

Emerging farmers: challenges and the impacts on conservation – a drylands perspective

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The EWT's Drylands Conservation Programme, as part of its Global Environmental Facility's (GEF 5) Karoo Sustainable Land Management Project, is currently initiating interactions with two groups of emerging farmers in both the Northern and Western Cape. While we cannot capture all of the facets of the very complicated situation we are faced with in the Karoo in one article, we do wish to highlight some pertinent points gleaned from our interactions with these farmers, and emphasise that organisations like the EWT can play a vital role in land reform by facilitating positive outcomes for people and species. As such, the EWT sees land reform as a great opportunity for conservation, provided that we engage emerging farmers in the right manner.

Challenges faced by emerging farmers

None of the farmers we have engaged with have title to the land they work on. Both groups of farmers we work with farm on government or municipal lands, subject to an agreement. From a farming perspective, lack of title effectively results in an inability to borrow money against the land.

It may come as a surprise to the man on the street, but most farmers routinely use loans to finance their farming activities. This is because farms typically do not yield a steady income throughout the year, and farmers essentially need bridge finance from banks who view the land as collateral. No title, no collateral.



A challenge is that farmers have been allocated land without appropriate training, access to networks, or resources. This means that emerging farmers lack skills, which other farmers have received from generational sources, and when they get stuck, they don't know who to approach for advice.



From a conservation perspective, the lack of ownership has an even more dramatic impact. Lack of title may at best cause a hesitancy to invest in the maintenance of ecological infrastructure and at worst, may lead to unsustainable practices such as overgrazing. Not owning the farm and not having certainty of tenure means that emerging farmers are unlikely to invest in the farms or to pursue long-term farming practices and goals. Sustainable farming in the Karoo is a long-term game.

In most cases, the number of hectares that each emerging farmer has access to is drastically less than what is considered a commercially viable farm in the Karoo. Typically, grazing capacity in the Karoo is about one head of sheep per six hectares. This means that to turn over R400,000 from the sale of sheep (20% of flock at R2,000 per sheep excluding wool income) you need to own a flock of about 1,000 animals, implying a farm size of approximately 6,000 ha.

Most of the emerging farmers we are working with operate on less than 1,000 ha, with a few having access to up to 3,000 ha. Economically, this means that these farmers can never be much more than small-scale or subsistence farmers, and that they will never earn sufficiently from farming to better their situations or invest in the land.

Small farms in the Karoo result in a vicious cycle where maintenance costs, including fencing and provision of water, outstrip income. The chances of overutilisation of the veld or the likelihood of farmers engaging in exploitative activities such as poaching or sand-mining increases when farming cannot provide enough income.

Another challenge is that farmers have been allocated land without appropriate training, access to networks, or resources. This means that emerging farmers lack skills, which other farmers have received from generational sources, and when they get stuck, they don't know who to approach for advice. In many cases, emerging farmers have to learn by trial and error, which is costly. Lack of knowledge also means that unsustainable farming suggestions from beneficiaries or outsiders are entertained without full appreciation of the impact on

the environment. This lack of knowledge may have a severe impact on ecosystem services and species. Poor farming practices affect the veld; in turn, this impacts on ecosystem services, which impacts on overall farming productivity. If the cycle is not addressed, farms become, over time, unable to sustain the farming activities or even wildlife occurring on the land.

In addition, due to the inadequate amount of hectares available to each farmer, divergent ideas and farming visions, a major challenge is conflict and lack of cooperation between the emerging farmers themselves. This is a major obstacle, as almost all strategies to improve the situation on these farms requires close cooperation between emerging landowners, particularly those sharing the available land. Lack of a common vision for farming also translates into conservation issues taking a back seat.

The way forward

Whilst the challenges experienced paint a complex picture, emerging farmers also present a great opportunity to expand conservation. Given the direction in which our country is moving, more emerging farmers will be settled on the land and their effective control over land will most likely expand.

In this context and from a conservation point of view, we want to work with emerging landowners and assist them to deal with the challenges they face. This will allow us to be socially responsible while continuing to work for the best interests of habitats and species in South Africa. The situation in which emerging farmers find themselves, also makes them receptive to conservation opportunities. The following is clear from our work:

Thirst for knowledge - emerging farmers we have dealt with are deeply aware of their skills shortages and are desperate for training. Our work with communities has shown that many of the training needs range from essential life skills such as financial literacy to more advanced farm management knowledge.



Conservation organisations can easily address this need though leveraging our networks to connect farmers with trainers. Our assistance here will not only provide immense value, but will also allow us to develop social capital with communities.

Need for support - emerging farmers need support and extension services. In remote areas such as the Northern Cape, agricultural extension services, or for that matter ANY extension services, are a rare commodity. In many cases, conservation organisations can bridge this need or leverage their networks to fill the gap. Many of our interactions show that emerging farmers are wary of outsiders. Extension visits represent opportunities to build trust.

An effective management framework or system also needs to be implemented on farms. Initial interactions with these farmers exposed a lot of uncertainty, lack of management plans and no consideration for conservation or sustainable land management. Proper management plans will take into account conservation priorities on farms while increasing farm productivity. We hope that in time these farmers will allow us to assist them with the development of these plans.

Need to diversify - since most emerging farmers will farm areas that are too small to allow graduation to commercial farm scale, there will be a need to make extra income. This represents unique space where conservation organisations can enter and collaborate to further the green economy by looking at environmentally sustainable opportunities. Farmers and their extended families can pursue these opportunities. This diversification can also provide a sustainable income during severe drought and ensure that resources are not over utilised. We suspect strongly from our interactions in the Karoo during the ongoing drought that diversification on farms is key to more resilient and sustainable farms.

A common vision - currently there are different opinions between emerging farmers on how to manage the farms they control. This disagreement is exacerbated by the challenges described above. As conservationists, we have a responsibility to co-create a common vision that will create more unity among emerging farmers, which will hopefully enhance protection of habitat and wildlife.

The land reform agenda is one of the most important issues facing our country and, by extension, conservation. Civil society role-players such as the EWT and others, must do their bit to ensure a collective outcome that is just, equitable and sustainable.

To ensure that the full agricultural and ecological potential of land reform in the Karoo is realised it is essential that the government and other role players work towards a well-planned and holistic approach.

Our work in these communities is made possible by the Global Environmental Facility through our local partners, Department of Environmental Affairs, and the United Nations Development Programme.

TAILS FROM THE FIELD

Giving cranes a voice

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Under the African Crane Conservation Programme, the International Crane Foundation/Endangered Wildlife Trust, in partnership with Community Action for Nature Conservation, is supporting the implementation of a project aimed at conserving Grey Crowned Cranes and wetlands in Kenya. The species is listed as Endangered in the 2012 IUCN Red Data List, meaning that it is likely to become extinct

if no serious mitigation measures are taken. It is also listed under Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Water birds (AEWA) as a priority species requiring urgent and dedicated conservation measures. Further, it is categorised as a protected species under Kenya's Wildlife (Conservation and Management) Act, 2013. The population of Grey Crowned Cranes is in decline, estimated at between 10,000 and 12,500 in 2014, down from an estimated 35,000 in 1985 (Morrison, 2015). Despite wetlands occupying only about 3% to 4% of the land surface of Kenya, which is approximately 14,000 km², marked decline in their extent and quality is being experienced.

The history of forums and coalitions in Kenya has been influenced by the political landscape/governance and donor influence. The main motivation remains the need to minimise risks and pool resources. Over time, civil society organisations (CSOs) playing advocacy or watchdog roles with regards the government risk de-registration. At times, policy directives have been instituted that are targeted at suffocating operations of such CSOs in terms of access to finances from external sources.

The rationale for establishing the Kenya Crane Conservation Forum (KCCF) was the realisation that addressing threats to cranes and wetlands in Kenya would require engagement with the government and other role-players at all levels, given that some of the threats are associated with governance. Initiated in July 2017, the KCCF is an informal forum hosted by Community Action for Nature Conservation under the ICF/EWT/CANCO partnership. Its vision is to be a leading forum dealing with crane conservation in the region. Among its objectives are to:

- enhance collective action on issues of mutual interest among actors on Grey Crowned Crane and wetlands conservation through networking partnerships and coalition building;
- influence conducive policy and legislative environment for sustainable conservation of cranes and their habitats through advocacy and capacity building;
- promote research and monitoring to ensure improved access to credible information on cranes and wetlands for assured evidence-based management; contribute to the conservation of Grey Crowned Crane habitats through ecosystem restoration and livelihood support, and
- promote communication, environmental education, public awareness and coordinate efforts among stakeholders on conservation of cranes and their habitats.

