

Reconstructing the Political Boundary in the Lubombo Transfrontier Conservation Area

by Krupa Patel, MEdSc 2006

Introduction

Imagine a landscape where elephants migrate freely along ancient migratory routes, crossing back and forth across international boundaries; a place where tourists can drive through multiple African countries in one day to view wildlife and enjoy ecotourism opportunities that promote biodiversity conservation, while also providing income to local communities. This is the central vision for Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs). TFCAs, or Peace Parks, attempt to reconcile human land use with conservation objectives. They are comprised of conservation corridors linking major protected areas across international borders. The result is a large, unified ecological area that can be managed jointly by different countries through international cooperation.

Transboundary conservation has been hailed as a new frontier in conservation and development due to its goal of simultaneously pursuing biodiversity conservation, rural economic growth, and regional peace through international cooperation. The Southern African Development Community (SADC), an economic and political alliance of nine southern African states, has embraced the TFCA as a way to provide poverty relief to local communities by bolstering local economies while keeping biodiversity conservation at the center of the TFCA initiative. Three governments in southern Africa—Swaziland,

Mozambique, and South Africa—have embarked on an initiative, currently in construction, to implement a TFCA within their boundaries. The TFCA would remove international border fences, thereby allowing a free flow of ecosystem *and* local economic functions. In the process, the *political* boundaries within the TFCA are intended to become less discernible, or less “visible.”

However, despite positive intentions for the plan, on the ground, the TFCA may strengthen political lines within its jurisdiction, intensifying the presence of the state in border regions and increasing the regulation of civilian movement across these borders. Consequently, the TFCA may adversely impact those whose lives depend on cross-border movement and the overall local economy in the region.

Background

In June of 2000, the governments of Swaziland, Mozambique, and South Africa entered into the Lubombo Transfrontier Trilateral Protocol to formally establish the Lubombo Transfrontier Conservation and Resource Area (Figure 1). The Trilateral Ministerial Committee, comprised of a ministerial representative from each of the participating nations, appointed high-ranking government officials from the three countries to a Trilateral Commission. Under the direction of the Trilateral Commission, five stakeholder Task Teams were deemed responsible for planning and organizing the implementation of the five corresponding sub-TFCAs that, together, comprise the Lubombo TFCA. Each country's conservation agency is then responsible for managing the TFCA land under its jurisdiction.

The anticipated Lubombo TFCA is

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Figure 1. Map of the Lubombo Transfrontier Conservation Area.



4,195 km² and lies on a coastal plain running from Tembe Elephant Park and Ndumu Game Reserve in northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, to the Maputo Elephant Reserve in Mozambique (Peace Parks Foundation 2005). Tembe Elephant Park will be connected to the Maputo Elephant Reserve through the creation of the Futi Conservation Corridor, which will reunite elephant populations in the two parks.

Several communities live in and are adjacent to the Lubombo TFCA. Most homesteads in the border regions are constructed using traditional materials and methods, and many people rely on a combination of livelihoods, which generally include subsistence farming, local *ilala* palm wine production, bush meat markets, and reed harvesting, as well as illicit transboundary activities. These communities frequently depend on natural resources that lie on opposite sides of the international boundary fence.

Although government officials are

attempting to hasten the process of making the Lubombo TFCA operational, within the TFCA, international border fences have yet to be dismantled. TFCA officials are still in the process of settling land claims, building infrastructure, and developing management plans.

Changing Regulation and its Impact on Policing and Creating Linkages

On an abstract level, the international boundary creates distinctions between systems of governance, history, and society. However, physical boundaries that separate the laws and policies that govern South Africa, Mozambique, and Swaziland can be walked across with little difficulty on the ground. On a local level, the international boundary that falls within the proposed TFCA is a single-track sand road that runs between two four-foot-high wire fences formally separating the three countries. These fences are broken in some places and non-existent in others.



The boundary road between South Africa and Mozambique
Photograph by K. Patel

The border regions where South Africa, Mozambique, and Swaziland meet are sparsely populated and state presence is all but absent in many of these areas. According to political scientist and anthropologist, James Scott, “Border zones have traditionally been non-state spaces, characterized by perceived chaos and illegibility” (1998: 187). Most local movement along the border regions is fairly unimpeded. In an interview with an inspector in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, the inspector revealed, “border control is a major problem in the South Africa-Mozambique border regions and there is very little regulation of movement” (South African security forces, pers. comm., 2005). As such, security in the borderlands is a heavily discussed issue among TFCA administrators.

Since conservation requires government action to regulate people’s activities and manage land (Ellis 1994), the Lubombo TFCA will intensify state presence in the borderlands through increased security and border forces. Border regulation will increase through the creation of corridor areas that are patrolled by both national forces and conservation authorities, leading to more effective policing of the borderlands (South African conservation authorities, pers. comm., 2005).

In addition, the TFCA will also strengthen core-periphery institutional linkages

through the construction of infrastructure for the TFCA. Roads and tourist facilities have been planned in all three countries to better connect the border regions to urban areas. Road-building is an inherently political activity. The extensive road-building planned for the TFCA will increase market access into and out of the communities affected by the TFCA, restructuring local economies. It will also strengthen state access, bringing more visibility to the borderlands.

The Effect of TFCA Regulation on Local Economies: Cross-Border Trade, Market Access, and Interaction

Although international cooperation is one of the main goals of the TFCA, cooperation across the political boundary is already taking place through systems of trade that contribute to the local economy. In a sense, these border zones are already transfrontier areas since local livelihoods and identities depend on cross-border trade and interaction. Most movement across the international border involves the local population that crosses back and forth to visit family, purchase bush meat, sell fish, and buy supplies at the local markets (community member, pers. comm., 2005). According to Jennifer Jones in her article, *Transboundary*

Conservation: Development Implications for Communities in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, many members of the Mbangweni community on the South African side of the border have primary household garden plots that lie one to two kilometers over the border in Mozambique on the floodplains where the soil is more fertile (2005). Greater regulation of local movement across the international border may affect local access to productive farming land and informal markets that are currently used by people on both sides of the international border.

In addition, small dirt paths can be seen winding their way through the dense bush on both sides of the international border road. The small dirt paths are the routes people take to avoid paying “crossing tolls” in the form of crops and money at stop-points along the main border road (South African Conservation Authorities, pers. comm., 2005). Increasing border forces may heighten the visibility of these informal border crossings. When security forces flow into the borderlands through the TFCA, it may place a further economic burden on people by imposing stronger regulation of local crossing paths and border zones, and perhaps expanding the crossing tolls network into previously informal routes.

Bush meat is an integral part of local diets since it is a traditional form of sustenance and also tends to be cheaper and more nutritious than store-bought meat. Bush meat also has profound implications for the local use of domestic livestock as capital investments for the economic security of the household. “People, regardless of ethnicity [in Eastern and Southern Africa], generally refrain from utilizing their livestock for domestic use, especially when a viable meat protein alternative exists so that livestock can be preserved as household capital and cultural assets, and be used only in dire circumstances during drought and famine” (Pillinger 2004: 22). Increased border regulation may prevent access to vital bush meat sources.

There are three informal markets that are

currently operating along the international border on land that will become part of the TFCA. These markets support the trade of bush meat, household goods, *ilala* palm wine, and locally grown produce from household plots in the area. Most of the daily movement across the border is foot movement for these markets. Although border communities access the markets differentially, Jones found that 18% of Mbangweni residents on the border sell household goods at the local markets, and 77% buy household goods at these markets (2005).

These informal markets are forums for social interaction as well as cross-boundary trade between border communities. At the KwaMshudu border market, women grill fish and sell stews in giant cauldrons. Giant plastic gas cans of locally made *ilala* palm wine are stacked in piles for local sale, and men smoke and socialize under trees from which red duikers and other bush meats hang. Women hang their fresh-plucked fowl and dried meat from the border fence, and people cross through the fence as if it was merely there to display their goods. Border guards with AK-47s lounge along the fence-lines smoking and watching the local movement through the fences.

The KwaMshudu market will most likely be encompassed by the proposed Futi Conservation Corridor that will link Tembe Elephant Park in South Africa to the Maputo Elephant Reserve in Mozambique. Two of the three existing informal bush meat markets lie w, as well as several crossing points used by South Africans to access their household garden plots in Mozambique. Walking access in the borderlands within the TFCA may also be restricted by the expanded range of elephants and other dangerous fauna in the conservation areas (Jones 2005).

The Potential for Increasing Visibility of Socio-Economic Disparities

Mobilization of border forces along the political border within the TFCA has many

implications. Will increased security forces contribute to more regional stability, more governance of the border regions, or perhaps more conflict? At current international border posts within the TFCA, South African and Mozambican border forces are camped roughly 60 m from each other across the international border road. The Mozambican security forces live in make-shift tents on one side of the political border, while the South African forces live in solid, weather-proof barracks on the other side. Unequal ground-level funding often leads to jealousy and intimidation among international border forces (South African Security Forces, pers comm). A further implication is that salary and infrastructural disparities along the international border may make the political border visible socio-economically even after the border fences have been removed physically.

Conclusion

In his article, *Transfrontier Conservation Areas: A New Dawn for Eco-tourism or a New Form of Conservation Expansionism*, Saliem Fakir astutely wrote, "There is a real danger that if TFCAs are not carefully thought through in terms of their economic and social impacts, a purely conservation mind-set may drag regional governments to support what may turn out to be large tracts of unproductive land...the cost of which will have to be borne by already impoverished citizens in the region" (Fakir 2000: 4).

Although the TFCA will increase access to border regions for tourists and external communities, the TFCA may hinder local systems of trade, household production, and social interaction that depend on unregulated cross-border movement. Local people will always find ways to cross boundaries, however the TFCA may present an additional hurdle. Thus, despite its purpose to transcend international boundaries, the TFCA may, in fact, reinforce boundary lines and undermine the efforts of the southern

African political community to improve local economies and combat rural poverty.

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