

Thukela biosphere

who'll benefit?

THE Natal Parks Board and white farmers in Weenen and Estcourt have put forward an ambitious plan for what could be Natal's biggest game reserve. Black communities who live in the area are questioning the motivation behind the biosphere idea and whether they will be the losers once again.

THE Thukela Biosphere Reserve idea started about two and a half years ago when white farmers in the Weenen and Estcourt Districts began discussions with the Natal Parks Board (NPB) about establishing a biosphere encompassing the Bushmans and Tugela Rivers. At present, the Thukela Biosphere plan involves about 20 farmers who own about 56 000 hectares stretching from the Bushmans/Tugela Rivers junction to about 3 km from Estcourt and Colenso. The longer term objective is to include up to 150 000 hectares in the reserve with extensive eco-tourism generating income and employment.

The area which the reserve will encompass has a long history of bitter conflict between white farmers and black communities

manifested in evictions, stock impounding, stock theft, assaults and deaths. Given this history of conflict, black communities living in the area view the biosphere reserve plan with caution and suspicion.

The present economy of the region, which is mainly dependent on agriculture, is very poor. It is generally argued that intensive maize or cattle farming is not suitable or profitable in the area and farmers are heavily dependent on subsidies.

If it succeeds, the reserve would be the biggest in Natal and would radically change the sub-regional economy of the Weenen and Estcourt Districts. Maize and cattle farming would become insignificant. The NPB and farmers involved in the plan anticipate that the Thukela Biosphere Reserve will develop in a similar way to Mala-Mala and Londolozi. This block of reserves is the largest generator of income, employment and government revenue in their subregion. If the Thukela Biosphere fails to meet these expectations, the Weenen/Estcourt areas' economic activity would decline even further.

The NPB and white farmers

The NPB has had difficulty with securing funding to buy land. So, the major benefit to the NPB of the Thukela Biosphere plan is that it provides a means of extending and privatising conservation. Game could be bought cheaply from NPB reserves, particularly in Weenen, where there is difficulty in sustaining

present stock because of the drought. In turn, the NPB would be able to draw on this stock for breeding.

White farmers involved in the plan appear to be more interested in the economic viability of game farming, linked to eco-tourism. Some farmers also see an opportunity to secure their farms against livestock poaching and illegal grazing.

What do communities say?

Those involved in the Thukela Biosphere have emphasised the possible benefits for rural black communities, such as employment opportunities and related to this, employment conditions and security of tenure, communities themselves are deeply mistrustful of what the reserve could mean. They believe there will be strong pressure on them to drastically reduce their livestock, that evictions will increase from farms in the Biosphere and that unemployment could increase because eco-tourism will not provide enough jobs.

AFRA is facilitating contact between the communities of Cornfields and Tembalihle and the white farmers and NPB around the reserve plan. It is hoped that these meetings will allow both parties to reach greater understanding of their different concerns. The Thukela Biosphere Reserve plan will only work if black communities in the area cooperate around the initiative. And they will only do so if they are convinced that they, too, will benefit from the reserve.