exclusion in decision-making', 'territorial disputes over natural resources', and 'territorial disputes over conservational policies'. These themes highlighted significant stakeholder dynamics and their influence on the territorial disputes within the Cwebe community. The study also uncovered substantial gaps between institutional policies on the ownership and use of natural resources and the on-ground realities. Local communities frequently expressed dissatisfaction with the structural inequalities arising from these policies related to resource use in the nature reserve. These findings are presented in detail, including quotes from primary data and examples to elucidate the key points.

4.1 Theme 1: Stakeholder dynamics: Top-down vs. bottom-up conservation frameworks

Firstly, the study explored the nature of the relationship between local communities in Cwebe villages and the management of the nature reserves. The study found that complex relationships exist, characterized by different interests, priorities, and power structures. To capture the stakeholder dynamics, the study found a contrast between the conservation frameworks explained in the form of top-down and bottom-up approaches. The study found that the management of the Cwebe Nature Reserve employs top-down approaches designed to systematically preserve the nature reserve. This is shown by the verbatim below:

> "*The duty mandated to us by the government is to make sure that we work towards the pre-determined conservation goals. These goals are institutionalised and are in the constitution, so our mandate is legal in nature*" (Nature Reserve Management Representative).

To support these findings, the participant went on to elaborate their institutional role in the province and how it aligns to the national and regional agenda:

"*In order to meet these goals, we are expected to lead local people in conservation. We have a big role to make sure that the local communities comply to the conservation legislations so that our province cannot be found on the wrong side of conservation in the country. The performance of our country in environmental conservation makes an important contribution towards the regional conservation agenda*" (Nature Reserve Management Representative).

In contrast, the study found that since the local communities are typically subjected to top-down approaches, they predominantly adopt bottom-up methods. This is shown in the verbatim below:

"*Our participation in the management of the Nature Reserve has been problematic for many years now because we rarely have a room to decide what needs to be done except remaining susceptible to the Parks Authority* [Cwebe Nature Reserve management]" (Elderly Focus Group Participant).

This view is also supported by the participant from the youth focus group who echoed that this has been a practice since she was born. The participant expressed her anger and all the possible reasons that explain the existence of territorial conflicts in Cwebe Nature Reserve and its communities.

"*Ever since I was young, I have never seen the community people making important decisions in the way in which the resources should be taken care of. Honestly, I have been told that the land belongs to us but we do not have anything to show for it. We are angry young people because that is the heritage we are supposed to benefit from. When are we going to be the sole owners of it*" (Youth Focus Group Participant).

Some women also raised their anger towards the marginalisation of their traditional roles of being custodians of the natural resources due to the top-down approaches imposed on them:

"*As women, we are concerned and raise our anger toward the institutional laws which tell us how we should manage our land. We are women and we know how to take care of our land. It is unfortunate because there is nothing, we can do except listening to what the managers say about how the nature reserve should be managed. But as women, we do not agree with everything they say that is why we always invade it* [the Nature Reserve] *whether they like it or not*" (Women Focus Group Participant).

It is noteworthy that the reliance on bottom-up approaches observed in this context was not a deliberate decision made by local communities, but rather a result of imposed institutional frameworks. Consequently, the top-down conservation strategies diverged from the expectations of local communities, who desired collaborative management and equitable resource utilization among stakeholders. As a result, local communities perceive these institutional frameworks as restrictive measures that disrupt their traditional, cultural, and socio-economic activities. Due to these conflicting conservation frameworks and divergent priorities, the study revealed that the management of the Nature Reserve often employs restrictive measures through environmental governance frameworks to limit the extraction of natural resources. These bottom-up approaches were identified as a catalyst for territorial disputes, as local communities heavily dependent on resources from the nature reserve find themselves constrained by institutional policies. The following sections will present the research findings on various territorial disputes between the Cwebe communities and the management of the Cwebe Nature Reserve.

4.2 Theme 2: Territorial disputes over exclusion in decision-making

The study revealed inherent disputes regarding the exclusion of the Cwebe community from decision-making processes pertaining to the conservation of the Cwebe Nature Reserve. Consequently, the findings indicate a widespread feeling of marginalization among the local communities. They expressed dissatisfaction with the outreach efforts and the degree to which they

were excluded from decision-making. The local communities argued that institutional policies foster tokenism, in which they are recognized as the owners of the natural resources but lack genuine authority in making decisions about their conservation and utilization. The data collected demonstrated that traditional leaders and community elders felt disregarded in environmental management meetings, with their contributions to the decision-making process regarding nature conservation largely disregarded. This situation is compounded by the fact that these meetings are purported to incorporate collective perspectives on the management of nature reserves. A participant in a focus group, who was elderly, vividly expressed this frustration:

> "*They always say they will communicate with top management to ensure that people do benefit from the nature reserve, but nothing really does happen... They are just useless because they do not know what their people need*" (Elderly Focus Group Participant).

A youth member who participated in the study also expressed concerns over the lack of meaningful dialogue in decision-making. The participant highlighted his frustration with being structurally excluded from a process that is supposed to be community-led:

> "*Our views are not considered at all. They tell us what they will do and expect us to agree... There is no real dialogue, just instructions. What does this tell you…? We are being excluded in this whole process though they claim that we own the natural resources*" (Youth Focus Group Participant).

Women also indicated that disputes arise from their exclusion from decision-making regarding the management and use of resources from the nature reserve. They expressed dissatisfaction with the protective decision-making processes that institutionalise the use of natural resources in ways that are less favourable to local communities. This sentiment is illustrated by one woman's account:

> "*We farm in my village and take the water from Mbhashe River. It has always been there, and I learn a lot of things from my mother because she spent all the time in the garden. We always made our decisions independently without any interference. Now the river belongs to the nature reserve, and they tell us that they will teach us how to use the river. That is not fair, and we cannot take that anymore!*" (Women Focus Group Participant).

The interview with the representative of the Nature Reserve management also revealed important dynamics that support the local communities' perspectives on being excluded from decision-making. The representative of the Nature Reserve management acknowledged the prevalence of infrequent direct engagement with local communities, as indicated below:

> "*As the Nature Reserve, we hold community meetings occasionally. This is because there are people on the ground who are employed by the Nature Reserve to work with communities every day. So, we cannot afford to have meetings always. But if the management really wants to have a meeting with them and do several consultations, meetings are held*" (Nature Reserve Management Representative).

The representative of the Nature Reserve management further outlined the role of Outreach Officers in engaging local communities on nature conservation. The representative of the Nature Reserve management noted that Outreach Officers serve as the first point of contact for any issues regarding the exploitation of the Nature Reserve resources:

> "*I work with two section rangers who help me in the management of the organisation. Then with the communities, we are having an Outreach Officer, a lady, who is employed by the organisation. Her responsibility is to liaise with the local communities on the conservational issues that affect them. Those issues are then presented before the organisation such that the information we are given we take it into strategic decisions. The meetings cannot be done every*

day but when we see it necessary to call people" (Nature Reserve Management Representative).

The women, however, questioned whether the Outreach Officers genuinely represent local communities. They raised concerns that the Outreach Officers hold merely symbolic positions without truly addressing the needs of the people. One woman noted that:

> "*The Outreach Officers have been there all these years, but they honestly cannot make any influence on how the resources from the Nature Reserve should be conserved and exploited. We feel like we are not included in the making of decisions though we have our own representatives in the council*" (Women Focus Group Participant).

An analysis of the sentiments of various stakeholders, as expressed in the verbatim statements above, clearly shows unstable relationship dynamics between the local communities and the Nature Reserve management. While institutional policies are expected to be inclusive, the sentiments reveal disputes arising from the exclusion of local communities in decision-making. Additionally, the verbatim statements underscore a systemic pattern of exclusion, in which community participation is more symbolic than substantive. This highlights significant gaps in achieving genuine inclusiveness in the conservation and use of natural resources.

Regarding the role of infrequent community meetings and the deployment of Outreach Officers, the sentiments above indicate the prevalence of top-down approaches. These approaches further support the fact that decisions are primarily made by institutional stakeholders and then communicated to local communities, whose involvement remains more symbolic than substantive. This highlights significant gaps in achieving genuine participatory conservation management, leaving local communities feeling like mere observers rather than active participants in decision-making about the exploitation of natural resources.

4.3 Theme 3: Territorial disputes over natural resources

The research identified territorial disputes over natural resources between the Cwebe community and the Nature Reserve management. These disputes highlight the tension that arises from the differing conservation objectives of institutions and the needs of local communities neighboring the Cwebe Nature Reserve. Data analysis shows that these territorial disputes primarily result from institutional limitations on resource access, particularly in fishing zones and gathering places. These findings will be further explained in the following sub-themes.

4.3.1 Subtheme: Restricted access to resource extraction

The study found that territorial disputes between institutional conservation goals and local community needs arise from the strict restrictions on natural resource use within the Cwebe Nature Reserve. While management regards these policies as crucial for preserving biodiversity, local communities see them as infringements on their traditional land ownership rights. This conflict is particularly apparent in the controlled fishing areas within the Nature Reserve and along the Mbhashe River. A young participant from the community expressed dissatisfaction with these restrictive institutional policies:

> "*These people [Nature Reserve Management] have strict rules that are not fair for everyone in this community and other surrounding villages. The Nature Reserve is very big, and it provides abundant resources necessary for the livelihoods of our people and can still sustain itself for many years to come. For example, there is plenty of fish in the ocean and everyone knows that. The problem is that we are not allowed to go and fish there because they fear that we may finish the fish*" (Youth Focus Group Participant).

The women also expressed their concerns over the restrictive measures on access to natural resources in the Nature Reserve. This is shown in the following verbatim:

"*As women we are faced with a hard time especially on the legislation that prohibits us from getting into the Nature Reserve and even using any resources that can aide to our livelihoods. As some of my fellow women have indicated here, our roles as women are seriously undermined because we know how to take of the environment but we are not given an opportunity to do that*" (Women Focus Group Participant.

The management of the Nature Reserve also confirmed the existence of prohibitive laws and supported this on sustainability grounds:

"*It is true that no one is allowed into the Nature Reserve let alone taking anything from it because that will affect our constitutional goal of making sure this reserve remains a protected area. Once we allow one person to get in, the whole village would come and that becomes a problem*" (Nature Reserve Management Representative).

The verbatim sentiments clearly show the local communities' discontent over restrictions on fishing and gathering essential natural resources. Youths expressed dissatisfaction with restrictive laws that prevent access to resources they consider abundant and sustainable. These laws are viewed as disproportionate, causing perceived injustices and leading to territorial disputes between local communities and management of the nature reserve. The researcher observed that, lacking alternatives, local communities resorted to "vandalising" the Nature Reserve boundaries to access necessary resources.

4.3.2 Subtheme: Perceptions of inequity and exploitation

Territorial disputes over access to and use of natural resources were also marked by inequalities and exploitation among stakeholders. Local communities criticised conservation policies, viewing them as biased mechanisms favouring outsiders over local people. Women specifically raised concerns about the prioritisation of tourists, who were perceived to have unrestricted access to abundant resources, while local communities faced prohibitions. One local woman expressed these sentiments poignantly:

"*The children are not even allowed to go and play in Mbhashe River especially on the side where there is a fence that demarcates the Nature Reserve and adjacent communities. Ironically, other children from outside* [tourists] *are seen playing in the same river without any restrictions. They even practice fishing – the same practice that local people are not allowed to do. At the end, we become resistant. Our children go and play there because they have seen many old people going there and even do fishing*" (Women Focus Group Participant).

This view is also supported by the local youths who noted that there exist some inequalities over access to and use of the resources available in the Nature Reserve:

"*As we were growing up, we always knew we were outsiders though we are the original owners of this land. What is more painful is that the tourists have access to the Nature Reserve and even have access to many fishing spots which are not open to anyone from the local villages*" (Youth Focus Group Participant).

The management in their defence argued that legislation does not lead to inequality but rather sustainability of the resources for the benefit of the country:

"*The local community members may feel being unfairly treated but really the accessibility laws are meant to sustain the environment, promote tourism and then use the money generated on*

everyone through community development projects" (Nature Reserve Management Representative)

From the sentiments above, local communities perceive institutional restrictive policies as selectively disadvantageous to indigenous peoples. These policies are viewed as tools that exploit local communities while benefiting external stakeholders. Consequently, local communities mistrust these policies, seeing them as ostensibly conservation-driven but, in reality, exploitative. Women questioned the harm to the Nature Reserve from children playing in the rivers, illustrating their skepticism. The youth seconded that and expressed their anger towards the prohibitive laws. This is despite the management perspectives that the prohibitive laws are meant to sustain environmental sustainability and tourism. This mistrust has led to social resistance, manifesting in the continuous breaking of restrictive laws by local communities.

4.3.3 Subtheme: Economic gap vs. conservation

The territorial disputes over natural resources were also identified through the subtheme titled "Economic Gap vs. Conservation". This subtheme highlights the conflicting interests between local communities and the Nature Reserve management regarding access to and use of resources in the Cwebe Nature Reserve. Local communities perceive the Nature Reserve as a vital source of their livelihoods, providing essential economic resources, whereas the management sees this economic reliance as detrimental to environmental conservation. The traditional leader shared his customary perspective on the nature reserve's importance and its role in sustaining many families within the Cwebe communities in the following sentiment:

> "*Cwebe Nature Reserve has been an economic source for this village for many years. There are people employed to do different things and life has always been like that. For example, there are people that are paid to extract the right trees to use as poles for building and they have raised their families doing that. Others even know the right fishing spots to catch a variety of fish and they have raised their families like that. Others know the right place to get herbal medicines and it has always been our livelihood for a long time*" (Traditional Leader).

The traditional leader's remarks on resource extraction from the Nature Reserve illustrate how local communities view these resources as rightfully theirs. However, institutional stakeholders perceive these activities as theft, poaching, or trespassing. The management of the Nature Reserve, though institutionally mandated to enforce conservation laws, acknowledged the difficulty in balancing nature conservation with community needs. He shared the following views:

> "*As the Nature Reserve management, we must enforce the laws to protect biodiversity. Sometimes, these rules may seem harsh to the local community, but they are necessary to ensure sustainability of resources. We try to balance these but it's challenging, especially when there are immediate needs from the community that conflict with long-term conservation goals*" (Nature Reserve Management Representative).

The sentiments presented above highlight the multifaceted relationship between the management of Cwebe Nature Reserve and the local communities residing adjacent to it. The Nature Reserve management tries to enforce conservation practices while addressing the negative consequences of such policies. Conversely, local communities view these institutional policies as threats to their socio-economic livelihoods and violations of their land ownership rights. Overall, the findings illustrate a profound disconnect between the policies enacted and the common interests of distinct stakeholders. These conflicting ideologies foster perpetual territorial disputes, evidenced by the continuous invasion of the Nature Reserve by local communities. To address these territorial disputes, stakeholders should advocate for a holistic nature conservation framework that unifies ecological objectives with the socio-economic realities of the Cwebe communities.

4.4 Theme 4: Territorial disputes over conservational policies

Lastly, the fourth theme derived from primary research is the presence of territorial disputes among stakeholders due to conservation policies. To explore this theme, two subthemes were identified: the lack of local context in policy formulation and the misalignment of policy and practice. These are presented below.

4.4.1 Subtheme 1: Lack of local context in policy formulation

Primary research revealed that territorial disputes over conservation policies are shaped by the lack of local context in policy formulation, among other factors. The study found minimal involvement of local communities in developing management frameworks for the conservation of Cwebe Nature Reserve and its surrounding communities. Consequently, one-size-fits-all policies are created that fail to address specific socio-economic, environmental, and cultural conditions. An elder from the community expressed this concern:

> "*They create these policies without talking to us, without understanding what we need from our land and water. This really show some level of disrespectful and lack of consideration because the resources are supposed to benefit us, our community and our future generations*" (Elderly Focus Group Participant).

This sentiment was then triangulated with the views of the representative of the Nature Reserve management regarding policy issues. Research findings indicate that the management prioritised policy implementation, contributing to the marginalisation and exclusion of local communities. The representative of the Nature Reserve management had the following to say:

> "*The policies are there, and they are good policies, but the challenge is the implementation. It's one thing to have a policy, it's another to act on it. We struggle with the capacity to fully implement these policies as intended*" (Nature Reserve Management Representative).

This situation underscores the complexity of stakeholder dynamics, where local communities desire involvement in policy formulation, while the Nature Reserve management views the institutional policies as sound but challenging to implement. Consequently, territorial disputes may persist as existing policies remain disconnected from on-the-ground realities. Moreover, the representative of the Nature Reserve management's acknowledgment of implementation challenges highlights the need for policies that are practically applicable and sensitive to local conditions.

4.4.2 Subtheme 2: Misalignment of policy and practice

To support the findings presented in the preceding section, it was discovered that there is a misalignment between policy and practice within and around the nature reserve. The major challenge identified is the gap between the intentions of conservation policies and their practical implementation. Local communities expressed concerns that current institutional policies aimed at promoting sustainable natural resource usage fail to meet their objectives. Instead, these policies impose restrictions on local communities due to inadequate implementation strategies that overlook the complexities of local realities. The traditional leader noted that:

> "*We are told about conservation, but we see only restrictions and no benefits. We represent many people as traditional leaders and out of many visitors that come to our shrine, most of them are disputes over access to the Nature Reserve. At the end, as societal beacons, we feel that the laws on environmental conservation do not really aim to conserve the environment but restrict them from accessing it and using the natural resources*" (Traditional Leader).

To support these findings, primary research also revealed that policies fall short in addressing the specific needs of local communities. These top-down conservation strategies are perceived as alienating by the communities they aim to benefit, as one elderly participant noted:

> "*The decisions are made from above, without real ground knowledge or understanding of our daily lives. This is really the beginning of all the problems we have on the Nature Reserve. We are not taken seriously, and we feel like we are still in the apartheid era though we are fully a democratic country*" (Elderly Focus Group Participant).

These findings highlight community members' emotions of alienation and discontent, indicating the urgent need for more inclusive and transparent conservation approaches. From these expressions, it is highly likely that the exclusion of local communities from participating in decisions that affect them will foster resentment and reduce their support for institutionalized environmental conservation. The community's view of being excluded from the benefits of conservation highlights the urgent need for reforms that emphasize local needs and realities in policy implementation. Through inclusive policies, local communities will help bridge the gap between institutional objectives and local communities' needs, thereby developing an equitable framework.

5. Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study on stakeholder dynamics and territorial disputes in the management of nature reserves align with previous research on environmental conservation practices and community participation in politics. In particular, territorial disputes in natural resource management are a prominent issue in the study area. Both the local communities and the Nature Reserve management have emphasized ongoing conflicts over access to and use of natural resources, highlighting their adversarial relationship.

The findings of Teff-Seker et al. (2020) closely align with the causes of territorial disputes identified in this study. These causes include stakeholders' desire to be the primary authority on environmental management within their local communities, the ongoing vulnerability of ecological ecosystems, and the need to sustain ecosystem services for long-term sustainability. In this study, territorial disputes are characterized by complex stakeholder relationships that influence the ownership dynamics of the Nature Reserve and determine how and when natural resources can be utilized. These differing ownership dynamics result in territorial disputes driven by differing beliefs on how the natural environment should be managed.

Bukh (2020) supports these findings by arguing that many territorial disputes in various geographical areas stem from the imposition of foreign conservation policies that do not align with the practices of specific ethnic groups. For example, the management of the Cwebe Nature Reserve views the ecological practices of the Cwebe villagers as unsustainable due to their heavy reliance on natural resource exploitation for their livelihoods. On the other hand, the Cwebe community perceives institutional practices as policies that separate local people from their essential livelihood resources.

The issue of territorial disputes is also addressed in literature on marginalization and exclusion by Von Braun and Gatzweiler (2014) and Nightingale (2019). These scholars describe situations where local communities feel unwelcome in participatory arrangements concerning resources that directly affect them. In this study, the Cwebe communities experience marginalization and exclusion from decision-making processes, with limited access to the Nature Reserve granted by its management. The findings of this study are consistent with those of Von Braun and Gatzweiler (2014) and Nightingale (2019), highlighting that the politics of marginalization and exclusion in managing and accessing natural resources lead to disenfranchisement and territorial disputes as local communities feel disregarded in significant developments affecting their livelihoods.

Literature also links the forms of marginalization and exclusion mentioned above to the dominant influence of top-down management frameworks. According to Smith (2019), formalized environmental conservation frameworks and discussions primarily originate from wealthy, industrialized countries, often disregarding contributions from developing nations. Smith also discovered that influential parties with financial power and dominance tend to impose top-down approaches, dictating and controlling conservation policies, while less powerful and poorer parties are unwillingly forced to adopt bottom-up approaches.

The findings of the current study reflect this situation, as territorial disputes have been attributed to the top-down conservation frameworks implemented by the management of the Cwebe Nature Reserve, which enforce specific conservation practices on the Cwebe communities. Similarly, a study conducted by Nyamahono (2013) in the same region criticized the predominance of institutional conservation frameworks that frequently prioritize top-down management approaches over genuinely inclusive conservation strategies. The literature suggests that conservation frameworks must be both ecologically sound and socially equitable, necessitating a nuanced understanding of local needs and contexts (Nyamahono, 2023; Akpan et al., 2017; Adem-Esmail & Geneletti, 2018; Nkondo, 2012).

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the study found that territorial conflicts arise due to a discrepancy between policy goals and their practical execution. Policies may seem strict on paper but are challenging to enforce because of variations in stakeholder dynamics. This difference often causes frustration and cynicism among local people who see little benefit from conservation measures supposedly meant to assist them. In summary, the findings suggest that territorial disputes can be reduced by implementing conservation activities that surpass established institutional paradigms and better integrate the interests and rights of local communities.

The recommendations are outlined below:

- Utilize ADR as the initial approach to resolving territorial disputes in the Cwebe villages, employing holistic and collaborative methods that foster capacity-building among stakeholders involved in these disputes.
- Educate stakeholders on their roles in conserving the Nature Reserve, abolishing the dominant top-down approach to enable local grassroots communities to feel that their opinions are valued in environmental conservation.
- Introduce empowerment policies focused on natural resources, such as land-use entrepreneurial activities, to give local communities a sense of control over the natural resources available to them.
- Invest in skills development through initiatives like Community-Based Natural Resources Management Programs, as empowered local communities are more likely to engage positively and contribute to achieving conservation goals.
- Conduct regular information-sharing sessions within the communities to facilitate the exchange of information between the management of the Nature Reserve and affected parties on conservation-related issues.

7. Declarations

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data availability: The data presented in this study is sensitive, and due to the University of Fort Hare Research and Ethics Committee, it cannot be shared publicly. However, interested parties may request access from the corresponding author.

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