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POLICY BRIEF

Department of Environmental Science, Rhodes University

Building collaborative stewardship practice in South African landscapes

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The policy and practice of stewardship in South Africa stretches across various sectors. These include natural resource management, biodiversity conservation, agriculture, rural development and land reform, and catchment management. Although studies have found that the practice of stewardship in South Africa is dominated by the biodiversity stewardship tool in the conservation sector, there is also evidence of more integrated cross-sectoral approaches emerging².

This policy brief outlines key messages from research on stewardship and collaboration in multifunctional rural landscapes.^a Environmental stewardship is the ethical and responsible interaction of humans with social-ecological systems to sustain the supply of diverse ecosystem services and values for the sake of current and future generations of humans and other life on the planet, also referred to as social-ecological stewardship¹. Multifunctional landscapes are rural areas in which different stakeholders are involved in different land uses, and which produce different ecosystem services valued by different people (See Box 6 Box the end of this brief for detailed definitions of terms).

^a This policy brief captures the key messages from Jessica Cockburn's PhD research for decision-makers working in policy and practice around the topics of stewardship, natural resource management, collaborative governance, and sustainable land use management. We urge readers who would like any further background on the key messages to refer to the full thesis, which is available for download via the Rhodes University library (Cockburn, 2018).

KEY RESEARCH MESSAGES TO SUPPORT STEWARDSHIP AND COLLABORATION IN RURAL LANDSCAPES

1. Support integrated landscape stewardship
2. Re-focus stewardship on stewards
3. Align agricultural and natural resource management policy and practice
4. Take a patchwork approach which recognises diversity and values pluralism
5. Focus on relationships to support collaborative stewardship

Each of these key messages is explained in further detail below.

I. SUPPORT INTEGRATED LANDSCAPE STEWARDSHIP

There is growing evidence of social-ecological stewardship approaches emerging in practice across South Africa. These approaches work towards integrated social and ecological outcomes at landscape-level. Outcomes include, for example, sustainable farming practices, improved rural livelihoods, biodiversity conservation, and improved catchment management. In many of these initiatives, stewardship practitioners are combining biodiversity stewardship with other approaches such as catchment management and sustainable livelihood initiatives. The value of integrated landscape-level approaches to address interlinked social-ecological sustainability challenges is recognised globally^{4,6}. The South African cases in our study suggest that these integrated approaches can indeed contribute to addressing sustainability challenges. Experiences in practice illustrate that co-creation and collaboration are important for resource pooling and leveraging, drawing in a variety of players from civil society and the state. However, the different sectors operating in a landscape are working in silos, often with conflicting mandates. Therefore, an enabling policy environment which supports co-operative governance across sectors such as water, agriculture, conservation, and rural development is needed to support such integrated approaches.

BOX 1

The Umzimvubu Catchment Partnership Programme illustrates the importance of integrated landscape stewardship

The Umzimvubu Catchment Partnership Programme (UCPP) is facilitated by Environmental Rural Solutions, Conservation South Africa, and other partners. It is a collaborative, multi-stakeholder platform. Through this platform a variety of stewardship approaches are being integrated to manage the landscape in a holistic way. Different partners have come together to facilitate biodiversity stewardship, sustainable livestock grazing, ecological restoration, and clearing of invasive alien plants. The UCPP is an effective example of cross-sectoral collaboration and co-operative governance for landscape-level stewardship. It illustrates that co-creation and collaboration are important for resource pooling and leveraging, drawing in a variety of players from civil society and the state.



See the Umzimvubu Catchment Partnership Programme website for further information on this initiative: <https://umzimvubu.org/>

Currently, most effective landscape-level stewardship initiatives are facilitated by NGOs, and the long-term financial viability of such approaches is not clear. Policy tools developed for biodiversity stewardship have been successful, and lessons could be learnt from these to develop effective policies and mechanisms to enable landscape stewardship. Furthermore, attention needs to be paid to enabling existing landscape-level stewardship approaches such as biosphere reserves, conservancies, and catchment management institutions through suitable capacity development and funding mechanisms (For a practical example, see Box 1).

2. RE-FOCUS STEWARDSHIP ON STEWARDS

In order to support and enable local land users to realise their potential as competent stewards, stewardship policy and practice needs to re-focus stewardship on stewards. Currently, stewardship and collaboration are heavily focused on ecological and spatial priorities, as well as formal institutions and governance mechanisms. These priorities drive funding and capacity building activities. This has resulted in somewhat of a blind spot about the importance of the individual and collective agency of local stewards i.e. the importance of empowering stewards to reach their full potential to care and take responsibility for natural resources.

Re-focusing stewardship on stewards will require a shift in the way in which stewardship initiatives are funded, planned, implemented, evaluated, and reported. The multiple underlying aspects which influence the ability and willingness of stewards to collaborate and to implement stewardship practices need to be better understood and taken into account. This includes, for example, recognising the economic barriers to stewardship practice and supporting stewards in finding innovative means to overcoming these. This also means realizing the importance of crafting stewardship to the individual's needs, so they can realise the potential benefits of implementing stewardship practices. This is particularly important when working with a diverse group of stakeholders. Flexible funding mechanisms are needed which address the steward as a whole person. This means recognising, for instance, the relevance of sufficient health care and educational opportunities for stewards and their families, particularly in rural areas where poverty and poor social services are a concern (For a practical example, see Box 2).

BOX 2

The Marico Catchment Conservation Project is re-focusing stewardship on stewards

The Marico Catchment Conservation Project, facilitated by the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), is demonstrating the importance of focusing stewardship on stewards. The overall aim of the initiative is improved river catchment health. They are working with an approach called PHE: People-Health-Environment. One of the focus areas is a partnership with an NGO developing future planning, health and child care facilities. This enables women to participate in EWT's sustainable agriculture projects such as permaculture gardens. Thus by focusing on stewards and recognising their needs and everyday realities, they are enabling stewardship.



See the Endangered Wildlife Trust website for further information on this initiative:
<https://www.ewt.org.za/SOURCETSEA/marico.html>

3. ALIGN AGRICULTURAL AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT POLICY AND PRACTICE

Stewardship is a balancing act between stewards' personal needs and interests (e.g. farming or natural resource use) versus the broader needs of the ecosystem, society as a whole and future generations. This is a challenge for stewards who have to make a living off the land. Stewards are expected to be successful agricultural producers whilst protecting ecosystem services for the greater good. To enable them to do this, better policy support and funding mechanisms are needed.

Currently, the neoliberal influence on economic and agricultural policies in South Africa pushes commercialisation and profit-making at the cost of environmental sustainability and social justice. This brings agricultural policies and natural resource management or conservation policies into conflict with one another. Stewards are caught in the middle of this conflict. Considering that most stewardship actions in South Africa are voluntary, this places a lot of pressure on stewards. Our research suggests that if the South African government is serious about its commitments to environmental resilience and addressing the inequalities of the past in rural landscapes, then agricultural and natural resource management policies need to be better aligned. Support measures need to be put in place to help stewards to

access knowledge and financial support to implement sustainable agricultural practices. This requires multi-sectoral collaboration across various departments to realise the potential of landscape-level stewardship. It also requires continuous and on-going support from the various spheres of government, as engagement and implementation of stewardship practices happens over long time periods (For a practical example, see Box 3).

BOX 3

In the Baviaanskloof Living Lands are seeking to align agricultural and natural resource management practices

Living Lands and partner organisation Grounded are working with farmers in the Baviaanskloof to restore degraded landscapes. Overuse of natural vegetation through goat farming led to degradation and soil erosion. Through green business development, the initiative has created enabling conditions for farmers to switch to organic lavender and rosemary farming to reduce their reliance on goat farming. This innovative arrangement has helped the farmers – or stewards – to overcome what initially seems to be a conflict between commercial goat farming and soil conservation on the hillslopes.

See the following websites for further information on this initiative:
Living Lands: <https://livinglands.co.za/where-we-work-3/the-baviaanskloof/>
Grounded: <https://www.grounded.co.za/our-work/baviaanskloof/>



4. TAKE A PATCHWORK APPROACH WHICH RECOGNISES DIVERSITY AND VALUES PLURALISM

In complex, contested landscapes, a blanket-like approach to collaboration to bring together all stakeholders across the landscape is unlikely to succeed. A patchwork approach which is sensitive to contextual diversity and values pluralism is more likely to succeed (See also Wollenberg et al.⁹). Valuing pluralism means recognising and respecting differences between people as a foundation for developing working relationships, trust, and the shared understandings necessary for collaboration⁹. Pluralism recognises different peoples' identities, values, interests and needs as legitimate. This should be acknowledged upfront and viewed as a starting point, and a potential source of creative and new ways of thinking and doing things. A pluralistic approach to collaborative processes is necessary in a country like South Africa where diversity and contestation are ever present features of society. Rural landscapes in South Africa are often places of contestation (e.g. around access to land and water), and stakeholders have diverse opinions and interests in the future of the landscape. A patchwork approach would focus on fostering small, local stewardship actions which can help to build collective action and positive momentum across the landscape. Over time these small 'patches' of collective stewardship action can merge together across the landscape forming a 'patchwork'.

BOX 4

In the Langkloof Living Lands are taking a patchwork approach which recognises diversity and values pluralism

Living Lands together with their partner organisation Grounded are working with diverse stakeholders on different action-oriented stewardship initiatives across the Langkloof landscape. In this region, they are looking at how best practice in wild harvesting and cultivation of honeybush could increase returns for farmers and local harvesters. In another part of the landscape, they have partnered with small-scale vegetable farmers to support composting practices. In a third 'patch' of collective stewardship, they are working with farmers and stakeholders from government on water security issues. All these different initiatives are part of a patchwork approach to landscape-scale stewardship in the Langkloof that supports a wider vision towards water security, functional ecosystems and regenerative agriculture.



See the following websites for further information on this initiative:
Living Lands: <https://livinglands.co.za/where-we-work-3/the-langkloof/>
Grounded: <https://www.grounded.co.za/our-work/langkloof/>



The Langkloof region, which falls at the boundary of the Eastern and Western Cape, is an example of a contested multifunctional landscape. The landscape is ecologically and socially diverse, and a diverse range of stakeholders have different interests in the landscape. For example, some people are interested in agriculture, some in tourism, and others in conservation. This makes collaboration for landscape-level stewardship particularly challenging, and a patchwork approach which values pluralism is most likely to succeed in this kind of context.

This kind of approach to facilitating collaboration for sustainable landscape management allows for different 'pathways' for sustainability to emerge across the landscape¹⁰, rather than trying to force a once-size-fits all blanket solution for the whole landscape. The challenge practitioners face is how, when and whether to 'stitch together' the patchwork of collective stewardship activities across the landscape in order to manage the landscape in a more integrated manner. This will require facilitating social learning processes. These can create opportunities for stakeholders to deliberate the direction of change towards sustainability beyond their own individual boundaries and interests i.e. for collective stewardship of the landscape as a whole. It will mean nurturing diverse forms of innovation and options for the landscape and its stakeholders. In this way, practitioners can work towards ensuring that the benefits of the landscape are more evenly distributed among multiple stakeholders¹¹ (For a practical example, see Box 4).

5. FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS TO SUPPORT COLLABORATIVE STEWARDSHIP

Stewardship and collaboration are inherently relational processes, and therefore we recommend that practitioners focus on relationships i.e. take a *relational approach* to support collaborative stewardship. What we mean by a relational approach, is that the relationships or connections between components of a system, rather than the components themselves should be the focus of an initiative. For example, this means paying attention to the relationships between stewards and their own personal values, between stewards and nature, between stewards and other people in the landscape, and between stewards and the broader institutional structures of society in which they are embedded. For policy and practice, this means, for example, finding ways to allow stewards to re-connect with and care for nature, despite the constraints of the current political, economic, and socio-cultural system in which they operate. It means foregrounding inter-personal relationships between stewards, practitioners, and other stakeholders in the landscape. This can be done, for example, by putting in place flexible and long-term funding mechanisms which pay for facilitator's time to build relationships in the landscape. It also means planning, implementing, evaluating, and reporting on relational aspects of stewardship and collaboration. For example, this might mean asking practitioners to track and report on their inter-personal relationships with stewards, or to evaluate their success in facilitating new and meaningful interpersonal relationships among diverse stakeholders across the landscape.

Another important consideration for putting a relational approach into practice is that it requires skills and competencies which professionals working in the environmental sector (and related sectors such as agriculture, water and land) may not ordinarily be trained in. These competencies are of particular importance in South Africa where deep social-relational divides exist between people from different race and class groups. Hence, professional development and capacity building opportunities should be provided for stewardship practitioners to develop these competencies.

Similarly, practical toolkits which can support practitioners in implementing a relational approach to facilitating stewardship may be needed. Such toolkits could include practical ideas for how to build and maintain long-term relationships with diverse stakeholders, how to manage conflict, how to facilitate social learning, or how to create inspiring opportunities to re-connect stewards with nature. Theory U¹² is one approach which offers some ideas towards such a toolkit. However, adapting such toolkits to local contexts, and developing toolkits in partnership with practitioners in a knowledge co-production process, would likely result in more relevant products and sustainable outcomes (For a practical example, see Box 5).

BOX 5

WWF South Africa are focusing on relationships to support collaborative stewardship in the KZN Midlands

The WWF Water Stewardship Partnership is working with different stakeholders in the Umngeni catchment to enable water stewardship and support sustainable farming practices. They work with farmers, government departments, the private sector and partner NGOs. They are creating new links between stakeholders in the agricultural value chain, they are building long-term working relationships between themselves and stewards, and they are facilitating social learning dialogues with various water-related stakeholders across the landscape. In this way, they have put interpersonal relationship-building at the centre of their approach to facilitating water stewardship.



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BOX 6

DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

STEWARDSHIP is a widely used but often misunderstood concept. In this research, we take a broad view of stewardship, understanding it as the ethical and responsible interaction of humans with social-ecological systems to sustain the supply of diverse ecosystem services and values for the sake of current and future generations of humans and other life on the planet¹. We suggest the term 'social ecological stewardship' to capture this broad understanding (See also Barendse et al.²)

MULTIFUNCTIONAL LANDSCAPES are rural areas in which different stakeholders are involved in different land uses. Multifunctional landscapes produce different ecosystem services valued by different people. For example, they could include farmers who use the land for crops or livestock, government bodies responsible for managing catchments for integrated water resources management, or government bodies managing land for conservation purposes. Most landscapes are in fact multifunctional. We therefore use the word 'landscape' to refer to all kinds of rural, multifunctional landscapes.

COLLABORATION for stewardship in the context of landscapes can be defined as "involving local resource users in a collective process of actively and intentionally taking responsibility and care of natural resources with which they interact"¹. Collaboration should not be viewed as a silver-bullet solution to solve complex natural resource management problems, as it can come at a cost, and it should not be viewed as an end in itself. Rather, in this study, collaboration is considered a necessary feature of landscape level stewardship, since it has the potential to enhance people's shared understanding and produce tangible environmental and socio-economic outcomes on the landscape.

FURTHER READING

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