



**Cultural environmental
narratives and perceptions:
potential for improved community
connection to
and protection of landscapes**

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Research context:

- Conservation policy in SA is more inclusive and participative than ever before, recognising the expressed need for increased community participation in land use, land management and land ownership (Lawes *et al* 2000; Cocks 2006; Brosius and Hitchner 2010)
- However, this has yet to be effectively translated at the ground level
- The legacy of protectionist policies continue to be felt and local environmental histories are not taken into account
- Current community environmental management is open to interpretation and prone to power abuses
- The language of conservation remains within the realm of the western 'educated' elite and local communities remain relatively silent in terms of conservation practices, planning and policy

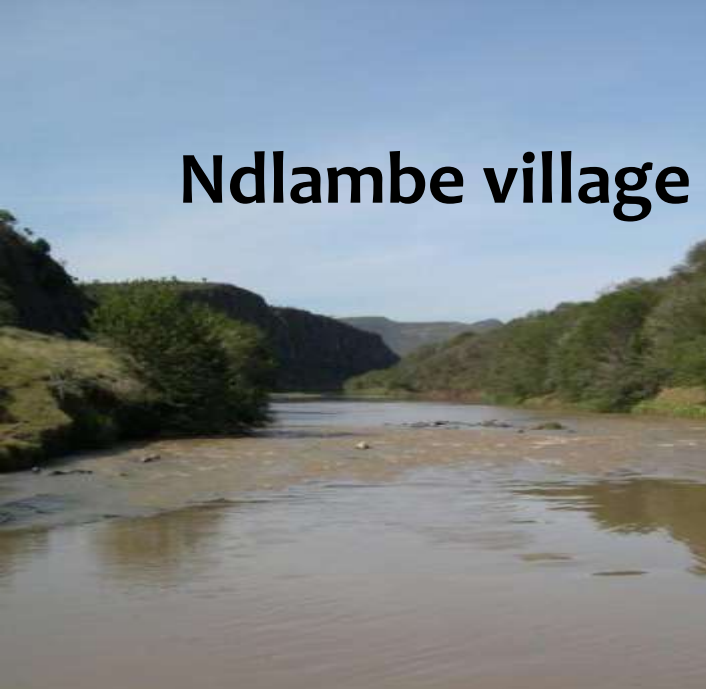
The study was designed to have several comparative aspects:

- Do different vegetation types (Valley thicket versus Southern Mist-belt Forest) inspire different environmental narratives and perceptions?
- How do different means of conservation (State forest versus open access community forest) impact upon cultural resource use and environmental perceptions?
- What impact does age and gender have on cultural environmental use and perceptions?
- What LEK is being passed down to children in these different environments?

Pirie Mission



Ndlambe village







Qualitative and participative methodologies:

- Participant observation
- Qualitative interviews
- Participatory booklets
- Participatory cultural mapping
- Drawing, singing and story-telling sessions
- Participatory cultural walks with children, ‘non-experts’, healers and elders
- Formal and informal focus group discussions
- Class workshops



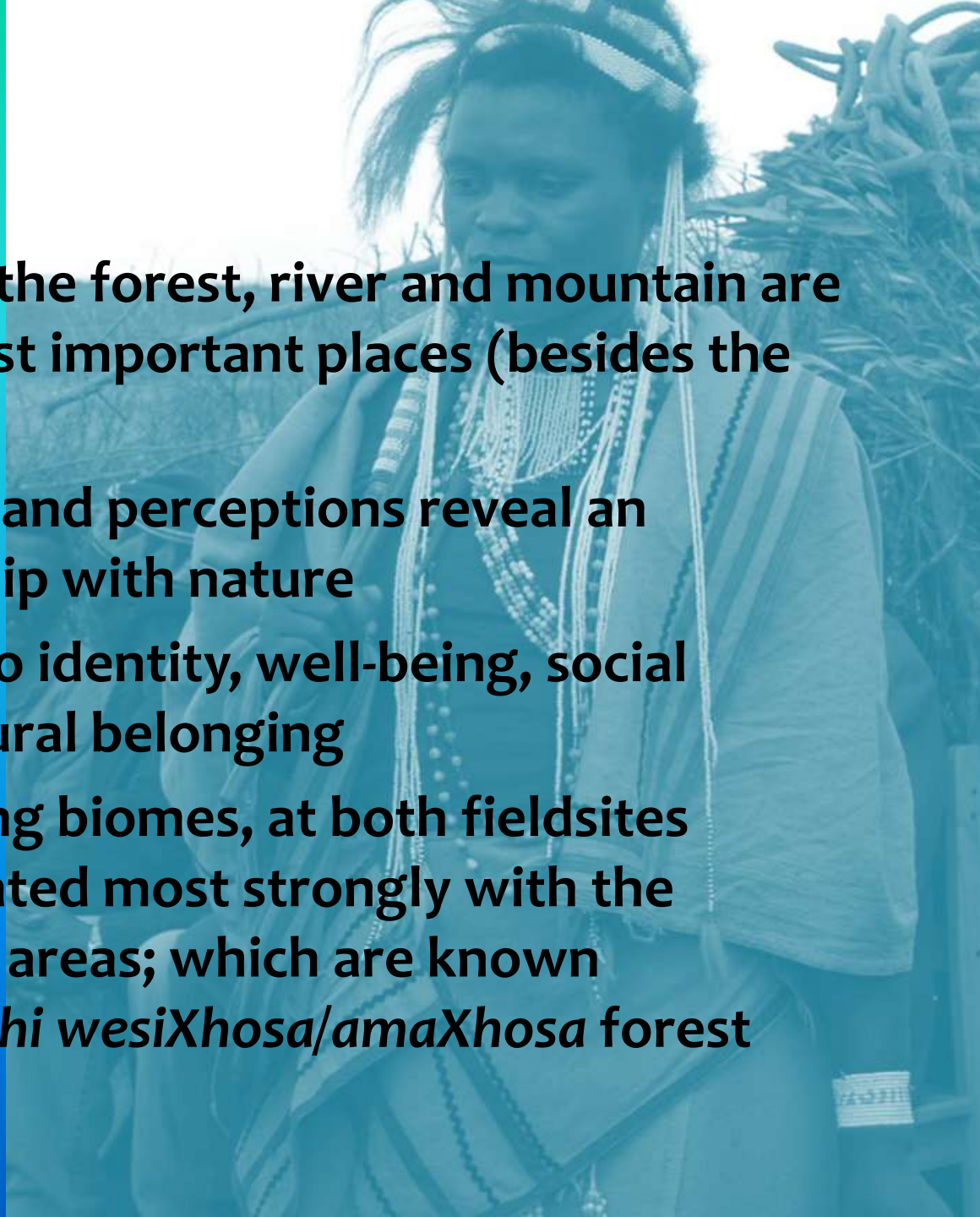
Cultural mapping

Detail of Mankazana Dam



Findings:

- At both field sites, the forest, river and mountain are considered the most important places (besides the village)
- Cultural narratives and perceptions reveal an intimate relationship with nature
- Nature is integral to identity, well-being, social transition and cultural belonging
- Despite the differing biomes, at both fieldsites participants resonated most strongly with the indigenous ‘forest’ areas; which are known collectively as *ihlathi wesiXhosa/amaXhosa* forest



Ihlathi as benevolent provider:

Ihlathi functions variously as:

- 'the place where you can get everything'
- a place of rejuvenation and psychological healing
- a church (a place to pray)
- as a home of the ancestors
- as a space which provides escape from the troubles of village life
- as a recreational arena
- as a liminal space which is vitally important during ritual transitions such as initiation of boys/healers
- The forest is particularly important to more vulnerable individuals, offering not only a means of livelihood, but also a space to escape physical and mental problems
- The forest thus acts as a cultural, emotional, and physical reserve, being hugely important for both people and livestock
- All agreed that life without the forest would be difficult, if not impossible

State restrictions have heavily impacted upon cultural environmental use and knowledge

- In Pirie kraals are constructed with *plantaish* (black wattle) as prescribed by the state and many households no longer maintain woodpiles
- Many older participants' environmental activities are still influenced by the restrictive government policies of the 1970's – 1990's and they fear conviction by the 'forest police'
- Continuing state restrictions allow outsiders access to forests communities feel they have no ownership over
- In Ndlambe, kraals are constructed with traditionally used *intsinde* and indigenous hardwoods – highly valued for their long lasting qualities
- Kraals and woodpiles are prevalent and well maintained
- Ndlambe residents felt free to access the forest and to utilise forest resources

Both forests open to exploitation

- **Communities continue to utilise natural resources despite state restrictions**
- **Overharvesting is taking place in both state and open access forests; resulting in local scarcity of valued species and long-lasting changes in vegetation composition (Dold and Cocks 2002; Nomtshongwana 1999; Cocks *et al.* 2006; Gugushe *et al.* 2008)**
- **This extraction of resources mean that neither forest is managed sustainably**
- **Villagers in both Pirie and Ndlambe areas were seemingly unaware of current forest management strategies (Gugushe *et al.* 2008)**

Children showed different cultural/ritual interactions with their environments

- During participatory exercises Pirie children and their families made no mention of cultural activities such as collecting wild fruit, herding, or beautifying the home using traditional materials
- Ndlambe participants considered an extensive and varied list of activities, many of which are related to environmental use and perceptions
- E.g: collecting wood, hunting, herding, making *kraals* and *amagoqos*, collecting water from the river, beautifying the house with mud or cow dung, collecting wild fruit and vegetables and even washing and drying clothes by the river were all considered activities essential for the maintenance of Xhosa cultural identity and belonging
- Participants from Ndlambe included mention of river, cave and forest rituals as part of the rituals essential to cultural identity
- Activities in Ndlambe afforded children increased opportunities to interact with their environment and more chances to learn LEK

State restrictions and transmission of LEK

- One forest can be divided into many different forests
- Forest names can relate to history/ use/resources

Ndlambe: Children knew up to 23 forest names

Pirie : Most children knew 6 forest names or less, many did not even know the local name for the forest

- Boys generally knew more names than girls
- Those (mostly boys) who hunted or visited the forest to collect resources knew the most names



Cultural environmental activities and learning

Long term impacts of state restrictions?

- Environmental restrictions have ultimately had an impact upon children's environmental values
- When asked which places they preferred, a higher percentage of Ndlambe participants preferred the forest:
 - Ndlambe: 46% of boys and 25% of girls
 - Pirie: 37% of boys and 13% of girls
- These results can potentially be seen as a direct result of the access and restrictions governing Pirie forest
- This throws up questions into the impact of state restrictions on community-environment relations in the long term

‘Less valued’ environments provide greater opportunity for cultural knowledge transmission

- Degree of access has been directly influenced by historical perceptions of what constitutes a forest and what is considered biologically important
- The Southern Mist-belt Forest, with its tall (commercially valuable) trees and lush vegetation, was seen historically as something to be protected
- The Albany Thicket biome has only recently been recognised botanically (Hoare *et al.* 2006). Previously it was perceived to be degraded and expendable from state protection
- The communally administered Albany Thicket has allowed greater, unrestricted opportunities for the continuance of environmentally related socio-cultural practices
- This affords increased cultural environmental interaction which results in increased local ecological knowledge (LEK)

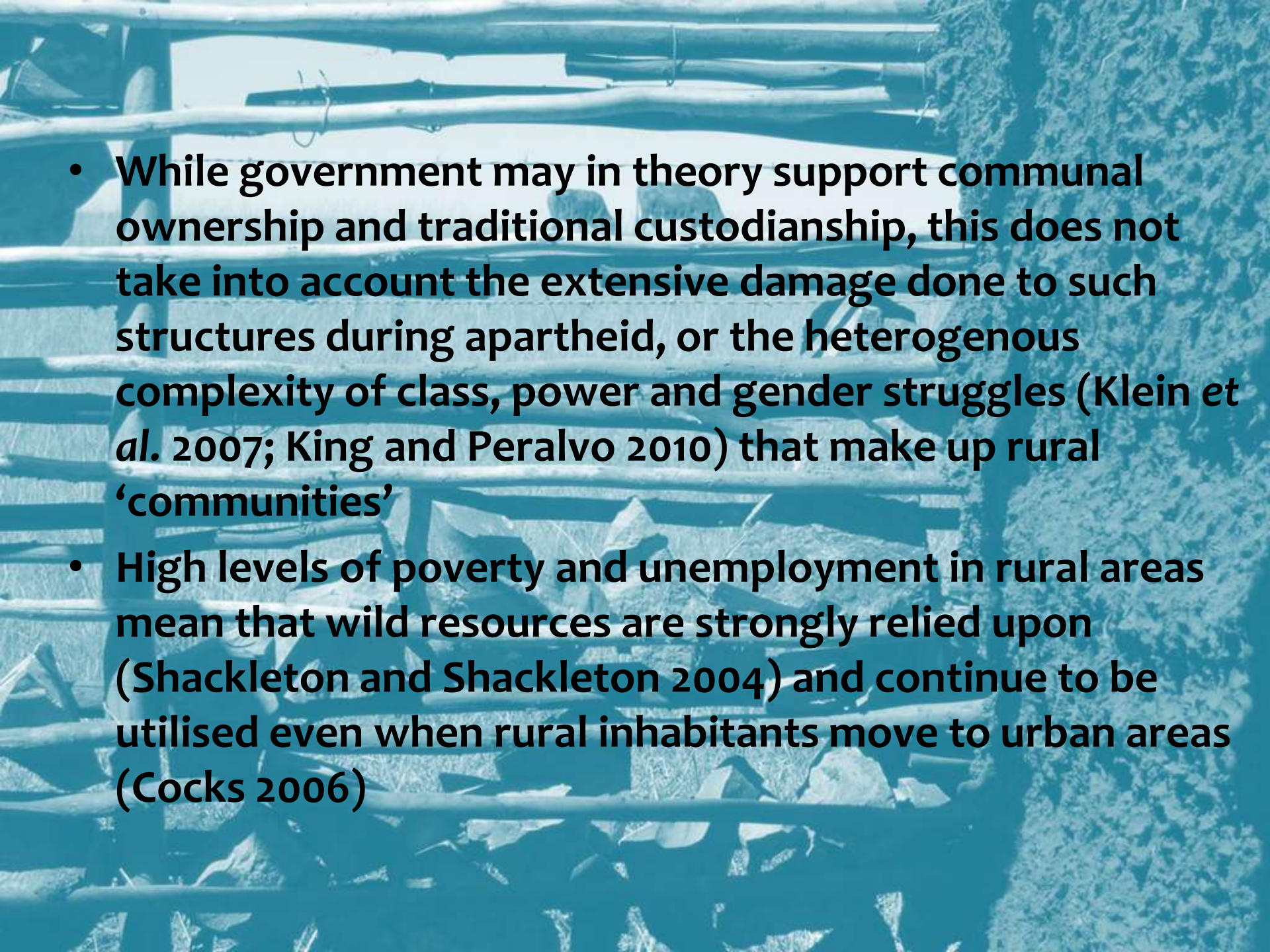


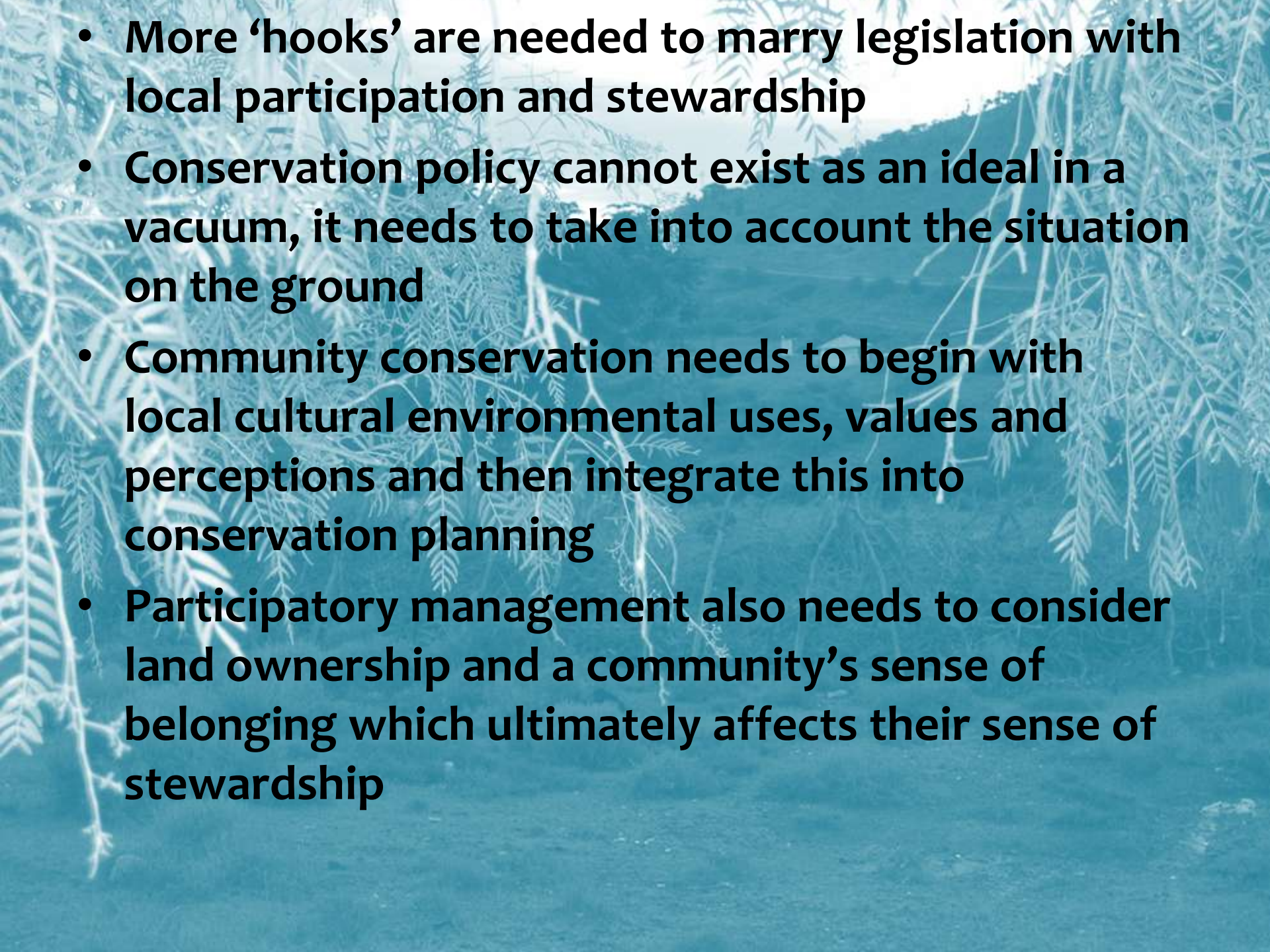
Gendered environmental use and knowledge

- During mapping exercises, teenage boys and younger children drew the forest or river in greater detail – reflecting the intimacy of their environmental interactions
- Teenage girls focused primarily on the village, drawing only vague outlines of the forest or surrounding hills; their worlds significantly shrunk
- Girls' activities keep them increasingly confined to the village
- Forests, which have provided a place of play during childhood and a place of sanctuary during adulthood – are becoming increasingly off limits to girls and women
- Safety concerns strongly influence environmental use

Conservation has yet to be translated into effective participatory practice

- Neither state restrictions nor 'communal' ownership are currently working to protect overexploitation of natural resources
- Conservation may have changed to embrace local participation and ownership on paper, but legislation fails to translate to grassroots level
- Governments most often support representational democracy over participatory democracy, despite the latter being preferential for resolving issues Chirikure *et al.* (2010: 39-40)

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- While government may in theory support communal ownership and traditional custodianship, this does not take into account the extensive damage done to such structures during apartheid, or the heterogenous complexity of class, power and gender struggles (Klein *et al.* 2007; King and Peralvo 2010) that make up rural ‘communities’
 - High levels of poverty and unemployment in rural areas mean that wild resources are strongly relied upon (Shackleton and Shackleton 2004) and continue to be utilised even when rural inhabitants move to urban areas (Cocks 2006)

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- **More ‘hooks’ are needed to marry legislation with local participation and stewardship**
 - **Conservation policy cannot exist as an ideal in a vacuum, it needs to take into account the situation on the ground**
 - **Community conservation needs to begin with local cultural environmental uses, values and perceptions and then integrate this into conservation planning**
 - **Participatory management also needs to consider land ownership and a community’s sense of belonging which ultimately affects their sense of stewardship**

Way forward

- The similarities between sites lead to new understandings in Xhosa cultural environmental uses and perceptions that are not yet recognised in conservation planning and programmes
- Everyday environmental activities, such as gathering wood, herding or hunting play a part in physical, spiritual, cultural, and individual well-being; making particular types of environments particularly *ihlathi wesiXhosa*, integral to cultural identity and belonging
- Cultural practices allow access to important cultural spaces. In many cases these practices contain spiritual elements
- The environment functions as a cultural and historical receptacle which is unlocked through cultural narratives and practices. These in turn provide inhabitants with a resonance with their environment which strengthens their sense of place



A long, decorated staff with a wooden handle and a colorful, patterned shaft.

Blue and yellow beanie hat with a circular emblem on the front.

White shawl with yellow and black patterns and text, including "ZULA" and "Kwena".

Harmonica held to the mouth.

adidas logo on a grey t-shirt.

gun run
beat the noon day

Red and white object, possibly a staff or tool, resting on the shoulder.

Red beanie hat with a white stripe.

Light-colored, fringed denim jacket with patches and text.

White cap with a dark brim.

Red and black patterned scarf.

Leopard cub with a spotted coat and a striped tail.

Potential areas to explore

- **Cultural perceptions that relate to ritual use of landscapes and species, or considerations of sacred spaces and species have huge potential for improved local-driven conservation programmes**
- **Conservation that can be pivoted upon cultural attachment to landscapes may provide the means to unlock a sense of ownership and participation that can lead to improved bio-cultural diversity conservation overall**

Thank you

