

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

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Building on the cornerstones of natural resources

Cranes are vital to South Africa's natural heritage, writes **Janis O'Grady**, field officer with the KwaZulu-Natal Crane Foundation. They also offer a huge, untapped potential in South Africa in the form of an alternative for landowners to get something back from their land.

The sight of a beautiful Blue Crane lying crumpled under a power-line is both tragic and not uncommon but the supply of electricity as a clean, convenient source of energy to provide humans with the benefits of modern society is becoming a priority for most developing countries. So too is the utilisation of land for intensive agriculture and timber, large-scale habitat transformation that must feed a burgeoning human population at all costs.

A fast-dwindling home range and violent power-line collisions are also affecting the other two species of crane found in South Africa - the regal Wattled and the gorgeous Grey-Crowned Cranes, which are usually affected when travelling between feeding and roosting sites.

The Wattled Crane whoops and dances in wetlands where relatively undisturbed habitats usually hide secretly. This is a world where other creatures dwell and places that are still oblivious to imminent human impacts. It is for this reason that the bird has been called the 'flagship species' for wetlands. There is some awareness that endangered and vulnerable species such as this regal crane are sensitive indicators of environmental health and therefore also indicators of the relative health of our human environment.

Cranes have also come to play a unique role as ambassadors for peace, helping people from different countries to recognise the common ground that unites them. It is not only their spectacular beauty, their elegant courtship dancing and their haunting calls that have drawn people to them but so too their ancient history in every, except two, continents of the world.

This is where eco-tourism comes in. The crane offers a huge, untapped potential in South Africa: An alternative for landowners to get something back from their land. A naturally functioning or rehabilitated wetland attracts wonderful bird species in general and provides water for antelope and other animals including otters, jackals and caracal. Frogs lie in the shallows and dragonflies abound. This sets the groundwork for a veritable playground for birder, university researcher and young learner.

Today crane conservation worldwide for the 15 crane species - 11 of which are already classified as endangered - depends on well-coordinated actions at local, regional and international level. In

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southern Africa, biological diversity goes hand-in-hand with sustainable land use and the alleviation of poverty. Tourism departments can link with land affairs, agriculture, traditional affairs and nature conservation departments.

The Wattled Crane is the most wetland dependant crane in the world and with only about 234 left in the wild in South Africa, extension work concentrates primarily on spreading awareness amongst landowners, farm workers and rural school children. The ongoing loss and misuse of wetlands in South Africa is the main threat to these birds.

When Blue Crane numbers dropped drastically from 100 000 to 20 000 in the 1980s due to massive habitat loss, grasslands in particular, conservation measures focused on education and awareness programmes were aimed at rural communities and landowners. Our national bird is a Red Data species, classified as vulnerable. Threats to the bird also include poisoning, power-line collisions and capture from the wild for illegal wildlife trade or food.

The Grey-Crowned Crane is the national bird of Uganda and while it is endemic to East Africa, Zimbabwe and South Africa, this crane is one of the species better adapted to human impacts on its grassland and wetland habits. One of the most ancient of cranes globally the species still roosts in trees and is regarded as sacred to many African peoples.

In a bid to highlight these features of cranes, the South African Crane Working Group, a working group of the Endangered Wildlife Trust based at the Johannesburg Zoo, has set out to conserve cranes and their grassland and wetland habitats.

Companies such as Eskom are increasingly on board with these conservation efforts, which will have positive impacts on other creatures in the food chain, through measures such as marking problematic power-lines and sponsoring efforts by the Trust. National educational workshops have been held for farm workers and rural school children in an effort to get everybody on board as future 'crane custodians'.

There are now fieldworkers in almost every province where cranes occur. The workers are striving to monitor and research the birds, to promote the viable management of their habitat and to nurture environmental education and awareness. The vast majority of threats to cranes are human induced, ranging from habitat loss and the illegal trade to a built environment and poverty.

Eco-tourism needs to play a major role in highlighting the plight of the bird through bird tours, wetland walks and more. One farmer in the Swartberg region of the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park of KwaZulu-Natal is an avid conservationist who sings the same song that both his father and his grandfather yodelled years before him - a song about shared, healthy land, a shared future.

Rod Dorning remembers the days of the early 1970s when there were 2 000 to 3 000 Blue and Grey-Crowned Cranes at one time on the family farm Fearnely. "It was the known thing to shoot these birds to get them out of the lands and planting maize was then a minor part of the farming enterprise," reminisces Dorning. Many farmers had cranes as pets, prancing around green lawns and coming in to roost at night.

But 10 years later there was a sudden change. Farmers began to diversify into ploughing larger maize fields and grazing more livestock. Agrochemicals became increasingly available and those that were 'environmentally unfriendly' were frequently used. In addition, the cheap protein source in some brands of chicken litter was attractive. Thus arrived diseases like Newcastle, creating sudden declines in wild fowl populations, including guinea fowl and cranes.

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Today, more than 20 years down the line, the numbers of both cranes and guinea fowl seem to be stabilising. There are now laws against keeping cranes as pets and a strict permit system attempts to regulate the illegal trade in these birds.

"I have always tried to tell people about our cranes and even though various district nature conservation officers have come and gone, we go on doing our own thing, always looking out for the cranes," smiles Dorning.

This success story gives conservationists hope for the future survival of other birds and wild species that have become rare and endangered due to habitat loss.

However, on the other side of the coin, a farmer in Himeville has recently applied for permission to plant a commercial pine plantation in the foothills of the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site. The proposed development sites lies en route to Sani Pass, one of the biggest tourist attractions in the southern Drakensberg. The mountains, wetlands, rivers, endemic plants, birds and animals seen on the road to Sani Pass, the gateway into Lesotho all contribute to the 'Berg experience.

According to the special case area plan for the Drakensberg prepared by the Town and Regional Planning Commission in 2001, the proposed afforestation site falls within a 'view corridor and agricultural zone', thus requiring special attention. Although this particular permit applies for afforestation of 220 hectares of land for pine plantations, the KZN Wildlife authorities consider this river catchment area full. However, at a public meeting towards the end of 2001, it was acknowledged that landowners today are feeling cash-strapped in tight economic times and that the alternatives to farming with stock in a mountain catchment are few.

Even while stock theft is rife, the environmental consequences of alien plants on this scale are many. There are definite impacts on stream and river flow, soil moisture is affected, acidification occurs, nutrients are depleted and there is soil compaction, soil erosion results and many indigenous plants are threatened.

The unique wetland systems that host many endemic plant, animal and bird species and more than 35 000 San rock art images contributed to the recognition of the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park as a World Heritage Site. Recently retired chief executive officer of KZN Wildlife, Dr George Hughes said that this status brings increased tourism and that this particular site will "have a very positive upliftment spin-off for local communities through increased employment resulting from an anticipated surge of tourists to the area".

Some private landowners are jumping on the eco-tourism bandwagon and using the natural biodiversity on their farms to boost their income from the land. An Underberg farmer George Lockhart is halfway there. By successfully rehabilitating a large wetland - which was previously so mismanaged that it ceased to function naturally - he will create an attraction for birders, flower lovers and hikers. Blocking the furrow that was originally created to divert water away from the wetland has encouraged water to once again seep into the wetland. Part of the reclaimed area has been converted into a small artificial pan complete with roosting facilities for waders and other waterfowl. A wild flower walk also meanders around the wetland and a bird hide is nearly ready for use.

In order to use this economic situation to their advantage, more farmers need to investigate the sustainable developmental opportunities that eco-tourism presents, building on the cornerstones of their natural resources and the people who live in the area..

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