

The KwaZulu-Natal Parks Board, renowned the world over for its achievements in conservation, may be amalgamated with the provincial department of nature conservation. Gillian Handley examines the implications

CHANGE FOR KZN CONSERVATION

DECEMBER 1997 would have marked the 50th anniversary of the KwaZulu-Natal Parks Board (NPB) but the organisation in its present form is unlikely to exist by then.

In terms of a Bill still to be published, the NPB and the provincial Department of Nature Conservation (DNC) are to be amalgamated. This move has generally been widely supported, but there are a number of problems and fears that need to be addressed.

The importance of conservation in the province is unarguable. As a major employer, a source of valuable income to rural communities and a solid generator of foreign exchange, the tourism and ecotourism industry is recognised as the goose that should lay the golden egg. KwaZulu-Natal is the most densely populated province, and one of the poorest, so here especially it is essential to make wildlife work for the people.

In 1995 tourists visiting SA brought in nearly R14bn (20 times what SA spends on formal conservation). Wildlife is arguably the major attraction, and KwaZulu-Natal's combination of wildlife and scenic and cultural attractions ensures it is a place on most visitors' itineraries.

Until now, the responsibility for conservation in KwaZulu-Natal fell on the NPB and the DNC. The NPB was founded in 1947 as a parastatal to manage conservation in the entire province, excluding areas managed by the DNC.

The NPB has a high international profile, thanks to some world-renowned conservation successes. The DNC has been more locally focused and has had some serious problems in the past.

Robin Raubenheimer, secretary of the Department of Traditional and Environmental Affairs, believes the marriage of local and international focus through the



Elephants ... one of the great attractions for foreign visitors

amalgamation of the two organisations will have solid benefits. Amalgamation will also mean less cost to the taxpayer and a more consistent approach to conservation management in the province.

The benefits of such a move are obvious, but some fears have been raised. The trade unions are cautious, although Raubenheimer says a recent meeting between Inkosi Ngubane, MEC for Traditional and Environmental Affairs, and labour went well, and various committees are now working on the Bill.

Raubenheimer says it would be fatal to force the Bill through. The staff concerned are understandably suspicious of change. DNC staff will be changing from public service to parastatal status, and their concerns over job security must be addressed. The last thing Raubenheimer's department wants is to lose highly skilled people.

The concern among DNC staff is one of the reasons for a proposed change in the functioning of the NPB. The MEC's role on the board is likely to be enlarged. The public servants of the DNC are more likely to accept the amalgamation if the minister has a final say over conditions and terms of service, and this is the main area where he will become more involved.

Members of NPB are concerned that the role of the board will change from an executive to an advisory one, and say it is ironic that the proposed change comes at a time when the structure of the NPB has been applauded internationally and when other African states seek to follow the board's model. The African Wildlife Foundation, a US NGO, recently described NPB as "the finest conservation agency, state or provincial, in the world."

Dr George Hughes, CEO of NPB, endorses the board's current role, saying it has worked well in the past. If the Bill goes through, he says, the advantages of change will not be that obvious. Raubenheimer says there is no intention to emasculate the board, or to interfere with the management of flora and fauna. As to changing from an executive to an advisory role, Raubenheimer insists that the Bill has not yet been published, and input is still to come from stakeholders and the public before any changes will be made.

Raubenheimer says that boards, particularly appointed boards, do not always marry well with new responsibilities in the country. He adds the board system must be brought in in such a way that it does not diminish the responsibility of the CE of the board to the MEC and that the MEC is not seen to hide behind the board or abdicate responsibility.

The Bill is also likely to differentiate between the board as such and the staff, which may be called the Conservation Service in future.

The report that formed the basis of the proposed Bill highlighted a need for a reconciliation of interests. Many rural and tribal black people are not particularly well disposed towards game reserves, according to the report. Raubenheimer refers to the deep hurt that still exists over forced land removals and the need to build something all communities can be proud of and identify with. He agrees the NPB is addressing this problem but says there is still a very long way to go. Most communities regard the talk about benefits of ecotourism, such as jobs, as pie in the sky. Raubenheimer recognises that some projects of the NPB are making inroads. Under the Board's Outreach Programme, a community curio shop turned over R270 000 last year – not bad for a cottage industry. He has also identified the need to look at dismantling the red tape that hinders ecotourism projects that could generate jobs.

The report also highlighted a concern from the private sector that the present board system is too exclusive and that parallel initiatives can be stifled. The MEC should have the power to ensure fair play for all parties. Raubenheimer adds that in the future, after central government's White Paper on the environment is out, KwaZulu-Natal will develop a provincial environmental Act. As part of this Act, a com-

mission or authority could be put in place to ensure a balance of interests.

Raubenheimer says the department believes in greater local representation and local control. Hughes says the board has no problem with creating a more transparent structure for appointing board members, adding that they would welcome a more structured form of permanent representation of local communities by including local boards under the main board. He is proud of the fact that NPB meets the various standards of good corporate governance, and that the board has had Zulu membership since 1978 – long before this was "politically correct".

Another issue likely to have an impact on conservation in the province is the budget cuts for the next year of around 7,8%. Raubenheimer stresses that the budget cuts were imposed across the board, not just on the NPB. However, as one of the seemingly more efficient departments, with no evidence of corruption or theft, should the parastatal suffer the same budget cuts as other departments populated largely, it would appear, by ghosts?

Downsizing

In the current year, with no real increase over last year's budget, the board is running hard to stay in the same place. Budget cuts in the next year, says Hughes, will mean losing ground, and the board will be looking at downsizing and reprioritising projects. In an effort to counter this, various projects encouraging private sector partnerships as a way of mobilising funds are in the pipeline.

Dr Pallo Jordan, Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, regards biodiversity as the fabric of existence. The NPB says it has long practised a conservation policy that promotes the conservation of biodiversity, and practises conservation as a sustainable economic force. The board has won numerous awards for conservation and for promoting social upliftment in local communities.

One of the world's great conservation success stories is the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park. In 1895, when the Hluhluwe and Umfolozi Game Reserves were declared, there were only 14 white rhino left in what was their last stronghold on earth. Today nearly every white rhino in the world owes its existence to this park.

The board was the first organisation to

launch an extension service where they got involved outside parks by persuading land owners to become involved in a combined conservation effort. In the 70s landowners combined their properties to form conservancies. Today there are 212 such conservancies (18% of the land area of the province) run by community organisations, and the concept has been exported successfully to other provinces and countries.

The board also runs the largest outreach programmes in Africa, if not the world, involving more than 150 different projects valued at R17m. These projects go beyond pure conservation. Funding has been obtained from local and foreign donor agencies by the board, which acts as a facilitator for the nearby communities. Small business forms an important part of the programme. So far R20m has been raised for communities through developments, and small community businesses within the parks generated R1,75m in 1996.

One of these outreach projects follows the ruling in favour of conservation in the St Lucia mining issue. A joint venture planning exercise has been developed with the Dukuduku Development and Tourism Association for a "gateway" camp development on the western shores of the Greater St Lucia Wetland Park.

A new community trust, the Neighbours' Trust, has been launched because, as Hughes concedes, no matter how big the outreach programme is, there is still a perception that the parks make money and the locals do not. The community wants to see cash benefits from conservation. A problem previously encountered is that if an influential local person uses money earned from conservation for something that does not benefit the community, he or she could not be challenged. A trust with locals as trustee members will be able to exert peer pressure. The concept has been discussed with thousands of people and NGOs and is widely approved of, says Hughes. It remains to be given the go-ahead by cabinet, and Hughes anticipates implementation shortly.

Once the draft Bill is finalised and published, comment and input will be invited. Hopefully the final document will meet the needs of the communities and other stakeholders without conservation paying a price. ♦