

Land needs versus conservation

Will the Thukela Biosphere reconcile the two?

In AFRA News number 22 we looked at what the Thukela biosphere reserve could mean for different groups affected by the initiative. Here we report on recent negotiations between farmers involved in the initiative and communities who will be affected .



THE Thukela biosphere reserve presently involves 36 farmers who own about 65 000 hectares of land. The Natal Parks Board and the farmers involved in the initiative have emphasised the possible benefits for rural black communities, such as employment opportunities and related to this, employment conditions and security of tenure. But the communities themselves were deeply mistrustful of what the reserve could mean. They believed there would be strong pressure on them to drastically reduce their livestock, that evictions would increase from farms in the Biosphere and that unemployment could increase because eco-tourism would not provide enough jobs. The communities who will be affected by the biosphere include the black freehold areas of Cornfields and Tembalihle who were officially reprieved from forced removal in 1990, a labour tenant community in the Colenso District who is currently in the process of buying part of the farm on which they have lived all their lives and labour tenants and farmworkers living on white-owned farms in and around the biosphere area.

What is a biosphere?

ESSENTIALLY, it is a conservation cooperative where membership is voluntary and people are seen as integral in the conservation process. The concept is based on cooperative management, protection of wildlife and the environment and community involvement. A typical biosphere consists of three main zones:

- a core area which is essentially a wilderness area and where the environment is formally protected
- a buffer area consisting of a protected nature or game reserve
- a transitional area which surrounds the buffer area and where land is used for agricultural, commercial tourism and development

The biosphere idea had its roots in Russia about 22 years ago. Today there are about 270 biosphere reserves spread across 60 countries. Most of these are based on existing national parks or other kinds of protected areas. The concept has been accepted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and a global network of biospheres is registered under UNESCO.

In South Africa, biospheres are still largely a Natal phenomenon, introduced by the Natal Parks Board. There are biosphere reserves at Bulwer, Kamberg, Pongolapoort, Underberg, Coleford and Cobham state forest.

Meeting the needs of people and the environment

A process to address communities fears and needs and those of the biosphere farmers started in August with a meeting between the biosphere farmers and the communities of Cornfields and Tembalihle. The key issue to emerge from the meeting was the communities' need for more land and the biosphere farmers willingness to look at making this land available.

The farmers also offered the communities help with farming methods, livestock marketing and water provision. Water is a particularly pressing problem at Tembalihle where the recent drought has dried up existing water sources except for a single borehole.

Farmers support communities getting more land

Subsequent meetings between the communities' representatives and the biosphere saw agreement on the communities buying 11 farms from the biosphere farmers.

The communities will use money recently set aside by the government for land purchases. The money, said to be about R25 million for 1993, was set aside in terms of the Provision of Certain Land For Settlement Act 126 of 1993. The government will pay a subsidy of up to 80% of the land's price. The community will be expected to pay 20% - 5% immediately and the remaining 15% over a period of five years.

Addressing the needs of labour tenants and farmworkers

While resolution of the problems between the biosphere farmers and black landowners seems imminent, addressing the larger problems of labour tenants and farmworkers is only beginning.

At a meeting between the Natal Parks Board, a representative of the biosphere farmers and Colenso labour tenants in October about 150 people squeezed into the classroom of a school in Inkanyezi to state their fears and see what assurances they could get.

"Will we be staying with wild animals? If so, how will we live with these wild animals? What kind of wild animals will there be? Why were we not consulted earlier? Is the new South Africa going to give preference to wild animals over people? We can't be exploited anymore. We want jobs but we don't know that a game reserve is necessarily the best way to create jobs. We feel that we're being forced to accept the biosphere. If we say no, what will happen? Can we say no?" These were just some of the many questions and fears which labour tenants put to Greg Laws of the Natal Parks Board and Chris Wilkinson of the biosphere reserve.

A man from Weenen told of his own experiences when the Weenen reserve was established.

"When the Parks Board was setting up the Weenen reserve," he said, "we heard the same promises of the reserve being people-centred. Then there were also meetings, parties,

to explain what the reserve would mean for people already living in the area where the reserve was going to be. But tell me, how many people are there in the reserve today? I'll tell you. There are none. They have all been forced to relocation sites in KwaZulu. A few days after the parties, after the meetings the same people who had given us all those promises came in camouflage to torch our houses. Even now, as we discuss what will happen with this new biosphere reserve, there are members of the Natal Parks Board going around feeding poisoned meat to dogs. What does the Parks Board have to say about this. These are not stories I got second hand. These are things I have seen with my own eyes."

In reply to this seemingly damning tale, Greg Laws of the Natal Parks Board and Chris Wilkinson of the biosphere reserve were at pains to reassure the tenants that this time things would be different.

Biosphere promises new approach to conservation

Dealing first with the accusation that members of the Parks Board were poisoning tenants dogs, Mr Laws promised that such allegations would be investigated. Regarding the account of what had happened when the Weenen reserve was set up, he said that the biosphere was an attempt by the Parks Board to change what had been wrong about conservation in the past. He said the Parks Board were now trying to help people who lived near the Weenen reserve with development projects and he invited the tenants to elect

representatives to visit these areas, courtesy of the Natal Parks Board so that they could hear the people's views themselves about what was now happening around the Weenen reserve.

Mr Wilkinson told the tenants that the biosphere would mean there would be more jobs than there were now, not less. He said if the biosphere was to work then there would have to be benefits for everyone living in the area. It was not biosphere policy to evict people, he said. If a member of the biosphere did want to evict tenants, then the biosphere would try to mediate on the issue.

The animals which would be brought into the biosphere would be those which had been in the area before - leopard, crocodiles, hyena and rhino. The farmers and people would have to cooperate around secure housing and fencing so that people would feel secure.

Tenants agree to liaise with biosphere farmers

At the end of the meeting, tenants seemed less suspicious than when they had arrived. They agreed to set up a liaison committee with the biosphere farmers to deal with any problems that may arise between farmers and tenants. A similar meeting will be held with tenants in Weenen on October 23.

If similar cooperation can be achieved between these tenants as seems to be happening with black landowners, then there is a real possibility that the biosphere could mean a better life for all people in the region.

Cornfields and Tembalihle buy more land

AS part of negotiations around the establishment of the Thukela biosphere reserve, the black freehold communities have succeeded in getting access to more land.

Farmers involved in the biosphere agreed to sell 11 farms surrounding the two communities' existing land. This will add 8 531 hectares to the existing 842 hectares which the two communities own.

The 11 farms cost an average of R628.52 a hectare and a total of R5 362 306.90. The government will pay 80% of this.

The 442 families of Cornfields will have to pay an initial R322.73 each and the 267 families of Tembalihle will each have to pay R469.92.

The families in the two communities will also have to repay between R289.95 and R193.64 each per year for the next five years.

The farms were valued by independent land valuers, SA Farm Consultants (Pty) Ltd, and were generally found to be well-developed and in good condition agriculturally. Only four of the 11 farms were found to have been overgrazed.

The average value per hectare which SA Farm Consultants placed on the farms was R655 a hectare.