Keeping cattle in a changing rural landscape: communal rangeland management in Okhombe, KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa

Monique Salomon, Robert Fincham, Terry Everson, Nicky Allsopp, Michael McCall, Akke van der Zijpp

This paper describes a research journey involving people, cattle and the landscape in Okhombe, a rural area in the western part of KwaZulu-Natal Province, at the foot of the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Mountain Range, South Africa. Using action research involving community members as co-researchers, the study investigated why a rotational resting system for communal cattle grazing collapsed within six months of its launch. Despite having been designed in a participatory manner cattle keepers did not apply the rotational resting system.

To understand how the current landscape of Okhombe was shaped the history of the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Region over the past two hundred years was explored. Four historical episodes were distinguished. Encounters between people, economic expansion, nature conservation efforts, and colonial and apartheid legislation all left their mark on the landscape. Vast tracts of largely uninhabited land with abundant wildlife rapidly evolved into a structured black and white landscape of overcrowded African enclaves on degraded lands, thriving large commercial farms, booming towns, and infrastructural development to service the burgeoning industry.

The study further investigated how cattle keepers use the rangeland commons, and what determines these practices. Less people in Enhlanokhombe sub-ward keep less cattle. A 30% decrease in cattle numbers was recorded over the past seven years. Stock theft emerged as a key driver of cattle grazing management practices. The decline in authority of traditional leaders and the abandonment of customary rules have further compounded the dominant practice of continuous grazing by cattle. Rotational resting was found to be unsuited to the majority of cattle keepers who want to keep a close watch on their herds as they graze on the lower hill slopes. People in Okhombe disagreed about the condition of the range and what comprised appropriate grazing management. A community initiative has emerged to form cattle patrols to address stock theft. If successful it may restore social cohesion and trust, and further enhance collective action.

The concern with communal grazing management described in this research, and in the Okhombe Landcare project of which it was part, aimed to reverse land degradation and overgrazing. This concern was underpinned by a particular interest and need to conserve the uKhahlamba Drakensberg as a near-pristine wilderness landscape which provides marketable ecosystem goods and services. As such, cattle keeping in Enhlanokhombe can be described as embedded in a social-ecosystem comprising a series of nested, self-organizing sub-systems which are interconnected. Subsystems include for example the cattle production system, cattle grazing management practices, the wider ecosystem, and government policies and regulations.

A complex systems perspective is proposed in communal rangeland management that enables cattle keepers, other rangeland users, and outside stakeholders such as extension workers and policy makers, to respond effectively to changes in the environment by taking
into consideration and balancing a complex set of biophysical, socio-political, and economic variables.