

Perspectives

on KwaZulu-Natal

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Community based crime prevention in the southern Drakensberg

Community based crime prevention projects have been documented in a project commissioned by the Independent Projects Trust and funded by the Open Society Foundation for South Africa. **Cheryl Goodenough** researched the Underberg/Himeville Community Watch as part of the project.

The towns of Underberg and Himeville are situated about 100 kilometres south west of Pietermaritzburg at the foothills of the southern Drakensberg mountains. The mountains, which form the boundary between South Africa and Lesotho, are part of the Ukhahlamba Drakensberg Park (recently declared a World Heritage Site). The mountain peaks are up to 3 200 metres high and very steep in places. The weather in the mountains is unpredictable.

The Underberg/Himeville Community Watch serves an area that is about 6 000 kilometres square and has a border with Lesotho that is 110 kilometres long. This area includes several villages and districts, as well as portions of some districts. These include Underberg (where the Community Watch is based at the offices of the Underberg Farmer's Association), Himeville, Bulwer, Bushmans Nek and Loteni.

This area is somewhat larger than that covered by the local KwaSani Municipality, which serves an area of about 1 180 kilometres square and a population of about 14 500 people. As a result of the demarcation process that took place around the local government elections in December 2000, the municipality replaced two councils that were situated in Underberg and Himeville and also took over part of the land under the Ndlovu Regional Council.

The village of Underberg has a number of shops predominantly in one main street and at the junction with the road to Himeville. The shops cater for local farmers and their labourers, as well as to tourists who travel through the southern Drakensberg area. However, KwaSani municipal manager Peter Robins says that increasingly people are starting to run businesses from the area using computer technology that enables them to be located away from a traditional office. A number of people also see the purchase of land in the Underberg or Himeville area as an investment with the intention of possibly retiring in the area.

Generally crime in the district is regarded as fairly minimal. The major problem is stock theft, particularly across the border, which affects both commercial and subsistence farmers. For conservation officials from KZN Wildlife, crime in the nature reserve areas of the Drakensberg along the border with Lesotho involves stock theft and dagga smuggling. According to conservation manager John Crowson, field rangers who work in various sections of the park are

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concerned particularly with biodiversity issues, but also perform law enforcement duties. "They are required to arrest or apprehend illegals that enter the park. This could be a visitor from a hotel or a Basutho with dagga. Last year we recovered two tons of dagga and made 116 arrests. That's in Cobham (nature reserve), which is 49 000 hectares. The Basuthos often come into South Africa and have drop off points where they meet the taxis and then they often steal stock on their way home."

When asked if he could describe an incident when conservation rangers had been involved in tracking stolen stock, Crowson said that it happens all the time. "Last week we had one at Bushmans Nek. The field ranger was actually running and talking (on the radio) at the same time. We thought that they were going to catch the thieves, but they were already in Lesotho. We had another one in Cobham recently where cattle were stolen and two or three hours later we got them back. We don't always get the cattle back, but it depends on how quickly the theft is reported to Community Watch."

Community Watch has continuously insisted that farmers check their fences and do patrols to count their stock early in the morning. To recover the stock action has to be taken as early as possible to prevent the stock from being taken across the border into Lesotho, according to the district co-ordinator of Community Watch John Pearce.

Pearce recorded a drop in stock theft to almost nothing in September 2001 as a result of operations conducted by the army and KZN Wildlife. However, Crowson said that there's been a comeback to the decrease in theft and the recovery of significant numbers of stock. "There have been a lot of arson fires started in retaliation. On Friday there was a group of Basuthos in the Garden Castle area. By doing this they ensure that our focus is on the fires. The fires have had a big impact. In the Loteni area we have 27 000 hectares and of those 23 000 have been lost to fires. There have been two fires there and they are started in the howling winds. We have got to backburn in those winds rather than just stopping the fire and that is not a good thing for biodiversity," Crowson said in an interview last year.

Apart from stock theft, crime on farms is minimal. There have not been any murders of farmers or farm managers in the district for the past four years.

One of the most frequently committed crimes in the Himeville policing area is assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm. This is often alcohol related. Housebreaking incidents occur in spates, but mostly affect the business sector in Underberg.

Community Watch has its origins in a farm watch initiative set up after a crisis developed between the farming community, in particular, and the Himeville police station in 1995. The majority of police members based at Himeville went on a strike which was led by members of the police and prisons union, Popcru and resulted in the station commissioner "being literally chased away", according to Pearce. The community members, who held a protest outside the locked gates of the police station, demanded that the police members returned to work and that the station commissioner be immediately reinstated.

Pearce said that the Underberg Farmers Association subsequently approached the police commissioner from the Umzimkulu policing area, which includes Underberg and Himeville, and has its headquarters in Port Shepstone. The association asked for permission to establish a farm watch which would be manned by two police members who would be chosen by the farm watch committee. According to Pearce, the task of the two members would be to service the farming community, which "did not want 'any' policemen on their farms". Popcru subsequently objected to this scheme - "and rightly so," according to Pearce, because policemen were serving a selected

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paying sector of the community.

At a general meeting initiated by those involved in the farm watch, it was decided that a community watch would be established. Pearce was appointed as a full-time district co-ordinator and given the task of expanding on the co-ordinating role that was envisaged for the new body, which was formalised in March 1998. Member of the Community Watch management committee Alan Hankinson, who is a resident in the Underberg village described the rationale behind the new structure. "It was decided that the structure would not just be a farm watch, but that it would include as many community individuals as possible and operate as a community watch. It was important that we all stood together against the dreadful situation that was developing. Although we haven't had any disasters here, the levels of stock theft in this area were alarming."

Community Watch is run by a management committee, while Pearce performs the day to day operations. The organisation has a full time secretary and for a time he was assisted by a second in charge. Community Watch has also employed two full time Bushmen trackers.

The primary function of Community Watch is to ensure that complaints are attended to. Community Watch is contacted in connection with a crime or security complaint and ensures that the incident is responded to. Said Pearce: "You don't have the public phoning the charge office (in the police station) now. We have developed a good working relationship with the police stations. It has got better and better. People have accepted us and they use us."

Community Watch is not only concerned with security matters. The organisation will also assist to resolve any other incidents that are reported. These may include a vehicle getting stuck in mud, a car accident, fires, snow related problems, as well as incidents of crime.

Pearce attends various meetings of security personnel that are aimed at co-ordinating different levels of structures. On the local level he sits on all the joint operational committees. These meetings are held once a week in Himeville. The army, police, stock theft units, KZN Wildlife and Community Watch attend these meetings.

The primary tool of the Community Watch, which is used for communication, is the network radio. The Underberg Farmers Association has had a radio network since 1977. A number of people living in the villages of Underberg and Himeville have radios in their houses, particularly those who live on smallholdings.

Community Watch also has access to the police radio network and the KZN Wildlife radio system. This enables Community Watch to be kept informed of any incidents that have occurred in the area and ensures that communication between all structures is co-ordinated through Community Watch.

The district that is served by Community Watch has been divided into 21 security cells, which have developed over eight years. "They are the first line of response in any emergency such as a farm attack," said Pearce. "The cell will react immediately. We also report the matter to the police immediately and the police take over when they arrive. The initial response is so quick because of the cells."

Although the cells respond to incidents, the Community Watch employees do not provide any response service. "Instead we co-ordinate with everybody. One of my responsibilities in an emergency is to ensure that things are done quickly," Pearce said.

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During the early days of Community Watch each person living in the Underberg and Himeville towns would be sent an account by the council for the payment of a fee for Community Watch. More recently, however, the council has included the fee in the rates. This means that separate accounts are not sent out and a lump sum, of about R15 000 at the time of this research, is paid to Community Watch on a monthly basis.

Farmers pay Community Watch separately, as do some large companies that are not situated in the villages. The payment is calculated according to the size of the farm and what the farmer does, with the average payment in the region of about R200 or R250.

The chairman of Community Watch Chris Barras is convinced that a large part of the success of Community Watch lies in the support from the community. He said that a community watch structure is going to be a financial burden for residents of a community and that they have to commit to it fully. In addition, the co-ordinator of the project is particularly important because the person has to "be able to work with the community who are his bread and butter". The person also has to be in a position to form excellent relationships with all structures operating in the area.

The leadership and management skills of Pearce are questioned by few, if any, of those who work with him. He has also shown his ability to co-ordinate activities ranging from crime prevention initiatives to fire fighting operations.

There is great potential for Community Watch to further include the rural communities in the district in their activities. Such an effort will face difficulties such as people being unable to attend meetings because of the financial implications involved in travelling long distances. However, black subsistence farmers who attended a focus group as part of this research have already shown significant support for the work of Community Watch. Such individuals would be vital in spreading information about the organisation. Lack of funding is, however, a constraint in any of these efforts.

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