‘NATURE IS WHAT HAPPENS BEHIND THE FENCES’

An ethnographic account on the underlying dynamics of the different narratives of local communities around Acornhoek, Mpumalanga, South Africa, regarding their surrounding natural environment and its conservation.
Abstract

Community-involvement strategies have been trending in the field of nature conservation for the last decades. Striving to combine conservation goals with socio-economic development, conservation organisations aim to involve local communities in their conservation practices. However, many critiques have been expressed on the design and implementation of these strategies (Brosius, Lowenhaupt Tsing, & Zerner, 2005; Hulme & Murphree, 2001; Wilshusen, Brechin, Fortwangler, & West, 2002). As most community-involvement strategies follow a ‘blueprint’-approach that disregards diversity and heterogeneity in local communities, they often don’t fit the local culture and lack to meet local development priorities (Lyons, 2013; West et al., 2006).

When designing involvement-strategies, local perspectives and priorities need to be researched to ensure a better fit (Jones, 2006; Keough & Blahna, 2006; Scarlett & McKinney, 2016; Thondhlana & Shackleton, 2015). To do so, one needs to immerse oneself in the community and get acquainted with its diversities, perspectives and priorities. This research aimed to do just that. Situated in a rural town in South Africa, Acornhoek is characterised by its surrounding nature conservation initiatives (Hoedspruit area), while the town itself is characterised by poverty, and a lack of socio-economic development. Setting out to gain an insight in the local perspectives, the central question in this research was: what are the underlying dynamics of the different narratives of communities around Acornhoek, Mpumalanga, South Africa, regarding their surrounding natural environment and its conservation?

An ethnographic approach of participant observation was taken, thereby putting the community and their stories central and co-construct their stories into an account on their local perspectives. Results show that there are profound differences between the communities of Acornhoek and the neighbouring nature conservation organisations regarding perspectives on nature (conservation).

The research site proved to be characterised by divide; in historic, cultural, judicial and socio-economic aspects. The combination of these differences results in a situation with a serious lack of social mobility for the inhabitants of Acornhoek, thereby leaving them behind in comparison to their neighbouring community. The population of Acornhoek is suffering endemic exclusion from economic processes, Hoedspruit’s society, growing (eco-) tourism in the region and is left behind due to a lack of public facilities that could support the community in creating development-opportunities for themselves.

The different circumstances in two communities result in different priorities. The poorer communities of Acornhoek have a focus on livelihood development, whereas the community of Hoedspruit is focussed on nature conservation, as expressed in the local narratives of ‘livelihood vs. poaching’. Despite community-involvement practices in the area, the two communities prove to be far apart in their perspectives on nature (conservation). The lack of contact and ongoing homogenous view of the ‘other side’ maintains these differences and Acornhoek’s marginalised position.

Finally, I argue that when aiming at involving local communities in surrounding conservation practices, both the marginalised position of Acornhoek’s communities, as well as the differences in circumstances, perspectives and priorities should be considered. Only when addressing the different circumstances of involved communities can biodiversity conservation and socio-economic development co-exist.

Keywords: community-involvement; community-based natural resource management; local perspectives; livelihood development; Post-Apartheid South Africa; rural marginalisation
Abbreviations

ANC African National Congress (political party)
ANP Afrikaner Nasional Partij (African National Party)
CBC Community-Based Conservation
CBNRM Community-Based Natural Resource Management
CI Community-involvement
DEAT Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (SAG)
GWLP(PT) Global White Lion Protection Trust
KNP Kruger National Park
NRM Natural Resource Management
PA's Protected Areas
RDP Reconstruction and Development Program
SAG South African Government
TA Traditional Authority

Translations

Afrikaans  English
Bakkie        Pick-up truck
Boom          Gate (barrier)

Xitsonga     English
Ahé            Hi, hello (informal greeting)
Avuxeni       Goodmorning (formal greeting, often used to greet elders)
Buti          Brother
Hosi          Chief
Induna        Sub-chief
Kunjani? (Zulu) How are you
Mahala        for free
Muchongolo    Traditional dance
Mlungu        White person
Muti          Traditional medicine (made by the sangoma)
Ntumbuluko    Nature
Nikona (also Zulu) I’m good
Sangoma       Traditional healer
Sesi          Sister
List of photos

All photographs included in this research are taken by me, the researcher.

Photo 1: Fence at the Mbube reserve, north of the Orpen Road ......................................................... cover sheet

Photo 2: LRTB: ranger at Mbube, logo of Global White Lion Protection Trust on car, Starlion education class, Muchongolo, newly made friends Shocky and Victor, traditional Shangani attire, students in the Starlion program, day care students, members of host family: Bonisiwe and Ian......................................................... p. 3

Photo 3: Mozambican ladies and field ranger of the Global White Lion reserve........................................ p. 10

Photo 4: Logo of the GWLPT on a vehicle................................................................................................. p. 21

Photo 5: Harmony, Bonisiwe, Sibusiso, Daphne and Shocky................................................................. p. 32

Photo 6: ‘Two sides of the road’ – street in Acornhoek and in a nature reserve ............................................. p. 40

Photo 7: Eco-estate at Moditlo, near Hoedspruit versus an average Acornhoek home................................. p. 42

Photo 8: Man walking down Acornhoek Main Road ................................................................................... p. 47

Photo 9: Muchongolo and traditional Shangaani attire ............................................................................. p. 52

Photo 10: Poached wildebeest carcass and remains of poaching snare ..................................................... p. 61

List of figures

Figure 1: Map of Acornhoek (Google Inc. & AfriGIS Pty Ltd., 2017, alterings mine) ................................ p. 20

Figure 2: Acornhoek map: provincial borders (Google Inc. & AfriGIS Pty Ltd., 2017, alterings mine) ........ p. 20

Figure 3: Map of former Bantustan Gazankulu (Republiek Suid Afrika, 1973) .......................................... p. 21

Figure 4: Satellite image of biodiversity differences Orpen Road (Google Inc. & AfriGIS Pty Ltd., 2017)....... p. 22

Figure 5: Table with demographic differences between Acornhoek and Hoedspruit ............................................. p. 41

Figure 6: Acornhoek map: provincial borders (Google Inc. & AfriGIS Pty Ltd., 2017, alterings mine) ........ p. 43

Figure 7: Map of Acornhoek ..................................................................................................................... p. 47
# Table of contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translations</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of photos</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of figures</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of contents</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Livelihood vs. poaching: one incident, different narratives</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Diving into the dynamics</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting to know the field: contextualising local perceptions</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Natural resource management in South Africa</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A need for community-involvement</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The Apartheid legacy: reshaping the physical and mental landscape</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ‘Environmental Apartheid’: the consequences of rural marginalization</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The Acornhoek case</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The remains of Gazankulu... or Gazankulu remains?</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A divided field for attempts at involvement</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Truth as a social construct, for me to interpret</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Participant observation: being there</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Checking and contextualising</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Putting the community in community-based</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Theory vs. Practice: my fieldwork experiences</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Introduction to the field</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Gaining access</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Building a network</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Gaining trust</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Language</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Positionality</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- New from Holland: straight, white female (25), non-religious</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A torn position</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The two sides of the road ................................................................. 38

'The other side of the road' ............................................................ 38
Demographics and facilities: tin roofs versus eco-estates ............ 39
Competing authorities: two provinces and a chief ...................... 41
Economic differences: Rural livelihoods versus Eco-tourism ........ 44
Cultural differences: conflicting interpretations of ‘authentic Africa’ 46
Relationship with nature ................................................................. 52

Different societal agenda’s ............................................................ 56
A case of ongoing marginalisation ............................................... 57

Afterthoughts ................................................................. 60
Experienced obstacles ................................................................. 60
No constructive dialogue ............................................................. 61

Bibliography ................................................................. 63

Appendix: Recommendations ...................................................... 70
Introduction

Imagine this, the Orpen Road; a two-way paved tar road going to the Orpen Gate of the Kruger National Park. To the south are the outskirts of Acornhoek, a rural town with 33,000 inhabitants. Its outskirts are made up of farm plots, growing corn and old sheds housing Mozambican employees. Further in the distance, behind a group of Rural Development (RDP) Houses you can see the first houses that make up the rural settlement. To your other side, north of the Orpen Road, the view is green and lush; bushveld, thicket and (big) animals. The north side is primarily nature reserves and conservation organisations. Fenced off, with signs stating to ‘keep out’ as no one is to enter without approval.

It had been close to Christmas when they had received the call. They, the Global White Lion Protection Trust (GWL), a nature conservation organisation located near Acornhoek. Employees of a neighbouring reserve had seen trespassers on their property, carrying equipment and dead game and suspected them to be poachers. As they had fled the neighbour’s property, they had crossed into Mbube, the GWL reserve, ‘thinking that would be an easy route back into the community’.

Harmony Khoza, an employee at the GWL, had just picked up some community workers in Acornhoek and was now returning to Mbube. As he approached the property, he got a call on his radio: ‘some people from the neighbours telling there were poachers inside’. Quickly switching his mindset, he went around the gate towards the Orpen Road and saw the three guys. Currently on foot, Harmony decided to head back into the reserve to retrieve his car.

Meanwhile, an Acornhoek community-member had called in and reported the trespassers; the ‘anti-poaching team as well as the neighbouring reserve and community members all gave chase’. On the south side, women working the farm lands heard the commotion. They moved to the Orpen Road to see what was happening. In a quick blur, three people came running by, carrying big knives and a cutter tongue. They were making their way across the road and into the farming plots on the south side. Meanwhile, Harmony had retrieved his car and came racing around the corner, ready for pursuit. Putting two and two together, the women pointed in the eastern direction, where the men had fled. Following directions, Harmony was now in pursuit and followed the intruders to the Acorn to Oaks high school, a few kilometres down the road - the field rangers followed on foot.

Now in close pursuit of one poacher (the other two had taken a different route) Harmony followed the man onto school grounds. ‘Bearing in mind here that our anti-poaching team don’t [sic] carry firearms. Fortunately, the poachers generally don’t tend to have firearms, but often have other weapons like axes and other weapons, so it can be quite daunting’, as was the case now. Harmony: ‘he came with axes, he wanted to hit the car with spears. I wanted to go after him but stayed in the car because I didn’t have anything, like a gun or something to protect myself with’. Harmony was now in a back and forth duel, waiting for the rangers to arrive on foot.

Meanwhile, also following the directions of the community members, the rangers arrived at the school grounds. With combined strengths, they managed to apprehend one man, the other two had gotten away. Although a little bruised and battered from the pursuit and struggle, there were no serious injuries. It had been a good catch, the man had had ‘a dead warthog, a spear, some cables, torches, knives, matches.’ Once caught, they called the police. Now a bit more relaxed, they brought the man back to Mbube while waiting for the police to arrive. In the meantime, they took him through the reserve, forcing him to show the snares that he and his mates had put there. The police arrived, arrested the man and took him into custody.

However, it was only a couple of weeks later, that the trespassing men, including the one who was taken into custody, were seen again hanging out on the corner of the R40 and Orpen Road, close to Mbube. When asking the police about this, they just said that it hadn’t been a ‘red-handed catch’. There had been no further evidence, so they couldn’t convict him. Jason (GWL management): ‘It is really challenging in terms of the justice system to get a prison-sentence for poachers’. Also confirmed by experiences in the community, poaching cases often ‘don’t end up sticking’. With ‘the police involved itself with certain cases’, there is often long periods of time between the court cases, or ‘the evidence disappears’.
In the aftermath of this incident, acquaintances of the trespasser came to Harmony’s home in Acornhoe. Harmony had recognised the men to be from Acornhoek, as likewise they had recognised him. The atmosphere was tense as the men instructed Harmony to ‘not rat them out’, because otherwise ‘something might happen to his family’. In reaction to this, Harmony explained them that this was part of his job and that they put him in jeopardy by coming to Mbube and expecting him to do nothing. The incident left Harmony feeling frightened. Being the only Mbube employee living in Acornhoek, made him vulnerable. Especially since these incidents are mostly ‘dealt with inside the community’ instead of through the official channels of the nature reserve or police.

Another issue was the awarded ‘incentive’ for ‘the successful apprehension of a poacher’ for the GWL employees. Since not everyone who had pursued the poachers received this financial bonus, it stroke a nerve with some of the employees. As described by a colleague: ‘the first thing that they told me is that neither of them got an incentive for having caught the poacher. So that was the very first thing they told me. Not about the poacher being caught, no it was about the R1000 that was promised for the one that catches the poacher’. Reflecting on this, some employees expressed that without financial incentive they were less inclined to take such risks.

Going around town, inhabitants of Acornhoek stated that ‘they didn’t approve of it, but they did understand’. With high unemployment numbers and prices for game-meat skyrocketing, poaching or ‘illegal harvesting’ is a lucrative option to consider for poor rural households. In defence of the trespassing and illegal harvesting practices, many stated that ‘it is not poaching, it’s livelihood’. Feelings of justification enforce this perspective, as most of the nature conservation grounds are ancestral lands previously claimed by the inhabitants of Acornhoek.

Even though both narratives appear to be true to the different parties entangled in this incident, a conflict is apparent as the two sides seem to have different perspectives on natural resource management and their role in conservation.

Livelihood vs. poaching: one incident, different narratives

In the preparation of this research, I focussed on the complexities of community-involvement practices in nature conservation. Through contacts of the Global White Lion, I set out to research the local perceptions of community-members around Acornhoek regarding their surrounding natural environment and its conservation. However, a few weeks into my fieldwork, I came across this story. It had already occurred to me that community members always started to talk politics when I asked them about nature (conservation). These weren’t the answers that I expected, so at first, I thought that I maybe wasn’t asking the right questions. Then this story came up and it all made sense, as it was exemplary for the different narratives that I had encountered in the communities.

The story shows that the two sides of the road have a completely different perspective on nature and its conservation. Where the Global White Lion coins it poaching, due to the illegal trespassing on their property and harvesting of resources that are not theirs to take, the community coins it livelihood; livelihood, for it entails the harvesting of natural resources for their ‘survival’.

Nature conservation organisations like the GWL are located north of the Orpen Road. Fences stating to ‘keep out’ mark their territory, conservation objectives are carried out while they are trying to involve the local community. On the southern side, Acornhoek houses people whose stories entail struggles for money,
development and sustaining a livelihood. Even though most inhabitants of Acornhoek are taught in school about the importance of nature conservation, their priorities lie elsewhere, as there is a widespread need for socio-economic development. As the Global White Lion aims to involve these community members in their conservation practices, it is also individuals from these communities who attempt to improve their livelihood through illegal harvesting in their reserves. Clearly, the 'two sides of the road' framed the incident in different narratives.

This research has been focussed on the dynamics that shape these different perspectives. How is it possible that communities in such proximity, take on a complete different perspective to such incidents? Why is it that on the one side nature is protected while the other side still needs it to foresee in their livelihood? How come, that despite attempts at community involvement, the differences are so significant? Closing the circle with what this research was set out to do in the beginning, this research aims to understand these different narratives in the wider perspective of community-involvement strategies. Deriving from this, my research questions states:

_What are the underlying dynamics of the different narratives of local communities around Acornhoek, Mpumalanga, South Africa, regarding their surrounding natural environment and its conservation?_

### Diving into the dynamics

Having introduced the incident at Mbube, I will dive further into the different perspectives that I encountered regarding nature and its conservation around Acornhoek. I will present the context in which this research is embedded, to provide a framework for understanding and interpreting. Furthermore, I will co-construct the different perspectives of the communities around Acornhoek and link them to a contextual framework. By doing so, I aim to illustrate the underlying dynamics that shape the different sides of the road in their perception of incidents like the one at Mbube and thereby answer the research question as stated above.

In the first chapter, I will lay the contextual foundation of the research, both in terms of theoretical framework as well as introduction to the research site. First, I will give an overview of how community-involvement (CI) strategies became the trend in conservation practices in South Africa. Looking at the development of community-involvement, I will dive further into evaluating community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) and elaborate on existing critiques. Coming from these critiques, I will discuss the importance of awareness and knowledge of local perspectives regarding nature conservation. Lastly, I will discuss the need for participatory research methods to co-construct these local perspectives.

Besides the theoretical framework, I will introduce the ‘physical’ framework: the research site. Diving deeper into South Africa, I will build on historical events like the Apartheid policy that has profoundly influenced South African society and its dealing with natural resources. I will discuss how processes of environmental apartheid have marginalised the non-white population of South Africa. Furthermore, I will elaborate on how processes of marginalisation have had an impact on biodiversity, land ownership issues and the socio-economic position of certain population groups. Looking in more detail at Acornhoek, I will illustrate how abovementioned factors come together and characterise the research site. By laying out these characteristics, I will present the contextual framework in which this research was taking place, while providing a context to interpret and understand the results.

In the second chapter, I will present my research methodology. I will explain the chosen route of ethno-graphic participant observation as research method for answering the research question. Furthermore, I will dive into the process of doing research. To create an insight in the research practices, I will explain how I dealt with obstacles and opportunities and reflect on how the choices made might have shaped the research. Reflecting upon this process, I will evaluate the chosen research route and point out limitations and deriving recommendations for when designing a research alike. Finally, I will elaborate on myself, for I, as a researcher, have influenced the ongoing process of not only executing, but also interpreting and writing this research.

The third chapter of this research encompasses the results regarding the different perspectives on nature (conservation) in the communities around Acornhoek and its underlying dynamics. I will present perceived differences between the two communities of Acornhoek and Hoedspruit by illustrating how differences in demographics, governmental support systems, competing authorities, economic situations, cultures and relationship with nature constitute two complete different ‘sides of the road’.  

---

Introduction
Deriving from the results, I will explain that Acornhoek and its communities are, in comparison to north of the Orpen Road, still in a marginalised position. They appear to be the endemic underdog in the interaction between the two sides of the road because they miss the opportunity, means and skills to improve themselves. Because of these differences, I will explain that the two communities have different societal agendas, as the communities of Acornhoek are focussed on livelihood development, where Hoedspruit and its nature reserves are focussed on conservation and eco-tourism.

Lastly, I will present some afterthoughts and illustrate that a continuing lack of communication between the two sides has maintained a homogenous image and a lack of understanding ‘the other side’. As a result, the two communities are not in a constructive dialogue with one another regarding community needs, perspectives, priorities and getting involved with each other. No common ground is found in terms of joining effort towards (shared) objectives due to this lack of contact, awareness and understanding.
Getting to know the field: contextualising local perceptions

In this chapter, I will contextualize the research both theoretically and practically. Theoretically by explaining the academic debates in which it is embedded and practically by illustrating the characteristics of the research site: the village of Acornhoek. Looking through the lens of community-involvement, it is important to understand the context in which the interactions (and attempts at involvement) are embedded. An understanding of the characteristics of this context, the research site, helps explaining the dynamics underlying the different narratives of the two sides of the roads.

To do so, I will firstly present the development of natural resource management in South Africa, elaborating on the influence of South Africa’s imperial history. Furthermore, I will discuss the theoretical debates on community involvement strategies in the field of nature conservation. I will present expressed critiques and illustrate the complexities. Deriving from these observed complexities, I will explain the importance of local perceptions regarding nature (conservation).

Secondly, I will elaborate on how Apartheid-policy has had a profound influence on South Africa. Illustrating the influences Apartheid has had on South Africa’s natural resource management (NRM) and land use. I will elaborate on the process of rural marginalisation as a result of Apartheid policy and illustrate how it is still of influence in modern South Africa in terms of geographical and legal disruptions.

Last, I will explain how the abovementioned factors of nature conservation strategies, historic influences and local spatial features characterise Acornhoek. By presenting how together they create the contextual framework for understanding and interpreting the results, I will illustrate how Acornhoek makes a relevant case study.

Natural resource management in South Africa

Before the arrival of the first Europeans, South Africa’s population was made up of different nomadic tribes that roamed the country freely in search for food and shelter. The indigenous population was made up of Bushmen (or San\(^3\)) who were hunter-gatherers, the Khoikhoi who were pastoralists and Bantu-speaking agricultural groups (Ross, 2008, pp. 7–8). Natural resources were managed by the leaders of these tribes (DEAT, 2005) by putting restrictions on the usage of surrounding natural resources (Thompson, 2001).

In 1652, an expedition of the Dutch East Indian Company (VOC\(^2\)) under Jan van Riebeeck arrived at what is now Cape Town and set up a refreshment station to foresee in resources and means to supply the VOC. At first instance, the indigenous population was ‘not to be harmed, but rather to be traded with’ (Ross, 2008, p. 22).

In the first years, the Dutchmen created basic camps, plantations and markets. The indigenous population, the Khoikhoi, however proved ‘unable or unwilling’ to meet the Dutch demands in terms of (trading) supplies (Ross, 2008, p. 23). The Dutch decided to transform their station to a genuine colony to foresee in the demands of the VOC. They did so, firstly, by forcibly appropriating land from the Khoisan\(^3\), which led to resistance. The Dutch retributed with military force, leading to occasional fights and wars. Secondly, the Dutch created the social order of a colony by welcoming voluntary settlers like merchants or immigrants from Europe, as well as importing involuntary immigrants: slaves. These changes created a new social order in the (now) Cape colony, in which ‘the combination of conquest and slavery gave rise to hierarchical racial systems’ (Anderson, Beinart, & Coates, 1998, p. 7).

With increasing population numbers and rising demand from the VOC, agriculture needed to increase and the Cape colony expanded further inland. Farmers expanded their businesses by dispossessing the Khoisan of their land and stock. The remaining Khoisan were forced to work for the farmers. With the expansion of the Cape Colony at the end of the 17th century, remaining roaming tribes moved further inland. Their (forced) move resulted in interactions with other tribes, which led to fights amongst these groups (Anderson et al., 1998; Ross, 2008; Thompson, 2001).

The minority of colonial rulers attempted to control the majority of indigenous people by setting a chiefocracy structure in place. Elderly, respected, male members of groups were appointed chiefs and were given

---

1 Coined by the Dutch as ‘Hottentotten’, the Bushmen are now referred to as San, for the other two denominations are considered insulting.

2 Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (Dutch) (Ross, 2008, p. 22).

3 Khoisan is the typology used for all indigenous Khoikhoi, San and mixed groups in the Cape area.
relative authority (Mthandeni, 2002). Sold as ‘empowering opportunities’ to tribal groups, these chiefs functioned as go-to for colonial rulers and negotiators between the two parties. Many critiques have been expressed as the system was ‘to manage Africans under administrative rule rather than to enfranchise them’ (Ntsebeza, 2005, p. 17). Despite the false pretences under which they might have been instituted (Ntsebeza, 2005), the (leaders of) the tribal groups used it to their advantage, as chiefs (and/or kings) used it to ‘strengthen their position through partnerships, sub-chiefs and strategic marriages’ to expand their authority (Ross, 2008, p. 33; see also Mthandeni, 2002; Ntsebeza, 2005).

At the beginning of the 19th century, the British empire took over control over the Cape colony from the Dutch which ‘greatly affected the whole tenor of social and political relations within the colony’ (Ross, 2008, p. 37). The British allowed for the expansion of the colony and its commercial trade. The further expansion led to new interactions with inland tribes, resulting in new wars. The British were able to win most wars by ‘reducing these tribes to poverty, burning their fields and huts and driving off their cattle’ (Ross, 2008, p. 41).

Natural resource distribution under colonial rule

As colonial settlers incorporated large areas of land, they ‘appropriated the best lands and stripped as much of the woodlands for sale’ (Ross, 2008, p. 69). The benefits made from these appropriated lands created an agricultural elite of white farmers and land owners. Hunting became a privilege to the rich white elite, as it was seen as a symbol for their (self-appointed) superiority over the country. Mirroring societal beliefs, Africans who attempted to do the same were stigmatised: ‘Africans who killed for the pot, or for cash, were stigmatised as poachers’ (Ross, 2008, p. 104).

To tackle the decreasing biodiversity, the European settlers developed plans to commodify natural resources and manage the biodiversity in protected areas (Hulme & Murphree, 2001; Thompson, 2001). In 1886, the first game reserves and national parks were established and with it, the colonial government ordered the first wave of relocations (Thompson, 2001). The indigenous black population was relocated to other areas outside the protected areas (PA’s) and thereby lost their rights to previously owned lands. People who attempted to enter the area in search for food - something they had been doing for centuries - were treated as poachers and suffered harsh treatment. The ‘cleared’ wilderness was now set aside for tourism (Ross, 2008). Despite these efforts, the increased pressure on game led to a decrease in numbers: by the beginning of the twentieth century game had become scarce. In an attempt to conserve game and natural resources, additional areas of land were set aside as national parks and protected areas (Carruthers, 1995; Jones, 2006; Thompson, 2001). Game was transferred into these areas (Carruthers, 1995), so that ‘whites could view as tourists what they were no longer allowed to shoot’ (Ross, 2008, p. 105).

As the white population still perceived themselves superior, it was predominantly a majority of white, European males who developed and executed these plans: conservation was considered a ‘white men’s affair’. Deriving from this superiority position, the indigenous population was seen unfit to manage natural resources and even considered damaging to wildlife and was therefore kept out (Jones, 2006). This conservation tactic is coined the ‘fortress’-approach due to the protectionist basis and the military control with which locals were kept out, ensuring no human activity - with an exception for the white population - would inflict damage to the ecosystem (Brosius, Lowenhaupt Tsing, & Zerner, 2005; DEAT, 2005; Hulme & Murphree, 2001).

A need for community-involvement

In the second half of the twentieth century, the ‘fortress’-approach was challenged. ‘Community-conservation stressed the need not to exclude local people, but to ensure their participation’ (Hulme & Murphree, 2001, p. 12, emphasis mine). The community-involvement approach advocates for two important aims. First, it stresses the importance of enabling local populations to participate in the management of natural resources by gaining them access to protected areas and including them in the conservation process (Brosius et al., 2005; Hulme &

---

*Game is a collective name for (wild) animals in reserves.*
This assumes that, firstly, local communities have a greater livelihood interest in the sustainable management of local resources than a distant party. And secondly, that local communities are more aware, and knowledgeable, of local ecological processes (Brosius, Lowenhaupt Tsing, & Zerner, 2005).

The second aim involves the ‘linkage of conservation objectives to local development needs’ (Hulme & Murphree, 2001, p. 13). Many argue that the conservation of biodiversity and local livelihood development cannot be seen apart from each other (Duffy, St John, Büscher, & Brockington, 2016; Oldekop, Holmes, Harris, & Evans, 2016; W. Twine, 2013). Involving local communities is therefore the only way to create a sustainable conservation practice, improving both biodiversity and the socio-economic status of the community (Hulme & Murphree, 2001; Kellert, Mehta, Ebbin, & Lichtenfeld, 2000; West, Igoe, & Brockington, 2006).

First critiques: community-involvement or community-outreach?

Nowadays, critiques are expressed on community-involvement outreach strategies. Some critiques question the possibility to incorporate biodiversity conservation and socio-economic development (Brosius, Lowenhaupt Tsing, & Zerner, 2005; Hulme & Murphree, 2001; Wilshusen, Brechin, Fortwangler, & West, 2002). They stress the contradicting character of its aim, as many livelihoods derive from the exploitation of natural resources (Neves & Du Toit, 2013; W. Twine, 2013). Other critiques are focussed on the design of community-involvement projects, stressing the lack of ‘real’ authority for the local communities (de Beer, 2013); ‘decentralisation has primarily been a rhetoric device’ (Jones, 2006, p. 488).

A second critique focusses on the unfair distribution of the deriving benefits, as the prohibiting regulations are not compensated and the deriving benefits from nature conservation practices (and tourism) do not find their way back to the community (Hulme & Murphree, 2001; Kellert et al., 2000). These critiques often argue that projects are more ‘community-outreach’ than community-involvement. Outreach-strategies are characterised by ‘explaining their theory and methods, communicating clearly in outputs, [and] translating insights into understandable and actionable recommendations’ (Bennett et al., 2016, p. 64). In practice, this materialises as education on conservation strategies, a partial share in the benefits (Hulme & Murphree, 1999, p. 31), but no involvement in the decision-making process as an equal partner (Brosius et al., 2005; Jones, 2006; Kellert et al., 2000). A decentralised, all-encompassing approach is needed to empower local communities in creating a sustainable livelihood, while in the meantime striving to conserve surrounding wildlife and resources (Brosius et al., 2005; Hulme & Murphree, 2001; Wilshusen et al., 2002). So, to fundamentally enable community-based conservation (CBC), institutional change is advocated for (Brosius et al., 2005; Hulme & Murphree, 2001).

Community: singular or plural?

Further critique has been focussed on the implementation of community conservation projects, as conservation organisations have been relatively naïve in their general assumptions regarding implementation. This naivety contains the assumption that communities are both homogenous in their perspectives and in their willingness to welcome conservation practices into their lives. Rather than expecting homogeneity, differences will exist and should be considered, since communities are dynamic and ‘internally differentiated’ (Jones, 2006, p. 487; see also Hulme & Murphree, 2001) and ‘success will be more likely to occur if the challenge of implementation is explicitly acknowledged’ (Kellert et al., 2000, p. 713).

The ease with which community-involvement projects are regarded and implemented, all with a similar ‘blueprint’-approach, is striking (Barrett, Brooks, Josefsson, & Zulu, 2013; Godfrey, 2013), as this homogenous approach is ‘blind to the specificities of particular groups and histories’ (Barrett et al., 2013, p. 340). This would translate, for example, as having one approach to cater to the needs of the 33,000 individuals that live in Acornhoek.

The blue-print approach of ‘homogenisation and mispresentation by outside promoters’ disregards a foundation of community-involvement, namely to ensure their participation on an equal partner-basis (Barrett, Brooks, Josefsson, & Zulu, 2013, p. 340). People are not included in the process of designing the approach for their specific community and thereby not considered an equal partner in the process. By designing a homogenous

Getting to know the field: contextualising local perceptions
approach for a community without speaking to them about their specific circumstances and needs, the community’s autonomy is taken away. It ‘dispossesses local citizens and their countries of the sovereign right to organise nature conservation according to domestic values’ (Godfrey, 2013, p. 387).

By excluding the communities, one can question whether communities need to meet a certain ‘threshold’ before being involved in the process; ‘when is a “community” considered responsible enough to direct its own decisions about wildlife?’ (Godfrey, 2013, p. 387). The blueprint-approach complicates the implementation of the community-involvement strategy as it not caters to specific local needs (the 33,000 inhabitants of a geographical community cannot be considered to all harbour the same opinions and needs). A blueprint-approach excludes heterogeneous priorities, as well as the communities the opportunity to express these local circumstances and priorities: they are (deliberately) not involved in the designing of the involvement-projects aimed at involving them.

Towards understanding local priorities

These critiques are in line with other observations on community-involvement projects; namely, that thorough research on communities’ perspectives and their priorities is sparsely done before conservation starts. As a result, community-involvement practices often don’t fit the local cultures (Lyons, 2013; West et al., 2006). A better insight in local cultures can ensure a better fit between conservation practices and the local institutions and practices (Jones, 2006; Keough & Blahna, 2006; Scarlett & McKinney, 2016; Thondhlana & Shackleton, 2015), as ‘a “homegrown” governance system’ supports conservation practices (Scarlett & McKinney, 2016, p. 124).

Additional research suggests that ‘particularly capacity building in the local communities, is critical in generating success across all outcomes’ (J. Brooks, Waylen, & Borgenhoff Mulder, 2013, p. 24). To create a sustainable community-involvement strategy that ensures both autonomy and a fair distribution of benefits that caters to local priorities, the local community must be known. An important assumption in the process of getting to know a community is acknowledging ‘heterogenous interests and demographic differences’ (Kellert et al., 2000, p. 713) that make up a community. Characteristics ‘such as supportive cultural beliefs and institutions’ are of great importance in understanding the local perspective regarding conservation (J. Brooks et al., 2013, p. 22).

To overcome a colonial approach where ‘decisions are then delivered to the post-colonies in the guise of programmes that promise to serve the interests of people, but constantly emphasise Northern philosophies on wildlife worth and management’ (Godfrey, 2013, p. 387). There is the need to immerse oneself in the community to get acquainted with its diversities, its priorities, its hidden agendas, its cultures. However, getting such an insight is not an easy job. One needs to go out onto streets and speak, observe and analyse. Researching and understanding local perceptions thereby asks for a participatory approach to ensure that the values and voices of the people directly affected are included in the discourse of nature conservation.

The Apartheid legacy: reshaping the physical and mental landscape

The developments of natural resource management are embedded in a broader national context. Looking at South Africa specifically, imperial history and political policies have had a profound impact on the land and the management of natural resources. Apartheid-policy forced widespread population relocations which in turn led to increasing pressure on land and natural resources. The land removals and later the restitution processes of land claims influenced the perceived relationship with land. Environmental apartheid led to rural marginalisation of the non-white population, which is considered of continuous influence on rural communities (Stull, Bell, & Ncwadi, 2015; Van der Walt & Honns, 2008).

Apartheid and natural resource management

The twentieth century in South Africa has been dominated by the Apartheid regime. With British and Afrikaner people ruling the country, a class system was put into place. The 1948 ANP political Apartheid program

5 Afrikaner are descendants of the Dutch, German and Hugenot population in South Africa.

Getting to know the field: contextualising local perceptions
had segregation as an important pillar. An important materialisation of this segregation meant separation between population groups and especially between the white population and the other population groups (Ross, 2008; Thompson, 2001). The white population considered themselves the superior population group and they favoured benefits over and at the expense of, others (Stull et al., 2015; Thompson, 2001).

The Population Registration Act of 1950 emphasized this segregation, as it provided a framework for Apartheid, by classifying all South Africans into four categories by race: Bantu (black Africans), coloured (mixed race), white and Asian (de Satgé, 2013). Apart from the white population, all others were relocated to so-called ‘Bantustans’⁶: pieces of land (generally the worst rural land available) ‘that was already badly degraded’ (Stull et al., 2015, p. 371). These mass relocations disrupted the already divided land by emphasizing Apartheid and inequality amongst its population.

Under colonial rule, not only national management but also the natural resource management was a predominantly white, male occasion. This self-appointed white superiority was materialised in the 1913 Native Land Act. The Act provided the legislative basis to divide South Africa into a white core encompassing 87% of the best land and most of the wealth and a black periphery in the remaining 13% of the land (de Satgé, 2013; South Africa Governal-General, 1913; Thompson, 2001). In other words, the non-white and especially black, population was relocated to the poorest pieces of land. With this, ‘the Natives Land Act made explicit the latent first order segregation of South Africa’s earlier colonial period’ (Stull et al., 2015, p. 370), for the black Bantustan were the poorest pieces of land in terms of natural resources and fertility.

A new regime was put in place in 1994, when South Africa had its first democratic elections. However, the remains of the institutionalised inequality that had ruled for decades were not simply washed away: ‘the consequences of this radical blueprint for white domination and black exclusion still reverberate across South Africa and the wider region today’ (de Satgé, 2013, p. 5). The post-Apartheid years brought hope at first, as - at least on paper - people were equal. Now, twenty-five years later, there is more scepticism as the transition has proven to be more difficult in practice (Lodge, 2014; Southall, 2014). Socio-economic development fails to reach all parts of South African society, as the gap between the rich and poor population continues to grow (Lodge, 2014; Southall, 2014; Statistics South Africa, 2014). The political leadership under president Zuma (2009-2017) has been characterised by corruption and ineffectiveness; money (and means) meant for re-building the country and compensating those who suffered during the apartheid-regime have not (yet) found their way to those most in need (Claassens, The Guardian, August 8th, 2014; Gumede, The Guardian, August 9th, 2017). Not only president Zuma, but also the African National Congress (ANC) party suffers corruption charges, as cases of self-enrichment seem to stack up over time (Allison, The Guardian, August 9th 2017; Cowell, The New York Times, December 13th, 2017; Gumede, The Guardian, August 9th, 2017; MacLean, The Guardian, December 29th, 2017).

The expected socio-economic development is lacking – despite the 25 years of ‘free’ South Africa - and South Africans now critically turn to their political institutions. There is the growing sense that the countries problems are no longer solely a result of the Apartheid-policy, as also the national and regional governmental institutions prove defective in tackling the ongoing inequality. However, now at the beginning of 2018, Cyril Ramaphosa is elected the new leader of the ANC (and likely the to be elected president in 2019 due to the party’s popularity). In his first public speech as ANC-leader he has publicly stated that ‘tackling the corruption’ is one of his priorities in an attempt to ensure ‘radical economic transformation’ (Reuters, The Guardian, 17th December 2017).

‘Environmental Apartheid’: the consequences of rural marginalization

Besides the social, political and economic injustices that were served during the Apartheid regime, there are also environmental consequences that prevail (Stull et al., 2015). Coined as ‘environmental apartheid’, is ‘the use of the rural environment to deliberately marginalize racially defined groups, as well as the subsequent consequences of that marginalization’ (ibid., p. 370). Rural marginalization functioned as both cause and consequence of this institutionalised environmental Apartheid.

⁶ Also referred to as homelands.
Stull et. al. (2015) distinguish three orders of rural marginalization. First order refers to the ‘the forcible location of Black South Africans in rural spaces distant from the economic and cultural advantages controlled by Whites’ and second order referring specifically to the relocation ‘to the worst lands within these distant rural spaces’ (Stull et al., 2015, p. 370). The relocations during the Apartheid regime are an example of this. Lastly, third order rural marginalization is ‘the continued isolation and neglect of South Africans within these first and second order rural marginalization’ (ibid., p. 370), which can be argued is still happening today, as the ‘long historical racialised dispossession’ is still reflected in the ongoing ‘economic marginalisation of a large proportion of middle-income South Africa’s population’ (Neeves, Samson, Niekerk, Hlatshwayo, & Toit, 2009, p. 11).

The far-reaching consequences of this spatial marginalisation ‘cannot be separated from an understanding of the social, political and economic repercussions of apartheid policies’ (Stull et al., 2015, p. 370; see also Neeves et al., 2009; Van der Walt & Honns, 2008). Looking at the consequences of this marginalization for the black population in South Africa regarding nature and its conservation, I abstracted two issues. First, geographic consequences in terms of biodiversity loss. And second, the legal consequences due to disputes over land-ownership. These developments have been significant in shaping the field of nature conservation and the local perception of nature. I will now further elaborate on the twofold impact of the marginalisation processes of rural communities in post-Apartheid South Africa.

**Geographic consequences: two different landscapes**

The population relocations during the Apartheid left a distinct mark on the land. With ‘the majority of the population squeezed into 13% of the land in overcrowded homelands’ (DEAT, 2005, p. 42), the growing population density had an increasing pressure on the land and its natural resources. Previous lush and resource-rich areas deteriorated at an alarming rate and suffered ‘massive deforestation, soil erosion and loss of biodiversity’ (DEAT, 2005, p. 42). The high population density led to an increase in demand. However, restrictions in their movement forced the inhabitants of the homelands ‘to overuse resources’ in their subsistence agricultural practices (Attfield, 2009, p. 11). The black populated areas developed into empty lands, lacking biodiversity, wildlife and natural resources. The land proved unable to provide for its inhabitants while sustaining its natural balance. This led to impoverished areas, both in terms of biodiversity, as well as opportunities for its inhabitants in terms of resource use and eco-tourism.

Meanwhile, the white South Africans lived on the large majority of the land. The significant lower population density resulted in relative empty lands that could sustain its natural balance and its richness in natural resources (DEAT, 2005; Thompson, 2001). These ‘rich’ areas had regained their natural wealth in terms of biodiversity, wildlife and natural resources. And due to the sustained natural wealth, these lands would attract tourists, incentivizing the commercialisation of these lands and the deriving (eco-)tourism (Carruthers, 1995; Ross, 2008).

**Questions of ownership and authority: the land claim issue**

The Apartheid’s policy on Bantustans and population relocation left a second important impact on the environment. As non-white population was forcibly moved to Bantustans, previously owned lands were lost to them. Winning the 1994 elections, the ANC focussed, amongst many other things, on restoring the equal rights for all population groups in South Africa. An important step in creating this equity was the Land Rights Act (Republic of South Africa, 1994; Thompson, 2001). This Act made it possible for people to file for ownership of a specific area and thereby reclaiming their historical communal claimed lands (Deininger, 1999). In the process of reclaiming, the 1913 Natives Land Act serves as the ‘historical marker’ for identifying which dispossession qualify for restitution (de Satgé, 2013; Republic of South Africa, 1994). Most of these land claims are outside of the Bantustans, in the areas that now constitute nature reserves and protected areas used for conservation or (eco-)tourism.

---

7 Western and (South) African interpretations of land ownership differ. Where western ideas of land ownership are often build upon individual (legal) ownership, traditional (South) African interpretations are often based upon a communal claim on a piece of land by a group of people (Shipston & Goheen, 1992) rather than individual ownership (de Satgé, 2013; Evers et al., 2005; Maruleng Spatial Development, 2007).
The policy developed by the South African government to restore the rights to previously owned lands had ‘three central components’ (Deininger, 1999, pp. 664–665; see also Moseley & McCusker, 2008). First, there is restitution, which entails a (mostly financial) compensation for lost lands (Lahiff, 2008). Second, there is land tenure reform, which focusses on improving tenure security by ‘recognising individual and communal ownership right’ which gives them the rights to decide about their own tenure systems (Deininger, 1999, p. 665). The third form constitutes redistribution, which entails the process of providing lands to large numbers of (rural) black population groups (Deininger, 1999; Lahiff, 2008).

The Restitution of Land Rights proves to be a difficult topic in practice: competing jurisdictions regarding the basis for claims (Evers, Spierenburg, & Wels, 2005), a lack of documentation with the claimants - which makes ownership hard to prove - and overlapping claims that are submitted problematise the smooth transition to restoring historic ownerships for the black population of South Africa (Lahiff, 2008; Lahiff, Davis, & Manenzhe, 2012; Moseley & McCusker, 2008; Peters, 2009).

After a land claim is assigned, problems still may occur. When looking at ownership from a land tenure perspective, defined by Barrow and Murphree (2001, as cited in Evers, Spierenburg, & Wels, 2005, p. 29) as ‘the rights of secure, long-term access to land and other resources, their benefits and the responsibilities related to these rights’, owners of the land have the right to access and to manage the resources. With this right, also comes the responsibility to manage these resources and possibly create a conservation strategy.

A lot of the reclaimed land is in protected areas that are on environment and wildlife-protection lists, or part of private game reserves (Lahiff, 2008; Ramutsindela, 2003). Most restored owners have kept their land under conservation (DEAT, 2005), as it was often ‘forced’ as a condition for the land claim to be granted (Adams, 2004; Ramutsindela, 2003; Tapela & Omara-Ojungu, 1999) as the case with the famous Makuleke-claim. Despite reclaimed lands, management of these lands thus often remains with (for example) national park managements. As a result, questions about decision-making authority and the distribution of deriving benefits from these lands remain. Furthermore, critique is expressed on whether land reform in general could ‘effectively address the spatial legacy that resulted from colonial and apartheid land disposessions’ (Ramutsindela, 2007, p. 465), as the management of these land claims seems to ‘largely account for the emerging spatial consolidation of the geography of the former Bantustans’ (ibid., p. 456).

Overall, ‘land reform is criticized for its pace - about 8 per cent of commercial farmland was redistributed over 18 years versus the 30 per cent over 5 years initially targeted - and for its performance’ (Aliber & Cousins, 2013, p. 140). Still, many claims logged during the first period (just after 1994) have not been processed and the newer claims are still waiting as a result. A new period of claim-logging possibilities was announced by the ANC in the spring of 2017 (Reuters Staff, 2017) leading to more protests amongst the people who were still waiting on a result on their initial claim (sometimes up to 23 years).

The tardiness with which the land reform process is executed is leading to widespread critique. Councils formed to oversee these processes don’t function and appointed funds are located to ‘other purposes’. Many claims delay due to economic interests of concerned parties (not excluding the South African government itself), as land claims may constitute areas with gold and diamond mines. It is especially in these economically important cases where investigatory teams strive to ‘establish ethnicity’ and tribal history of the claiming group, thereby again basing the access to land and natural resources based on race and (tribal) group. “It is exactly what used to happen under Apartheid, but the difference today is that these interventions are increasingly connected with securing the conditions for mining corporations and determining who will benefit from their local operations” (So-sibo, Mail & Guardian, August 8th, 2014; see also Claassens, Mail & Guardian, August 8th, 2014). Despite being in execution for over 20 years, the land reform policy and process has not proven to be a successful one in restoring access to land, natural resources and its deriving benefits for those disadvantaged by the Apartheid legacy.
The Acornhoek case

This research was situated around the rural village of Acornhoek. To ensure a holistic understanding of this research and the results, an understanding of the local context in which the research is embedded is needed. Acornhoek is situated in the most north-eastern corner of the Bushbuckridge municipality, in the north-eastern part of Mpumalanga province. Bushbuckridge municipality is bordered in the South by the urban area of Mbombela (Nelspruit), the Blyde Canyon in the west, the Kruger National Park in the east and the Limpopo province in the north, as can be seen in Figure 1.

Acornhoek is situated in the most north-eastern part of Mpumalanga province. Bushbuckridge municipality is bordered in the South by the urban area of Mbombela (Nelspruit), the Blyde Canyon in the west, the Kruger National Park in the east and the Limpopo province in the north, as can be seen in Figure 1.

This research field is divided in two governmental areas. South of the Orpen Road (where Acornhoek is) is the Mpumalanga province. North of the Orpen Road is Limpopo province, that houses Hoedspruit, but also the nature reserves like the Global White Lion Protection Trust (GWLPT) (as observable in Figure 2). Although the GWLPT is located in the Maruleng municipality, it is closer to the Acornhoek community, as it is just across the road. With the research site encompassing both the town of Acornhoek, but also the nature reserves north of the Orpen Road, the research site is thus situated in two different provinces. The presence of two different governmental provincial jurisdictions comes with its difficulties, as there are differences in public facilities and policies. For nature reserves like the GWLPT, the two jurisdictions come with their own complexities. Officially, they are under Limpopo jurisdiction, as Maruleng is part of the Limpopo province but their nearest community (Acornhoek) is located in Mpumalanga province, with its own jurisdiction.

Acornhoek knows many rural settlements on its outskirts. On a daily basis, people all the way from Tulamahashe, Cottondale, Casteel, Morolo - up to 25 kilometres from Acornhoek centre - come to Acornhoek for business. Acornhoek is located near the R40 that leads south to Hazynview (and Mbombela) and north to Hoedspruit (and Phalaborwa). Due to the central position of Acornhoek, a lot of local and regional busses (even to Johannesburg) leave from Acornhoek, making it an important logistic node in the rural region. However, for tourists, Hoedspruit functions as the most important (logistic) node.

North of the Orpen Road: The Global White Lion Protection Trust

The GWLPT is one of the nature conservation organisations located north of the Orpen Road. The organisation owns three properties, all located between Hoedspruit and Acornhoek. The one located at the Orpen Road is the Mbube property and is closest and most open to Acornhoek. This property houses a field manager, several
field rangers and a volunteer accommodation. The organisation is founded and managed by Linda Tucker and Jason Turner. The three reserves are managed through field managers and field rangers, who take up the daily maintenance of the properties and the monitoring of the (white) lions.

The GWLPT is focussed on ‘restoring the white lion to its endemic region, the Timbavati’ (Global White Lion Protection Trust, 2017b). With timba meaning lion and vati ‘where they descended on earth’ in XiTsonga (Fieldnotes, 07-03-2017), the region north-east of Acornhoek (the Timbavati) is the endemic environment of their key species: the white lion (J. A. Turner, 2017). As part of their conservation philosophy, the organisation aims to involve local communities in their conservation practices. Although located in a different province (Limpopo), they are in close proximity to Acornhoek. With their conservation practices partially constructed on basis of local cultures, (Linda Tucker builds upon the belief that the white lion symbolises the spiritual on earth in Tsonga cultures), they seek contact with the Shangaan (and Sepedi) communities in Acornhoek in their attempts at community-involvement (Fieldnotes, 27-04-2017). These involvement practices are currently focussed on eco-education and raising awareness in order to ‘foster clear awareness of and concern about, economic, social, heritage, political and ecological interdependence amongst our learners’ (Global White Lion Protection Trust, 2017a).

Being my host organisation for this research, I got the opportunity to speak to the GWL members and incorporate their side of the story in co-constructing the local perspectives. Interesting feature of the organisation is that it is employer to both people who live in Acornhoek, people from other regions in South Africa and white South Africans (and an occasional European volunteer group/manager). Some GWL employees live in Acornhoek and are therefore part of the community ‘on the other side of the road’ that the GWL’s community-involvement strategies target. Although not the only conservation organisation located north of the Orpen Road, the GWL symbolises the ‘other side of the road’ in this research. This because most people in Acornhoek were not aware of the presence of distinct (differences in) nature reserves north of the Orpen Road and together coined them ‘the other side’.

The remains of Gazankulu... or Gazankulu remains?

Before the Apartheid regime, the Acornhoek region consisted of several Tsonga kingdoms (Frankental & Sichone, 2005). During the Apartheid years, all Tsonga people were relocated to the Tsonga Bantustan, which was called Gazankulu. As observable in Figure 3, Gazankulu was made up of two bigger areas: one south from Acornhoek (just south-east of Klaserie) to Hazyview and a northern area around Polokwane.

The Tsonga people who now live in Acornhoek, coin themselves ‘Shangaan’9 and are the descendants of the Tsonga population who inhabited the Gazankulu homeland. Despite being a former Tsonga Bantustan, the current population of Acornhoek encompasses also Sepedi, Swati and Sotho people (Statistics South Africa, 2011a). So, despite being (slightly) more cultural diverse, the town is still primarily a Tsonga settlement.

The logo of the Global White Lion Protection Trust on one of their safari vehicles.

Figure 3. Map showing Gazankulu (in red). The open space just north of Acornhoek ensured access into the Kruger National Park for the white population (Carruthers, 1995).

9 Apart from Mtbube, there are many other reserves north of the Orpen Road, such as AM Lodge, Wits Rural Facility, Kapama Reserve Thornybush and Phelwana (Google Inc. & AfriGIS Pty Ltd., 2017).
9 The Shangaani people are part of the Tsonga TsiTsonga tribe, that originated in Mozambique. The SoShangana, or Changhana (Shangaani nowadays) are the results of mixes between the Mozambican Tsonga tribe and South African Zulu’s and other smaller TsiTsonga tribes from the north-western region of South Africa. (Syabona Africa (Pty) Ltd, 2017; U.S. Library of Congress, 2017)
The Orpen Road: a symbol for rural marginalisation

The Orpen Road, that now marks the northern border of Acornhoek, wasn’t always there. Before the Apartheid regime, the Main Road to the Orpen Gate made its way through what is now Acornhoek village. The Kruger Park, being a major tourist attraction, was for socio-economic reasons important for the government to have available (Carruthers, 1995) and with the aim to have minimal interaction between the different population groups during the Apartheid, the Orpen Road was relocated to the northern border of Acornhoek. The design of Gazankulu and relocation of the Orpen Road, provided a corridor between Phalaborwa and Klaserie, ensuring the white population to maintain easy access into the KNP without having to enter ‘black areas’ (Fieldnotes, 17-04-2017). It became the new border between the Bantustan Gazankulu and the non-homeland areas around Hoedspruit (and towards the Kruger National Park). By doing so, it excluded Acornhoek and its inhabitants from the deriving benefits of the tourism that the Kruger Park attracted, exemplary of first and second order rural marginalisation, as the Gazankulu population was deliberately kept from ‘economic and cultural advantages’ (Stull et al., 2015, p. 370).

A research site characterised by divide

With the research site only partially located in a former Bantustan, the site is characterised by divide. The Orpen Road marks the border between the former Bantustan and the ‘white lands’ in nowadays Maruleng municipality, where the nature reserves like the GWL are located. As part of the former Gazankulu, Acornhoek has been subjected to the consequences of environmental Apartheid. These consequences are observable around Acornhoek.

Firstly: the geographical differences between the former Bantustan and its neighbouring area. The two sides of the Orpen Road constitute two complete different landscapes. Looking at satellite pictures from the area a distinct division in ‘green-ness’ is observable on separate sides of the Orpen Road (red line), as can be seen in Figure 4. The area stretching from Acornhoek to Hoedspruit and the Kruger National Park is characterised by a resource-wealthy lands that house a multitude of nature reserves, wildlife and touristic eco-estates. South of the Orpen Road, the former Bantustan, is much less green. High population density during Apartheid years has put a high pressure on the land and its natural resources.

Secondly, Acornhoek bears the consequences of rural marginalisation, as the Tsonga population suffered endemic exclusion of economic and cultural centres. Even though Acornhoek is situated near the major tourist attraction - the Kruger National Park - there are no tourist-businesses in town. Hoedspruit, north of the Orpen Road, has maintained the central provider for tourists in the region (Maruleng Spatial Development, 2007; Mavungu, 2011). In a broader societal perspective, Acornhoek is still subject to third order rural marginalisation as the town is in ‘continued isolation and neglect’ in comparison to the opportunities in the wider region (Stull et al., 2015, p. 370).

A divided field for attempts at involvement

As illustrated above, the area in which this research is embedded is characterised by divide. First of all, a two-way tar road slices up the area as it runs between the conservation organisations and Acornhoek town. This road, the Orpen Road, proves to symbolize broader differences between the two areas. As they were divided in Apartheid years into a Bantustan in the south and a non-Bantustan area north of the road. This Apartheid divide has resulted in differences that still divide the area today, as the two sides constitute two complete different areas in geographical terms. On top the consequences of this divide is the research site also cut up in two in judicial terms, as the two sides of the road belong to two different municipalities and provinces.
Driving back through the reserve from my appointment I felt happy, ecstatic even. I was already in the final month of my fieldwork and I felt completely at home in Acornhoek. Driving in my bakkie, windows down, the lush and warm bushtveld smell that came in. A thick scent that changed with every corner I turned, made up of hundreds of flowers, insects, animals, dung, small meandering streams whose smell found its way through the dry thicket and grass, sand and dust: the smell of the African bush. The late afternoon sun found my skin, already set low on the horizon seeping through branches as I made my way back home. With the satisfactory sounds of my tires grinding their way through loose sand, the humming of my car and the hidden animals, I felt no urge whatsoever to turn on the radio. I felt blessed, for I knew that this experience would last for another twenty minutes before I would reach the gate onto the ‘real’ world again, so I tried to soak it up as good as possible.

It dawned upon me that I was very lucky to be able to enjoy this and the feeling of guilt and shame came over me. My background had opened more doors and gates for that matter, for me in the last three months, than what most local people would ever see. As I turned the last corner of the dirt road and the boom showed itself, I felt a knot inside of me. Before me lay the Orpen Road, a road that I had been travelling for two months without thinking twice. But now it was different.

As I took my right onto the Orpen Road, I stopped the car after a hundred metres on the side of the road. To my left lay Acornhoek, or its most northern outskirts for that matter, bordered by small RDP (Reconstruction and Development Program) houses. Having been inside several of them, I could make a clear estimation of what would be going on: around 20m², probably housing a family of one parent, a grandparent and five children. With no electricity available, cooking and washing happens outside.

Further up the hill, towards the centre of Acornhoek, lay bigger houses. Some with electricity and maybe even running water and a flushing toilet – but that would be a luxurious exception. Looking over the Orpen Road, most people currently living in Acornhoek are looking at their ancestral lands. The places where most of them used to live, where their grandparents grew up, uncles were initiated, parents had their wedding and buried their loved ones.

But not anymore, because to my right now were fences. Up to two-and-a-half metres high, strengthened with barbed wire and electricity, carrying signs announcing the presence of wildlife, the Big Five and stating to ‘keep out’. With the village to the south of the Orpen Road, the opposite, northern part is characterised by nature reserves. Large plots of lush bushes and thicket, inhabited by giraffes, zebra, lions and the occasional rhino. I knew this because I had been inside. As the road stretched before me, I followed the route in my mind. Driving west on the Orpen Road up to the R40, leaving two options. Turn left, towards Acornhoek, the black, rural village that had been my home for the last two months. Or turn right and drive up to Hoedspruit, a road surrounded by nature reserves that led to the mlungu town and the economic, touristic hotspot of the region.

Behind me lay the Orpen Road going east, stretching six kilometres before reaching the Orpen Gate into the Kruger National Park. It was this situation, with the new acquired information its history, that brought me to tears. (Fieldnotes, 17-04-2017)

It is in this field where conservation organisations like the GWL are attempting to involve local (Acornhoek) communities. Despite the discouraging spatial characteristics of the area, there are efforts made at bringing the two sides of the road together. The combination of characteristics creates a significant research field for a case-study on studying the dynamics of different perspectives regarding nature and its conservation through a lens of community-involvement in South Africa.
Methodology

With community-involvement being popular as a conservation strategy, questions about the local perceptions and priorities of local communities have arisen. However, there has been a serious lack of research into these local perceptions on nature and its conservation (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Lyons, 2013; Nilsson, Baxter, Butler, & Mcalpine, 2016; West et al., 2006). In this research, I have aimed to do just that. By immersing myself in a local, rural community that is surrounded by conservation initiatives, I have tried to get an insight in the local culture, people’s perceptions of, and relation with, nature to see how inhabitants of Acornhoek make sense of nature conservation and their role in that process. In this chapter I will explain what research methods I have used to collect data for my research question:

What are the underlying dynamics of the different narratives of local communities around Acornhoek, Mpumalanga, South Africa regarding their surrounding natural environment and its conservation?

To adequately contextualize local perceptions, I needed a detailed understanding of the complexities of everyday life in the community. Ethnographic research is ‘viewed as particularly helpful in the generation of an intensive, detailed examination’ (Bryman, 2008, p. 53). Deriving from that goal, I will explain in this chapter how I have designed this ethnographic research and elaborate on decisions I made during the process.

Furthermore, I will elaborate on how these research methods worked out in the field. Participating in a new and unknown culture and community comes with challenges like gaining access, building a network and adjusting research direction and expectations. To give a thorough insight in what it is like to research local perceptions, I will go into detail on how I gained access in the community, how I connected with people and how I profiled myself; in other words, what ethnographic research on local perceptions encompassed in this research context. By doing so, I strive to give a close insight in what it is like to do fieldwork in a rural community in South Africa and what (hidden) aspects should be considered when designing a similar research.

Truth as a social construct, for me to interpret

In this research, I have taken on a (co-)constructivist, interpretive perspective. The focus of this research is on local perceptions and possible discrepancies in these perceptions. To consider these (differences in) local perceptions, I have assumed that the local community of Acornhoek is not homogenous in their perceptions and/or actions and will probably be constituted of multiple, perhaps even contrasting, perceptions regarding nature and its conservation (depending on age, education, cultural heritage, socio-economic status, etc.). In contrast with ontological objectivism, which states that there is only one truth to social phenomena, I derive from a constructivist ontological perspective. Constructivism treats ‘social realities as socially – collectively, intersubjectively, constructed in an ongoing interplay between individual agency and social structure, in and through which individuals and structures mutually constitute each other’ (Berger and Luckman, 1991/1966; Giddens, 1984; Jenkins, 2004, as cited in Ybema et al., 2015, p. 8). So, I treat this research as not having one ‘truth’, rather I expect diverse perspectives and ‘truths’ and aim at co-constructing those in this research.

To research these differences in perceived realities, I have taken on an epistemological interpretivist perspective. Interpretivism ‘sees social realities as being socially constructed, with the ethnographer as fully part of these constructivist processes’ (Ybema et al., 2015, p. 8) and states that ‘in order to understand these differences, social researchers should try to constantly grasp the subjective meaning of social action’ (Bryman, 2008, p. 16). An interpretivist perspective thereby tries to ‘break away from a univocal account that holds out the promise of mirroring reality, in favour of richly describing “the polyphony of voices”’ (Ybema et al., 2015, p. 8). In this research, I thus tried to look beyond the first image of homogenous ‘perfect’ images and focus on how local perspectives and truths are constructed through behaviour, values and norms, thereby co-constructing the diversity of the perspectives in the communities.

To research the diversity of local perceptions, I have immersed myself in the field. By having daily interactions with the local community, I have tried to research their daily processes of meaning-making and sense-
giving. By looking into how people narrate their relationship with nature, what aspects are of importance and questioning their relation. By letting people talk, elaborate and explain, I have heard what people perceive as their truth(s).

However, important is that I, as a researcher, am ‘fully part of these constructivist processes’, for I interpret them. Therefore, doing ethnographic research is often ‘the product of circumstance, of serendipity and coincidence, of contingency, of interpretations and being interpreted’ (Wilkinson in Thomson, Ansoms & Murison 2013: 5; cf. Yanow & Swartz-Shea 2006). Because of that, the results that come about in this research might not automatically be the experienced truths of the local communities of Acornhoek. Rather than that, they are my interpretations of those truths, influenced by my biography and put into context what I heard, saw and experienced during my three months of field work. This research is a co-construction; I as a researcher have constructed the local narratives of the communities around Acornhoek and the deriving results are a combination of their constructed stories and my interpretation, analysis and writing it down.

Participant observation: being there

Because fieldwork ‘is an interpretive act, not a observational or descriptive one’ (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 93 in Ybema et al., 2015), my main source of data has derived from me being there. Participant observation entails ‘being a fully functioning member of the social setting, while members of the social setting are aware of the researchers’ status as a researcher’ (Bryman, 2008, p. 410). As a participant observer, I have immersed myself in the daily lives of the inhabitants of Acornhoek: by ‘interacting, making regular observations on the behaviour of members, listening to and engaging in conversations, interviewing informants and collecting data about the group, in order to develop an understanding of the culture of the group and people’s behaviour within that culture’ (Bryman, 2008, p. 410; see also Ybema et al., 2015). This meant that for three months, I walked the same streets, endured the same weather, ate the same food, drank the traditional drinks, talked their talk, enjoyed the traditional dances, drove through their landscapes, read their newspaper, watched their news, used their public transport and so - to a certain extent – attempted to live their life.

Aware of our tendency ‘to have a blind spot for what is usual, ordinary, routine’, I have strived to ‘make explicit the often-overlooked’ (Ybema et al., 2015, p. 1/7). I have done so by shining light on small, at first seemingly unimportant, details that I observed during my time as an inhabitant of Acornhoek, that together symbolise the local perceptions regarding nature and its conservation. My focus has been on analysing the complexities of daily life and trying to understand discrepancies between the official and the unofficial (Ybema et al., 2015). I have done so by comparing information with different sources, but especially by observing the differences between what people said and how they acted, and how they reflected on my observations.

Deriving from the focus to gain knowledge on local perceptions and the communities’ perspectives of nature conservation, becoming a member of the community was crucial for this research (Ybema et al., 2015, p. 141). However, being accepted as a member by the community and gaining access, is no certainty. It requires effort from the researcher to be accepted into the community; it requires ‘work’. Due to the possible obstacles of participant observation, I will later elaborate on my research experiences regarding gaining access, building trust and being a participant observer.

Checking and contextualising

To deepen my understanding of the co-constructed data and increase its trustworthiness, I have discussed findings with other informants and incorporated other research methods (Bryman, 2008; Ybema et al., 2015). Triangulation, the ‘drawing on different kinds of sources or analytic tools in trying to understand a phenomenon’ (Ybema et al., 2015, p. 60) has helped to check, double-check and cross-check the information and see if there were discrepancies in the expressed and the observed. These additional methods included open and semi-structured interviews, analysing documentary sources and keeping a research diary to keep track of the development of my data co-construction and research experiences.
Talk, talk, talk

The most important research method (and information source) proved to be the informal talks I had on the street. These conversations mostly shaped my insight in local cultures and perceptions. Furthermore, they provided me with numerous opportunities to check, double check and cross-check information. These conversations were completely open and took shape as the conversation was going on. Most of these talks were one-on-one, speaking to one inhabitant of Acornhoek at the time. The conversations mostly lasted between ten and thirty minutes and were not recorded. I tried to incorporate some of the general topics of my semi-structured interviews into these talks, such as demographics, eco-philosophy and personal relationship with nature. Most of the time I would take notes in my notebook, or quickly write observations and quotes down after the conversation.

As ‘bycatch’, I was able to conduct several open and semi-structured interviews. I deliberately kept these interviews as unstructured and open as possible. By doing so, I gave the interviewee the opportunity to elaborate and stress the issues that he/she deemed important, which can lead to a better insight into what the interviewees see as more important or relevant (Bryman, 2008; Hermanowicz, 2002). I set up a topic list to ensure that certain general topics would be tipped upon. Most interviews lasted from ninety minutes up to two hours and were conducted face-to-face in a private setting. An interview with a rhino-poacher is an exception to this; since he is imprisoned, his interview was conducted over the phone. To sharpen my memory and improve my analysis of these talks, I transcribed all interviews (Bryman, 2008), thereby enabling myself to insert quotes and examples from the interviews to underline and exemplify my research results.

In terms of trustworthiness as a researcher, I have made sure to treat each contributor with respect and respected their privacy when needed or requested. Since I assumed the community to be heterogeneous, conflicting opinions and perspectives amongst community members were possible and thus needed to be taken into account. To contribute without fear, I therefore gave all contributors the opportunity to contribute anonymously and to do so in a private setting.

Even though my research never ‘stopped’ (I walked around town seven days a week), most of my interviews were conducted Monday to Friday, during the day. This consequently shaped my respondents group, for most people that I spoke to either worked on the streets (as a vendor, repair man, etc.), or were just hanging out on the streets, unemployed. With the exemptions of conversations during the weekends and those in stores with employees, I have thus dominantly been speaking to a group of people with rather traditional money-streams, like growing their own crops, arts and crafts, street vendors or unemployed people. It was mostly my group of key informants, who all worked (except for Victor) and some parents at the day-care, who have provided me with perspectives from people who are employed by a company.

In my attempts to research a representative group of the Acornhoek community, I have strived to keep the group of respondents as diverse as possible in terms of age, gender and socio-economic background and status. However, it has been impossible to determine this factually, since I did not ask people about their yearly incomes, or age. Thereby, my attempts have been solely based on information given to me by either the respondent itself, other respondents, or my own estimates. To improve my selection of conversation partners I have paid multiple visits to the more peripheral neighbourhoods of Acornhoek and included both privately owned houses as well as households housed by the government in Rural Development Project (RDP) houses10.

Paper-work

To contextualise, check and compare information, I have analysed documentary sources. These sources were mainly websites, with a focus on the website of the Global White Lion Protection Trust and governmental institutes concerning livelihood, rural development, environment and nature conservation. In my close reading of these sources, I focussed on certain narratives, jargon and approaches to (1) nature conservation, (2) eco-philosophy, (3) community involvement strategies and (4) socio-cultural aspects.

10 RDP is a government-organised housing project aimed at providing the poorest (rural) households with housing (Greenberg, 2004, p. 2).
The close reading of these documents proved to be a helpful starting point for conversations, but also as a comparison for information, or to compare real practices with what was stated (or promised) online. Besides the GWLPT and governmental websites, I was also a member of the Facebook-group of ‘Acornhoek community’. This helped me to get an insight in what issues were at hand in the community and to connect with people over social events.

In the analysis of these documentary sources, I have focused on relevant facts and incidents in their contents, but also on the tone and perspective taken in the different documents. In the coding process and interpretation, I have taken on an ethnographic content analysis (ECA) approach. ECA follows a reflexive movement, where ‘categories guide the analysis, but new ones are allowed to emerge, including an orientation to constant discovery and comparison of relevant situations’ (Altheide, 2004, as cited in Bryman, 2008 p. 529). During the analysis, I have paid special attention to semiotics and the interpretation of signs and symbols in the texts, combined with ‘hermeneutics which focuses on bringing out the meanings of a text from the perspective of the author’ (Bryman, 2008, p. 532). By following this analysis path, I have strived to elucidate the different organisational narratives and perspectives on nature (conservation), community-involvement and the socio-economic factors of livelihood development.

Field notes

To document my findings, I have kept fieldnotes. I have written down all interesting interactions, talks, observations as fieldnotes in my research diary, which functions as my primary data source. First of all, my fieldnotes include sections on my interactions and talks, but also reflections on these talks, thereby ‘recording what researchers see and hear outside the immediate context of the interview, their thoughts about the dynamic of the encounter’ (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 132). Fieldnotes are thus ‘not simply aide memories to what was said. Rather they contain the researcher’s lived experience of a particular moment – such as the atmosphere of a room – which is not easily captured in recordings’ (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, & Le, 2014, p. 276). Furthermore, my fieldnotes include my reflections on the research; discussing experiences of the chosen research methods, analyses and my positionality. This proved to be of great help in the continuous re-designing of the research in the field, the analysis of the data, reflecting upon the research in general as well as at home while constructing the data for this thesis (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). While writing, I have deliberately intertwined the two sections in my fieldnotes, for the researcher cannot be seen apart from the research and its results, due to the immersive character of ethnographic research and the (co-)constructivist-interpretive stance that I have taken.

Putting the community in community-based

Focussing my research on local perspectives, my approach throughout the research has been to stay ‘close to the ground’, by putting the community at the centre of my data collection. Aware of the fact that most community-involvement programs lack serious research into local perceptions and priorities (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Lyons, 2013; West et al., 2006), I wanted to research these local perspectives. I did so by letting the community speak for itself. I let them do the talking, explain to me their perspectives on nature conservation and relationship with nature (and conservation practices). Furthermore, I tried to let the individual community-members ‘connect the dots’ when it came to explaining the underlying aspects and dynamics and their perspectives and write down their stories. To give them the space needed to be able to tell their story in full, I found it important that my personal (European) perspectives were of the fewest possible influence. I thus tried to position myself as a curious listener, who wanted to learn from the locals in order to understand what was going on and hear their stories and their thoughts.

I have done so by trying to react non-judgemental and only express personal opinions further down the research period. I actively kept a neutral expression, reacted with understanding and support when I felt that people were unsure about whether they should tell me something. I underlined this by often literally telling people that ‘I was just a ‘unknowing’ mlungu from Holland who knew nothing about nature, conservation or South Africa,
so please tell me’. This often-sparked pride and a sense of mentorship in my interviewee’s, who then saw it as their job to explain to me their daily practices, cultural traditions and perspectives regarding certain topics.

Nevertheless, throughout my research I have tried to stay critical of what I heard and experienced. Overall, my approach has been to start from ‘please teach me’-approach, developing (when appropriate), to a more critical stance in which I would ask people to reflect upon the discrepancies in their logic and/or behaviour. I often experienced that in the first minutes of my talks with people, someone would quickly take on a rather extreme position. However, I wanted to know why people thought what they thought. On what premises, information and experiences did they base their opinion? How had their opinion developed over the years? I did so by challenging their opinions: why do you think that? How does that correspond with how you act? Do people discuss these matters with each other? If yes, in what ways? If not, why not?

In my attempts to get to the underlying values and influencing factors of one’s opinion, I encouraged people to think about whether this was their individual opinion, a community-stance, or maybe something that they had overheard. These deepening questions were often the ones that lead to interesting observations. It was then when people would expose (and reflect upon) what aspects had shaped their perspectives, how they had weighed those aspects in the process of forming their opinion and reflected upon the importance of each part.

**Theory vs. Practice: my fieldwork experiences**

Ethnographic research rests on close engagement with the research subject. This closeness asks of the researcher to be increasingly sensible regarding ethical, social and political issues (Ybema et al., 2015). My immersion in the field has influenced not only my fieldwork choices, but also my interpretations of the observations made. Due to the intertwined nature of me as a researcher with the research object, ethnography asks for elaborate reflexivity (Brown, 2006; Bryman, 2008; Ybema et al., 2015). Because ‘it is important to adequately balance the immersion into the field and distancing oneself of the research topic’ (Ybema et al., 2015, p. 11), I will elaborate on some choices I made during my fieldwork period, how I think these affected my data collection and how my positionality as researcher might influence the results.

In doing so, I will first explain how I organised the data co-construction and how I coped with experienced obstacles. I will expand on local customs that have helped in the process of immersing myself in a rural South African community and reflect on how those customs are to be considered when developing a similar research. Finally, I will reflect on my positionality as a researcher and my personal background, my beliefs and how these have affected me during my fieldwork period and in the interpretation of events and information. After all, ethnography and the ethnographer are not two separate things.

**Introduction to the field**

Preparation always precedes fieldwork. This preparation functions in several ways, as it encourages to design the best fitting research methodology for the research question, but also to gain initial insight and knowledge about the research topic and the research field. After deciding on my methodological strategies, I had to prepare myself for three months of ethnographic research in a South African rural community, both in terms of location and research topics. To do so, I divided my preparations into three main aspects: (1) doing ethnographic research into (2) the local perceptions of community-based nature conservation in (3) South Africa. The first part, preparing for ethnographic research was already largely done when designing my research. In the time leading up to my arrival in Acornhoek, I further looked into strategies on ‘gaining access’ and ‘building trust’ as those steps seemed to be of crucial importance to doing my research. Also, I spoke to several other students who had conducted ethnographic research in South Africa to ask them about their experiences and practical do’s and don’ts.

To strengthen my knowledge about my research topic and the location of my fieldwork, I did a lot of reading. When it comes to my research topic, I focused on the developments and obstacles in natural resource management and especially community-based conservation practices. Besides this, I also dived into the field in which my research was embedded: South Africa. As I had never been to the country (nor the continent) before,
this involved a lot of reading about the history of the country; how the colonial centuries have influenced governance, land ownership and the management and distribution of natural resources, thereby establishing the link between the research topic and the field. Furthermore, I dived deeper into the specific surroundings of my research field, focussing on the Acornhoek, Mpumalanga area and the conservation organisation that would host my research: The Global White Lion Protection Trust.

However, walking around in Acornhoek, I experienced that the topics that I had expected to be of great influence were not the things that most of the people of Acornhoek regarded as being closely linked to their perceptions of nature and its conservation. It was after about a month that I realised that the answers people gave me repeatedly referred to other aspects as influencing factors. People’s attitudes and perspectives proved to be shaped by aspects such as politics (Zuma’s governing style), as well as the current (national and regional) economic situation. Furthermore, cultural traditions and beliefs were of great importance, especially the diversity and heterogeneity inside (and amongst) the communities. The ‘dangers’ of homogenizing these nuances quickly became clear to me, as it is exactly these differences in local cultures that are of importance when designing community involvement strategies. The fact that I made these observations quite early into the period of fieldwork helped me in not seeing it as a big problem for which a solution was needed, but rather as an interesting observation that possibly required a reaction from me, as a researcher, in my further fieldwork.

As I was already conducting my research and thereby beyond the point (and the time!) to re-do my preparation, I adapted to local circumstances. Having had dozens of (small) talks already, I had a good idea of what new topics had emerged and I started mapping them. After establishing the new topics (politics, economic situation (livelihood), local (Shangaani) cultures (and its development) and traditional beliefs), I then took several days to bring myself up to a basic level of knowledge on all topics through browsing the internet, reading newspapers and speaking to my key informants to acquire information.

I found the process of ‘re-mapping’ the influencing aspects and reading into them challenging at times, although it brought up new opportunities. While reading into a new topic, I experienced that I needed to constrain myself from becoming ‘too knowledgeable’, thereby blindsiding myself as a researcher. I didn’t want to be too quick in connecting the dots where there might not be perceived connections by the local community. The process of weighing basic knowledge with being too knowledgeable proved to be a delicate interplay throughout the rest of my research. During talks with people, I would sometimes automatically start to connect dots, or place information in a historic context. However, the moment I found myself doing this, I actively tried to restrain myself, to try and leave space for the interviewee to connect the dots for themselves, thereby showing me what they thought the connections between the influencing aspects and their perceptions were.

In retrospect, I would now argue that my preparations were not the best fit to my research question. Even though general knowledge on national history were necessary to take first steps, my preparations had been too general in terms of national history and not specific enough when it comes to local knowledge of Acornhoek and (rural) South African culture. Perhaps a little blindsided by a personal interest in history in general and fuelled by a fear of not knowing enough of, or being insensitive to, ‘our’ history as the Dutch, I completely tunnelled my preparations on national political history. And although this never turned out as a bad thing, it was no perfect fit to my research question. Observing this during my fieldwork was at times hard (doubting whether all those hours spend reading had been worthwhile), but mostly an interesting reflective observation. Looking back, I would now argue that my preparations should have been more on how local perceptions are shaped, what aspects are of influence when it comes to thinking about (our relationship with) nature and its conservation and diving deeper into South African (rural) culture, such as chieftaincy structures and religion.

Gaining access

‘So probably the most difficult – certainly the most tense – part of the fieldwork experience is gaining access to a particular community of people’ (Moeran, 2009, p. 141). Aware that a large part of the success of my research depended on being accepted into the community, gaining access was my first focus when starting the actual fieldwork. I was lucky to be introduced by my supervisor to the GWL, the organisation that acted as host organisation for my research. The fact that he was known by the organisation helped me with initial introductions
to the ‘right people’ in terms of decision-making (Moeran, 2009, p. 142) and throughout the fieldwork period: ‘Ah you are from Prof!’. The acceptance of my presence and research in the organisation automatically led to access to all the employees, their meetings, and activities.

However, gaining access into the community could not be established over e-mail and was to be done in the field. New to the field of ethnographic research, I felt a bit nervous about this part. As ‘the first stage – that of reconnaissance – should not be rushed’ (Ybema et al., 2015, p. 28), I decided that I would dedicate my first month to gaining access, ‘getting accepted’ and building trust. However, getting accepted, was not up to me. As it was the communities’ decision whether they were going to ‘accept’ me into their lives, all I could do was be open and interested, ‘sell’ my research and wait for them to invite me into their lives.

**Main Road, Acornhoek**

I had decided on the strategy of ‘hanging out’ (Bryman, 2008; Ybema et al., 2015). This meant that, at first, I was to just hang in public spots, hoping that the community would thereby get used to my presence. As ‘spatial exploration is often a good strategy for getting going’ (Ybema et al., 2015, p. 31), I set out to combine multiple goals: getting to know the area by walking around, ‘hanging out’ to make sure people would get used to me and my presence around town and, if the opportunity was there, actively seeking contact with inhabitants and getting to know them and their lives.

‘Downtown’ Acornhoek has one major tar road around which all the shops are located. With my house being located just behind Main Road, it was easy for me to just walk up there. As it was my first day, I decided to go and explore, see what’s there, but more importantly, let people see me there. As I turned the corner onto the Main Road, I felt my body stiffen up – I felt nervous.

I had decided to go window-shopping, providing me with a good way to see what kind of shops were there and see how people behaved on the streets and in the shops. As I made my way up to cross the street I could feel people looking at me. Suddenly aware of my every move, my every muscle, I felt self-conscious. Am I standing up too much? Is that even possible, standing up too straight? Am I wearing the correct clothing? What if they think I look too posh? What if they don’t like me being here?

Even though it was a sunny day, I had deliberately decided on not wearing my sunglasses, so people could look me in the eye, for I thought it would make contact easier. Passing the street and walking past the shops, I could see people in surprise, poking their neighbours while gesturing at me. Some people spoke to me ‘Hello ma’am, how are you’, ‘Hello miss’, or – and this was most often – ‘mlungu, mlungu’.

I made my round very slowly, making sure to smile back when they directed their smile or eyes at me. A small tour around Main Road took me about forty-five minutes before I headed back home. Completely exhausted from being so self-conscious of my every move and breath, I nevertheless felt happy – this had been a good first step in making contact (Fieldnotes, 14-02-2017).

During the following days and weeks, I repeated this process in different parts of Acornhoek. Making sure I was seen around Main Road, the shopping plaza, the internet café. In the first two weeks, ‘mlungu’ was the dominant reaction. Asking about this at home, my hostesses had laughed, ‘mlungu means white person’. Knowing this brought a twofold reaction. At first, I had thought they were laughing at me, since ‘mlungu’ was always combined with finger-pointing and gigglimg. However, with my host explaining that it’s not something they make fun of, simply something that is rather surprising to them, it felt even weirder. Never in my life had I been addressed by my skin colour like that and it felt weird. However, in a split second I felt ashamed about this, thinking about how many people with non-white skin colour probably feel this way every day.

Whether I was feeling uncomfortable or not, it was a fact that I stood out. Being the only mlungu around Acornhoek (in my three months there I have not heard about nor seen any other mlungu’s living or walking around in Acornhoek except from some very scarce visitors), it was difficult not to stand out in the crowd. On the positive side, being a ‘rarity’ in town helped me to make contact more easily, for it was never met with hostility. My different appearance would spark conversation that would grant me an introduction to tell about my research. As most people see being friends with a mlungu as a status-enhancing thing, people would offer to help me find the right
people, or just simply walk me up and down the street, introducing me to their friends and traditional foods. As this was a lot of fun - and hopeful for my research - I let this happen, even though at times it felt uncomfortable:

It was only after my third time coming to the Spar that she had dared to ask me: the security lady. While she was checking my bag, she paused. ‘So, eh... I’ve seen you around. Do you live here now?’ In the corner of my eye I could see her colleague security guard stiffen up. His movements came to a halt, just as the movements of the client whose bag he had been checking. The conversation that had been going on behind me stopped. I stretched out my hand to her and answered: ‘Yes, for three months. I just arrived, my name is Flora, nice to meet you’. Seemingly surprised by this reaction she stood up straight and with pride gestured to the name on her security-badge. ‘My name is Jennie. I also just moved here two months ago, maybe we can become friends’. ‘That would be lovely’, I answered as we made some small talk. ‘I guess I’ll see you around then!’ as she handed me back my groceries, I smiled at her and made my way out of the shop. The other people kept still and only as I smiled at them when I walked away, I could see and feel them loosening up. It was clear that contact with a mlungu was still unusual (Fieldnotes, 21-02-2017).

being perceived as ‘a nice accessory’ to be seen with.

‘The basic requirements for participant observation – being open to opportunity, maximizing social relationships and building on shared social experience – should be optimized for gaining access while one gets to know the field’ (Ybema et al., 2015, p. 29). Going around town, I made sure to accept as many invitations as I could handle, or felt comfortable with. I noticed that people started recognising me (and vice versa) and slowly but steadily, I made some ‘friends’ by talking to the same vendors, cashiers and people around Acornhoek as I tried to get acquainted with my research field. Especially as a mlungu, I tried to be open and supportive of initiatives for I experienced that little people had ever interacted with a mlungu in a ‘household’ setting, like doing groceries, but that positive experiences in that realm seemed to give an extra incentive for welcoming me into the community.

Building a network

In terms of decision-makers (Moeran, 2009), several people have played a vital role in my process of getting access into the community and learning about it. Due to their important and indispensable role in my fieldwork process, I will now elaborate on what characterised these people, either in personality, positionality (or both) that made their contribution of such influence.

Meeting the induna

One important aspect of me gaining access into the community of Acornhoek has been my introduction to the local headman, or induna, as they are referred to. South Africans still acknowledge chieftaincy structures, especially in the rural areas (Mthandeni, 2002; Neves & Du Toit, 2013; Ntsebeza, 2005). Chieftaincy is a structure
in which one man, the chief, functions as the tribe’s or village’s leader. The hierarchical pyramid structure functions as an authority structure, with the chief on top and headmen lower (Mthandeni, 2002). On the smallest scale, local induna’s function as ‘the eyes and ears on the ground’ for the chief who, in this case, is in Bushbuckridge. Due to the importance that people still place on this, especially in rural areas like Acornhoek, my host suggested that I should go see the local headmen.

During the rest of my research, I have felt the ongoing benefit of this introduction. Several people that I spoke to on the streets, told me that they had known about my presence and research because the headman had told them. Reflecting upon the importance that chieftaincy structures still has in (especially rural) South African communities, I would advocate that ‘getting the chief, or induna, ‘on board’ is at least a first minimal step everyone doing fieldwork in a rural South African community should follow. Especially after learning that most things are dealt with ‘inside the community’ through chieftaincy structures, meeting the induna seemed like a crucial step to establish contact with the community and make them aware of my presence as a researcher.

**Human ‘bridges’**

Furthermore, there have been several persons who have offered important support in terms of introductions and information. Acting as key informants in this research, they have been ‘a source of information on a variety of topics, such as kinship and family organization economic system, political structure and religious beliefs and practices’ (Tremblay, 1973, p. 688). It was these persons who predominantly taught me about the local (Shangaani) cultures, the traditions, customs, beliefs and structures and therefore played a crucial role in shaping most of my research context. These people all had a bridging function during my fieldwork period in terms of connecting me to people (socially) and ‘getting me connected’ to the local customs, perceptions, etc. (culturally) (Bryman, 2008, p. 409).

First and foremost, has been my host family: Joseph and Daphne (parents) and their children Mandla, Busi(siwe), Ian and Boni(siwe), the last being my host. With four members of the family teaching around Acornhoek, thereby having a job and being in daily contact with a lot of community members, they experience some status around town. After retirement, Daphne founded a daycare centre which takes daily care of over 150 children, mostly of the most poor and vulnerable households in the community. She and Boni both volunteer at this daycare, situated in downtown Acornhoek. Their central position in town, together with the fact that they both have had an academic education, speak English well and are in regular contact with mlungu’s, gives them a relatively high social status around town. Living with them has created endless opportunities for me to ask questions, to check information, ask for clarification, discuss topics and thereby get a great insight into local culture and customs, but also the national climate in terms of politics, economics, social culture and mentality throughout South Africa.

Boni’s twin brother, Ian, has also played an important role. He is the founder and owner of Acornhoek’s biggest and most popular ‘recreational area’: Dee Anjo’s Square. This is a square in downtown Acornhoek, where a clear majority of the (young) population of (downtown) Acornhoek spends their free time (and money). Being the owner, Ian is an appreciated member of the community and not someone to mess with. Being the centre of nightlife for the younger population, getting excluded from Dee Anjo’s square would mean ‘social suicide’. The
fact that Ian ‘looked after me’ and that people knew that I was ‘related’ to Ian, helped me in making friends and kept me safe from intrusive guys: ‘don’t you bother her, or I’ll kick you out!’

Second, are Harmony (30) and Sibusiso (26), who are employees from the GWL and who were of great help in terms of introductions and information. As community-workers for the GWL, they spend most of their time executing eco-education school programs at primary and high schools around Acornhoek. As my local buti’s, they brought me along to these programs, invited me to social events and basically showed me around town and took me into their friend circles.

Third are my friends Shocky and Victor. Their support has been characterised mainly by availability. Availability in terms of spending time with me, explaining certain topics to me over and over, answering my endless questions without frustration, taking me along to social events, acting as my interpreters and taking me in as a friend. Due to Shocky’s position as manager at Dee Anjo’s nightclub, she has a big network, everyone knows Shocky around town.

**One big family**

What occurred to me early in my fieldwork period was the family-like atmosphere that characterised most daily interactions in the community. Going for a quick shopping round with my host, Boni, we would meet several ‘buti’s’ of her and I would also be introduced as ‘sesi’\(^{11}\). Unlike in The Netherlands, where you only refer to your biological brother and sister as brother/sister, almost everyone is your buti and sesi in Acornhoek. This linguistic feature creates a certain social structure, where a large part of the community functions, or is treated, as family. Boni once told me that she uses buti strategically, by for example calling the more dangerous men (‘gangsters’) in town her buti, thereby creating (or faking?) a special bond between them, to establish a safer social place in the community. The use of these familial appointments proved to have several positive outcomes in terms of social control, feelings of connectedness and community-building.

The fact that I was also often introduced as sesi, or ‘my mlungu sesi’, helped me in being perceived as closer to the community in first encounters with people. When I experienced this, I, myself, started to use these appointments to refer to certain people, to establish a certain closeness in our relation, thereby hoping to ‘speed up’ the process of getting accepted into the community. People predominantly reacted very positively to this, ‘Ahé, she’s calling me her buti! Yes, yes, my sister, you my sesi’. I experienced that this linguistics helped to overcome an initial boundary in my contacts, both because a certain closeness was established and because people liked it when I used their language and cultural customs.

**Gaining trust**

Trust: ‘the belief that somebody/something is good, sincere, honest and will not try to harm or trick you’ (Oxford University Press, 2017). Building trust in the community was important for two reasons: to further develop my relations with the people of Acornhoek and secondly to create a non-hostile environment for people to contribute to my research (Bryman, 2008). I believed that first people needed to see me for the trustworthy person I believe myself to be, before they would trust me with possible controversial information and opinions, for there might be fear of social repercussions.

To convey my trustworthiness, I strived to convince people of my interest. I did so by ‘playing up my credentials’ by showing understanding and listening to their stories and problems (Bryman, 2008, p. 409). Furthermore, I tried to be non-judgemental and hopefully convey my trustworthiness as someone who could be trusted with even secrets. This meant no gossiping, keeping secrets that were told and securing confidentiality of sources when they had required me to do so. In building trust in the relations, I encouraged the feeling that, at every next meeting, people got to know me better and got closer to me. Apart from being friendly, I thus strived to always be honest about myself, where I come from, etc. To establish my trustworthiness in a more practical way, I behaved as someone who people could ‘build on’; by behaving consistently, helping when possible (or needed) and

---

\(^{11}\) Buti is the XiTsonga word for brother, sesi for sister.
setting a positive image of being someone who ‘does as she says’. Although not that far from how I try to be in The Netherlands, I emphasized this trait during fieldwork.

Helping at the daycare has been a big help in creating this image. As I was there multiple times a week to either teach English or just help, people quickly got to know me. News travelled fast, as a lot of people saw me there when picking up their children. Besides this visual of me helping, I got a name of being a ‘simple girl’ around town. Whereas that might be considered an insult to some, I was proud of this ‘nickname’, as people perceived this to be a positive thing, especially for a mlungu. This image was strengthened by my rather simple clothing style, the fact that I was open to try anything new, like traditional drinks and foods (such as eating the Mopani worms\(^\text{12}\), which was a big thing at the parents’ meeting at the daycare) and the fact that Boni told this to anyone who would hear it. ‘She does her own laundry, helps us around the house, she cooks for us, she is a hard worker’. Although at times it felt even a bit embarrassing to have people advocating for me like that, it helped in establishing a trustworthy image around town, especially with elder women and men.

**Sisterhood**

I was brought up with a sense of group-mentality; ‘if you help now, the quicker we can all sit down’. Striving to be a normal member of the family, I helped around in the house. At first, Boni and Daphne were rather inhibiting me being so active around the house. When I asked them why, it seemed to be about being a good host. However, I was to be there for three months and in no way would I be okay with being passive that long so, stubborn as I might be, I helped. Time after time explaining to them that it was no case of bad hosting, but rather too much energy and a certain upbringing from my side, they eventually caved and let me do chores around the house. I think this also helped me in becoming closer to both Boni and Daphne, as we would work together, cook together, or clean together — creating a sort of sisterhood.

Joseph, my host father, proved to be an eager talker. Unfortunately, ill, he stayed in a building apart from the main house where I would visit him. At least two afternoons a week, I would sit with him for an hour or two, talking about Shangaani and Dutch culture and what was going on in the world. These interactions were not just fun and informative, but also greatly appreciated by the family and wider community. My relationship with Daphne was more practical, as she taught me things about local and South African culture, politics etc. and I would help her out with day-care stuff, repairs and cooking, while discussing the differences between The Netherlands and South Africa and reflecting upon them.

My relationship with Boni developed into a serious form of sisterhood. Being just with two ladies in the house, we quickly established a sister-relationship of doing things together, picking out her work-outfits, taking turns in bathing Mpendulo (her new-born son) and discussing life. After cooking, we would usually retreat into the living room and have dinner behind the television. While not my favourite thing at first, this quickly established into a routine, where we would have our own spots on the couch. I would take Mpendulo and take care of him during the evening (only fair since she had him during the night) and we would sit in for our two-hour round of daily soaps. Not being a fan of soaps in general, I nonetheless quickly grew fond of them, as they proved to be a brilliant conversation starter. With the soaps giving beautiful insights into popular South African culture, it functioned as a way to ask Boni about rather ‘taboo’-topics, such as homosexuality, transgenders, crime, corruption and such. The soaps proved to be an important kick-starter in getting to know local perceptions regarding these topics.

Living in a host family was at times difficult and frustrating; like moving back home after seven years of independence, except the people in your home aren’t your parents. Food proved to be a point of discussion, especially. My preference for eating vegetarian proved to be an unknown and unloved concept in this household. Even though I had accepted this before heading to South Africa, I still aspired to eat as little meat as possible. This often led to (heated) discussions, as I tried to explain to Boni why I didn’t want meat. Finding a balance between remaining polite and thankful to my host family and respecting local culture on the one hand and standing up for my personal principles (and physical health) on the other hand, was challenging. Results were that I would

\(^{12}\) Mopani worms are a local delicacy made from thick caterpillars in a stew-like sauce. Not being accustomed to eating insects, this was quite a big step for me, as I explained.
Methodology

Sometimes argue with Boni, almost like the teenager living in the house, trying to explain why I choose differently. Other days, I would just quietly reflect on my so-called principles, as I was chewing on some chicken.

Language

With eleven official languages in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2014) it was inevitable that a language barrier would occur throughout my research. Although every person up to 40 proved to be speaking at least basic English, I experienced that my English vocabulary would quite quickly be too difficult when encountering community members of Acornhoek. By toning down the difficulty of my questions in terms of length and vocabulary, I got a long way, but language continued to be an issue. In the months in Acornhoek I learned enough XiTsonga (and a little Zulu) to give a little introduction. I experienced that, even though it was only a few sentences, people greatly appreciated my effort to learn their language. It made first contact easier, I was more approachable and people seemed to be more eager to tell about their culture after seeing that I had already tried to learn about it.

Positionality

Because ethnographic research rests on close engagement with the research object, reflection is key. Reflexivity argues that ‘social researchers should be reflective about the implications of their values, biases and decisions on the knowledge that they generate’. This calls for a ‘heightened self-awareness – a “reflexivity” – of the ways in which their own personality might be shaping the knowledge claims researchers advance with respect to their research topic: their “positionality”’ (Ybema et al., 2015, p. 9). Therefore, I will elaborate on how my positionality as researcher might have influenced the research in terms of execution, interpretation and results.

New from Holland: straight, white female (25), non-religious

As a 25-year-old female from the Netherlands, my youth and upbringing has been very different from an ‘average Acornhoek-upbringing’, for as far as I am able to judge after three months. My background is ‘untroubled’ in the sense that I had a happy youth, was never hungry and that my parents had the time, will and resources to fully support me in my discovery of ‘becoming me’. The characteristics of my life, my upbringing, my culture have shaped this research in all its aspects: from the design, to its execution, its interpretations and the writing of the eventual thesis. Being a quite ‘hands-on’ type I wanted to make sure that my research entailed something in the field. I was longing for actual interaction, to real people, not just theorising about ‘what it might be like on the
I am easy in making (first) contact and am considered (and/or consider myself) ‘easy’ to be around. Not being too picky about circumstances, luxury, or status, I am quite flexible and can easily adapt to different kinds of situations (I discovered though that I am less flexible on religion than I would coin myself in advance). Even though this personality trait has helped me throughout the research in establishing and maintaining contacts, other characteristics have also had a profound influence on the process, even if I didn’t want it to be of influence.

**Straight white female**

In my preparations, I was reluctant to consider gender as influential aspect of my positionality in my fieldwork. Having a deep-rooted conviction that women and men are equal, I found it ‘thus’ unnecessary to address. Looking back, this now seems incredibly stubborn. As much as I still am a feminist, I now see that these preparations were not about me. Rather, they were about me in my future research field, rural South Africa. And as much as I do not want gender to be an influencing aspect, it is childish and naive to think so. Throughout my research, I have sometimes struggled with sexist remarks made by people (and especially men). Surprise about my qualities, my independence, my strength: ‘wow, you’re so good at this, your brother must be even better’. I could believe in gender-equality, but that was not the reality in which my research was embedded.

On top of being a woman, I am a white woman. As stated by Vice (2011, p. 326) ‘it is impossible for anyone not to be aware of his or her race’ in South Africa. Being a white, Dutch person was something that could not go unappointed, or unnoticed. Being the only white person in Acornhoek was at times weird: except for the early-years in my Amsterdam neighbourhood, I had never been the minority in my street. Despite having only positive encounters regarding my skin colour with the people in Acornhoek, it felt uncomfortable to be constantly reminded - ‘mlungu, mlungu’ - of the fact that I stood out.

‘Ethnographic research sites have often been characterized by large differences in class between researcher and researched, (...) this is still the norm in development situations’ (Ybema et al., 2015, p. 27). Although it is debatable in what degree South Africa is still a ‘developing’ country, my skin colour was still perceived as ‘high status’ when going around Acornhoek. As most people in Acornhoek had never spoken to a white person, let alone touch one (or sleek hair for that matter), I was a person of interest. Due to this relative ‘socially powerful social position’ (Ybema et al., 2015, p. 27), I experienced relatively easy access, as doors opened rather easy and access was granted almost automatically to (for locals) otherwise closed places.

In my daily interactions with people on the streets of Acornhoek I experienced a distinct difference in reaction between men and women. In my interaction with men, the combination of being white and female often provoked a (sexual) interest. These ranged from ‘modest ones’ like the daily marriage proposals, to more explicit remarks regarding my physique from men considering themselves ‘the perfect man for me’: ‘I’ll treat you like a queen, I’ll show you, can’t take my eyes of you – I follow your every move, you are perfect’, ‘We can make beautiful babies together’ (Fieldnotes, multiple dates). Even though at times irritating, I never felt explicitly unsafe in these interactions, for they were always just words and in a public setting. Men would keep a ‘respectable’ distance and their hands to themselves. These were predominantly the reactions of men on the streets that I talked to, or passed by. There were a few incidents where this proved to be an obstacle, as some men who were quite key in my research in terms of network and information expressed the ‘special bond they felt between us’. Being quite dependent on these persons, it was sometimes tricky to operate between staying diplomatic and protecting my personal boundaries. Trying to make the best of it, I manoeuvred inside the borders of what was acceptable for me and found that sometimes I could turn it into a benefit for my research. As men were eager to be seen with me and make a good impression, most would go beyond effort to set up a certain meeting for me, connect me to one of their ‘powerful’ friends and show me around.

In my interactions with women the atmosphere was quite different. Lacking the sexual tension (or at least, I didn’t experience it), interactions with other women quickly turned friendly. Same as with men, my white skin seemed to be a status-things as many women wanted to be seen with me. Especially younger women quickly stated I was their new ‘mlungu friend’ and were curious to learn more about me (and whether I had single brothers they could marry) and tell me about their lives. Despite cultural differences, returning interactions with the same group of women quickly began feeling like a ‘friendship’, as people would look out for me, look after me and...
incorporate me in their local lives. In the interaction with women it was especially the talking that has helped my research. Being less of the ‘networking’ types, I would often sit down with groups of women (often either young women up to thirty-five or older women up to sixty-five) and talk for hours. About their lives, about mine, about what was going on in South Africa, about my research. It was afternoons like those that have tremendously helped me in getting a thorough understanding of daily life. The fact that these talks often took several hours helped in gaining a deeper understanding, as the women would reflect with me on observations.

My white skin and Dutch background were constantly in the back of my head as I made my way through town. Trying to avoid a neo-colonial approach where I forced my European idea(l)s on the local community, I have strived to remain open to their side of the story. Despite these ongoing attempts, I experienced that background, culture and skin colour are such an intrinsic part of your personality that even self-awareness doesn’t come close to covering it all. I experienced that despite attempts at co-constructing a diverse and heterogeneous local story, I would still often generalise both my western/European background and local cultures. The fact that I experienced this made me both sad and optimistic, for I found that I had (perhaps just for the first time) truly experienced how my background encompassed all my interactions, both conscious and unconscious and becoming aware of this seemed like a first step in overcoming prejudices and homogenous images. As overcoming one’s background can never be completely done, self-awareness and -critique seemed to be a constructive first step.

Cheating ‘God’: no initial place for religion

I consider myself non-religious. Non-religious, as in I don’t believe that a thing like a ‘God’ exists. I do have my occasional trips towards more spiritual ideas about ‘what is’ on earth, our self or our cosmos, but none of these things have taken a structural place in my life. Coming to South Africa for a research on nature conservation, I had thus not even considered that religion might have a place in my research; religion and nature are two complete different and unrelated things to me. Oh, was I wrong.

In my preparations I had not considered religion, so coming to South Africa and experiencing the central role religion still plays, was quite a surprise. After two weeks of adjusting, I found myself more and more in religious settings. As I occasionally joined family members and friends to church on Sunday, I experienced a profound unease inside myself with these religious ceremonies. Praying at church, thanking ‘God’, or when conservation practices were legitimized through local religion, I felt a knot inside of me. People asked me to participate or join in prayers and I experienced that I couldn’t. ‘I felt that I couldn’t speak the words “amen” and “hallelujah” without a taste of hypocrisy. In an attempt at escape, I hummed along without speaking the actual words’ (Fieldnotes, 25-03-2017).

As much as religion was part of their life, religion is not a part of mine and joining in felt like cheating. Cheating on myself and my beliefs regarding religion and ‘what is’ in the world. But moreover, it felt like I was cheating religion by joining in as a non-believer. I felt that by executing their rituals as a non-believer, I did not respect the symbolism appointed to certain rituals by believing individuals; I experienced religion as a very existential part of personal identity. Not behaving in line with my personal relation to religion thus felt invasive, as well as invading someone else’s belief with my ‘non-believing’.

It can be argued that in these situations, my research role shifted from participant observation to a spectator observer. However, it was my goal to co-construct local perspectives and local perspectives incorporate religion and nature. During my research I thus tried to set aside my initial discomfort to learn about the connections local perspectives in Acornhoek make between nature and religion. In this process, I learned that this encompassed more aspects I could identify with than I had expected. The perspective where nature and humans are both part of a cosmos and thus interrelating, resonated with me and taught me the lesson that maybe religion and nature don’t have to be so far apart as I initially thought.

Cultural appropriation or fluidity?

Besides religion, I also encountered culture and cultural customs as an existential part of my identity. Even though I don’t regard myself to be passionate about Dutch cultural customs like attires or national holidays,
I found that combining cultures felt inappropriate. Undoubtedly influenced by public debates on cultural appropriation and the dominance of white Western cultures, I actively ‘held back’ in terms of becoming an active participant in cultural events. I did not want to become the European girl who ‘knows Shangaani culture’ after wearing the traditional attire during a public event. I strongly felt that I should be an appreciating spectator, but not participant, thereby thus again shifting from participant observer to a spectator observer.

Funny enough, I experienced that the inhabitants had a different perspective when it comes to such situations. Explaining them why I wouldn’t wear their attire, they would look at me in disbelief: ‘but we would be honoured if you’d wear it. We all wear it. I am Shangani and I wear a Zulu band, the Xhosa wear Venda dresses. Just wear it if you like it’. Local population seemed to have a more fluid interpretation of their traditions and the exchange of customs and attires.

Looking back, I can now see that perhaps my initial withdrawal in participating might be more European, or ‘western’, than I would wish to admit. Having read and heard a lot about cultural appropriation and a disturbed image of ‘authentic Africa’ I perhaps did not want to participate as I felt that I would be forcing my culture on their lives. However, I would now argue that indirectly expecting that these local customs cannot handle a white girl participating in their customs and wearing their traditional attire without them continuing their authenticity, is more denigrating than participating in the event.

Reflecting on this process, I would now argue that I might be rather ‘heavy’ on certain (personal) principles and that this might result in being less flexible in adapting to situations that I had thought beforehand. A more flexible and open attitude in these situations might result in a more ‘realistic’ evaluation on the performance of these principles in real life. The question remaining could be whether my rather stiff “following” of these principles materialises the underlying norms and values that I appreciate, or whether a more fluid interpretation might perhaps establish the same effect without me deciding for other parties which road is best to follow.

**Custodians of the Earth**

In terms of ecophilosophy, I strongly feel for a real partnership between people and the planet, with all living animals - humans thus included - having the same rights to be on our planet. As a result of my ‘truth’, I thus believe in co-creating an equilibrium that is sustainable for all current and future inhabitants. At the same time, I am very much aware that (my) current consumption pattern might be doing the exact opposite. Being aware of this contradicting deadlock, both in my personal life as well as worldwide, often angers me. I am aware that while the quest for sustainable management of our planet might seem obvious on paper, it is more complex in practice. People worldwide want to improve their livelihood, no difference between The Netherlands and South Africa. During my fieldwork I felt divided when reflecting on this topic, comparing it to the lived reality. As I advocate for a sustainable equilibrium, how do I account for the fact that I just flew 10.000 kilometres to do a research?

Walking down the streets of Acornhoek I would sometimes feel hopeless, seeing all the garbage, the littering, people taking cars for a couple of hundred metres. On the other hand, I would feel shame. Ashamed that I would get angry on these people, instead of blaming, for example, European businesses producing more CO₂ than all these people combined would ever do. Spending more and more time in Acornhoek made me realise that what we are trying to teach ourselves in Europe: eat locally, know where your food comes from, grow your own crops – is something that is a given in Acornhoek. I might separate my plastics from my garbage, but who here is doing more damage? Throughout my fieldwork I have tried to understand the local stance on our relationship with our planet, compared words with actions and reflected upon these discrepancies in my own life. Ecophilosophy became a red line in my personal research process.

**A torn position**

The combination of my background, my (non-)beliefs and my presence in the research site often resulted in a torn position. Torn because I came to understand the multitude of perspectives regarding topics and didn’t know whether and how to choose. Caught between the two worlds of home and my temporal home, I felt that at times I couldn’t be my Dutch-self, nor a complete ‘Acornhoek-version’ of me. I often experienced a twofold
reaction to topics, as I understood the Acornhoek perspective, while in the meantime understanding the need for change to, for example, treat our planet better. This ambiguity affected my research on a daily basis as I sometimes had to ‘pick sides’. In the end, this thesis is the result of the local stories with a pinch of my own reflections.

Especially the colonial history and its consequences had a big impact on me personally. Coming in direct contact with the ongoing processes of marginalisation and in the meantime knowing the dominant narrative of ‘get over it’ saddened me. The unequal foundation from which local communities, like in Acornhoek, have to build on, it resonated with me. It made me reflect on my home-situation and the relatively ‘equal’ chances that people in The Netherlands have. With this experience, I have come to see such situations in a different light, as I now understand that marginalisation comes in many different shapes.

Despite this valued lesson, I also experienced that being sad, or angry, about these things is not going to change a thing for marginalised groups. Creating awareness and supporting them in expanding their own opportunities to grow is more helpful than me writing this here; action is needed. Reflecting on this research process, I can conclude that I learned many lessons. Some about the topics regarding this research and some transcending these as they touched broader aspects of my life. The perspectives I have come to learn and incorporated have enriched my life in more ways that I could have imaged setting out to do this research beforehand.
The two sides of the road

In this chapter, I present the results of this ethnographic research into dynamics influencing the different perceptions of the communities around Acornhoek regarding nature and its conservation. Having spoken to dozens and dozens of community-members, I have attempted to co-construct their perceptions of nature (conservation).

This research showed a continuous perceived separation between Acornhoek and ‘the other side of the road’: the Maruleng municipality with all its nature conservation initiatives. The two sides of the road play a central role in the conservation of the wider natural area. To illustrate the observed local perceptions, I will explain how the two parties differ from each other in economic, demographic, political and cultural aspects and how ongoing processes of marginalisation influence the position of the Acornhoek community.

‘The other side of the road’

Looking at the research site, one can argue that it is made up of two different sides. The geographical distribution of the site shows two areas, connected through and separated by a shared road. This road, the Orpen Road, separates the greener area to its north, from the urban area to its south. The north side is represented by the community of nature conservation initiatives in Maruleng municipality, with its abundance of nature reserves, game, protected plants and animals. The southern side is made up of the rural town of Acornhoek with its 33,000 inhabitants.

Although literally divided, the two areas are inextricably linked by their shared space, the common structures in which they are embedded and their mutual dependence in terms of location, resources and communities. Besides the geographical differences between the two areas, they are also perceived as different. In all talks with inhabitants of Acornhoek, a separation between Acornhoek and ‘the other side of the road’, the Maruleng municipality with all its nature conservation initiatives, was apparent. When asking locals about an individual conservation initiative, it quickly became ‘one of them’, symbolising the homogenous view of what went on ‘on the other side of the road’. The other way around, the inhabitants of Acornhoek were often coined as ‘the community’ by conservationist, thereby disregarding any diversity and heterogeneity inside a community of 33,000 inhabitants.

Beside the apparent difference between the two areas - both geographically and in perceptions of the other side - the two areas are divided on more aspects. These differences have shaped the two sides of the road into two different and heterogeneous communities. However, they continue to be influenced by each other, as history, economics and cultural mindset influence the relationships of both sides of the road with their natural environment. To co-construct the researched local perspectives regarding nature and its conservation, the difference between the two sides needs to be explained, with all its complexities and intertwining aspects.
Demographics and facilities: tin roofs versus eco-estates

Walking around Acornhoek is a completely different experience from strolling around the town of Hoedspruit. Going around Acornhoek feels like a ‘survival-adventure light’. Cars, wheelbarrows, goats, children, women with large baskets and chickens are in a continuous fight over public space. Women sell crops with small children sleeping or playing in their lap, men go around town in the back of an old bakkie on their way to their construction job on the outskirts of Acornhoek. The main road slips up around six in the morning as drivers fight for a spot in the traffic jam on their way to their jobs in Hoedspruit. The road is dented with potholes, some the size of a humble pond and alongside are dozens of locals trying to hitch a ride, since the majority cannot afford a car.

The second you leave Acornhoek, you drive up onto the R40. Drive north towards Hoedspruit and the Rural Development Project houses make way for nature reserves and eco-estates. Estates, such as Moditlo, house 150 mansions in a private game resort, where the infinity pool stops where the zebras begin. The roads are well-maintained and the sides of the road are characterised by pavements with palm trees instead of piles of litter.

Six thirty in Hoedspruit, the town is relatively quiet. The Spar has opened, but life on the streets is not yet bustling. Large air-conditioned safari vehicles with single white drivers start filling up the parking lots around the shops in a slow pace. No scattered black children dangling around moms who sell home-grown crops. The town seems to be made up of a classic safari crowd. Khaki’s, airy shirts with logos that feature lions, elephants, or other big game. Restaurants serve ‘fusion dishes’ as African prints are combined with the latest trends in European cuisine. Quiet restaurants host white people working on their laptops while drinking a cappuccino; a drink the large majority in Acornhoek has never heard of, let alone seen.

The two towns, although only twenty-five kilometres apart, are two worlds apart. Whereas I was the only white person in Acornhoek I saw during my research, you could almost walk around Hoedspruit without realizing you are in Africa due to the (visual) absence of black population, as reflected by the percentages of white/black population in both towns in Figure 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Acornhoek</th>
<th>Hoedspruit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>33,529</td>
<td>3,157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population density per km²</td>
<td>862</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% black population of total</td>
<td>99,7%</td>
<td>39,4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% white population of total</td>
<td>0,01%</td>
<td>52,3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most spoken language</td>
<td>XiTsonga (73,8%)</td>
<td>Afrikaans (44,8%), English (19,7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% people who Matric-ed&lt;sup&gt;13&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>28,1%</td>
<td>42,9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% people with higher education&lt;sup&gt;14&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6,3%</td>
<td>35,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% households with flush toilet (either sewer or septic tank)</td>
<td>2,9%</td>
<td>97,1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% households with access to piped water inside the house</td>
<td>8,3%</td>
<td>91,8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All numbers in table retrieved from (Statistics South Africa, 2011a, 2011b).

Figure 5. Table shows basic demographic differences between the town of Acornhoek and Hoedspruit.

The crowdedness of Acornhoek comes hand in hand with a serious lack of (public) facilities. Speaking with inhabitants, many complain about the lack of road maintenance, as potholes have not been repaired for over ten years (SABC Digital News, 2017; Field notes, 08/03/2017), despite the fact that there is only one tar road in town. The majority of houses is characterised by basic facilities; a small brick house with corrugated sheets for roof, cooking and washing outside or in the same room. Most people in town live with their grandparents and a

<sup>13</sup> South Africa’s Matric can be compared to finishing high school (in the Netherlands).

<sup>14</sup> Higher education constitutes education after Matric-ing: college or university (Statistics South Africa Governmental Department, 2011).
maximum of one of their parents, due to either labour migration, HIV/AIDS deaths, or (mostly) dads living with other women. In a community survey in 2016, the people of Mpumalanga province stated that the three biggest municipal challenges were (1) lack of employment opportunities (14%), (2) lack of reliable water and electricity supply (40%) and (3) inadequate roads (18%) (Statistics South Africa, 2016b).

Hoedspruit on the other hand is well-maintained and the street-vendors that are there do not sell crops but tourist artefacts like textiles, wooden ‘Big Five’ statues, or traditional jewellery. The houses are well-hidden in the thicket but fences state ‘private estate’, or ‘eco-estate’, explaining the realtor-signs on the side of the road marketing ‘game reserves including 500 impalas for sale’ instead of Coca Cola or mobile internet access on credit.

As observable in Figure 4, the majority of Acornhoek’s population has not finished their matric. Money is still an important incentive for these low-education rates. With the rural areas of South Africa being relatively poor, not every household has the money to send their children to school, let alone afford to not have them making money. Although community initiatives try to facilitate education to the children of Acornhoek at an affordable rate, reality shows that not all children are able to finish school, due to various reasons. Schooling in Hoedspruit is better organised, and of better quality and therefore (although debatable) more expensive. When comparing the Acornhoek children who attend primary school in Hoedspruit with Acornhoek schooled children, the difference in results is significant. The English sufficiency of Hoedspruit’s students is of much higher level, they engage in more sports, are overall more knowledgeable in various topics, as they have better educators. A lack of qualified people (and/or money to pay them) forces most schools in Acornhoek to run on volunteers without an education certificate. The international character of Hoedspruit, together with its demographics, makes sure that student attending in Hoedspruit are interacting with white people (both Hoedspruit inhabitants and tourists) and their culture - gaining an advance in bridging the gap between the two communities. Even though education is not the only way to bridge the gap between the two communities, it serves as an important foundation in increasing equal chances. However, looking at the population in Acornhoek, I only met five children who attended school in Hoedspruit, against thousands and thousands of children who are schooled in Acornhoek.

Although the two towns are in relative proximity (only twenty-five kilometres separates the two), they barely mix. Some people from Acornhoek make their daily commute to Hoedspruit, as the eco-estates and shops are a main provider of labour. Despite their daily activities in town, they do not spend their free time there. As the town is mainly white-focussed, hair salons don’t appeal to the local Acornhoek community – ‘they only do European hair’ and the restaurants don’t seem to cater to Acornhoek needs as ‘they don’t even serve pap’15.

When asking people around Acornhoek what they thought of Hoedspruit, it was mostly the difference in culture that stood out: ‘they all live there, in their own big houses with all these walls around them. How are people walking in to join you, or check up on you if you keep them out like that? That is not a community, everyone lives for themselves there!’ (Fieldnotes, 25-03-2017). On the other hand, when speaking to people in Hoedspruit, the reaction was even more extreme: ‘I hate it. I never stop there, I only drive through’ (Fieldnotes, 24-03-2017).

15 ‘Pap’ is a maize porridge that is a key ingredient to any rural South African meal, as it serves for breakfast, lunch and dinner.
With all facilities available in Hoedspruit, there is no necessity to drive to Acornhoek. Interaction can be kept to the minimum, as the Orpen Road makes a turn towards the Kruger National Park before it crosses paths with Acornhoek. However, for Acornhoek community, it is the other way around. In search for jobs, better schooling and better healthcare (Fieldnotes, 22-02-2017) people turn to Hoedspruit. The ongoing lack of public facilities in Acornhoek pushes its inhabitants to the neighbouring community. However, due to the higher standard of living and tourist prices, Acornhoek members cannot afford to become a fully participating member of the richer Hoedspruit community. This unequal access to opportunities and facilities maintains the unequal position Acornhoek has in terms of capacity building and social mobility in comparison to their neighbours.

In relation to the research question, the demographic differences create a gap between the two sides of the road. Contact is not easily made and the threshold to get to know each other remains high. Overall, the differences result in different socio-economic situations that shape different perspectives regarding nature conservation. In short, one can say that the ‘make up’ of the town, its public facilities and deriving social opportunities create different circumstances on both sides of the road that influence the perspectives regarding each other as well as their surrounding natural environment and its conservation.

Competing authorities: two provinces and a chief

The poaching incident in the introduction described how competing authorities complicate processes with (for example) catching poachers, since the locations of the different parties do not fit the governmental division. A local report on the provincial differences in poaching jurisdiction emphasized that it is ‘currently regulated on a provincial basis and every province has its own legislation and policies resulting in a complex and fragmented system resulting in gaps, loopholes and use of provisions that are outdated’ (as cited in Anthony, Scott, & Antypas, 2010, p. 235).

Located on the border of the two provinces (see Figure 6), dealing with the two police jurisdictions proves to be a challenge, as explained by Jason Turner (Interview, 27-04-2017):

“An interesting challenge that we have on that specific road, is that it is the boundary between two provinces. (...) So that’s often an issue where, you phone this police station, the Acornhoek police station, who then say ‘No, that’s the jurisdiction of Hoedspruit’ and of course Acornhoek is much closer, it’s right there. The guys from Hoedspruit have to come from a long way and often they are far away on another case, so that’s also great. (...) There’s not a lot of cooperation between the police units.”

Apart from the difficulties of being located closer to another jurisdiction, cases of corruption also complicate cooperation between parties. Looking at the poaching incident at Mbube property, the poacher who was caught was roaming free again in a couple of weeks. Other incidents where ‘evidence has gone “lost”’, or ‘police stating they are “unable to find evidence”’, are not uncommon. When asking Harmony about his experiences with the support of the (local) police in poaching cases, he stated the following:

“The police are up and down. That’s why I said there is corruption. Some will support you, some won’t because they benefit out of it as well. They get meat for cheap, it’s a good bargain (...) because they need the money, if they find something like snares or poachers, they take it and sell it, or eat it because they don’t have food. So, you never know what they think, it’s corrupting.” (Interview Harmony, 03-05-2017)

Asking people in Acornhoek about their experiences with either municipality or police, they express a general discontent (Fieldnotes, multiple dates): a ‘lack of support’, tiring bureaucratic procedures, ‘[municipality]
funds that have not been spent on the community in years’ and ‘an elite group that enriches themselves with community money’. The overall opinion is that the government is not to be trusted, as is expressed in the following statement by an inhabitant of Acornhoek when asked about the national political situation:

“I don’t want to watch news, because I’m going to see things that, for me, doesn’t help me, you know. Politics. What does politics help me with? Because people are fighting up there, instead of looking below what they can help with. So that’s why today we’ve got a lot of corruptions, even the police are corrupted. The whole system is corrupted because of money and greed and trying to do more for themselves than for the people that you are leading.” (Inhabitant of Acornhoek, 26-04-2017)

Trust in traditional authority system

With an unreliable local government, the people of Acornhoek turn to other authority structures to deal with unwanted behaviour and organise collective facilities. Inherited from the era of colonial rule (Ntsebeza, 2005), Acornhoek acknowledges a chieftaincy structure. As stated by Neves and Du Toit (2013, p. 105) ‘chiefs exercise their authority in locales where the modern South African state and its appurtenances are either relatively thin on the ground or altogether absent’. Recognised by the national government, these “traditional authorities” function as authority in mostly rural areas where community members turn to each other (in response to a lack of governmental structures). Such chieftaincy systems ‘continue to exercise authority over large swathes of the communal areas’ (Hendricks 1990; Ntsebeza 2006 as cited in Neves & Du Toit, 2013, p. 105). The chieftaincy structure in Acornhoek creates a twofold result in the area.

On the one hand, it supports the community as it manages the distribution of lands and resources, creates a system of social control that maintains a certain social order and regulates behaviour in the community (Mthandeni, 2002). As was observable with my introduction to the community, where I met the local headman, who welcomed me into the community on behalf of the Acornhoek inhabitants and ensured me ‘safe passage’ as he would pass on ‘his decision’ with his fellow headmen. The traditional authority system of chieftaincy creates a close-knit community where people look after each other and where community is on everyone’s mind in terms of collective facilities. Examples of this are community-members who repair potholes in town, community-organised day care (like Sibonile), but also the collective silence that occurred after the poaching incident at Mbube:

‘This community has got a way of dealing with things themselves. The community will take care of it before they go to the police’ (Inhabitant of Acornhoek, 30-03-2017)

On the other hand, the close-knit chieftaincy structures complicate matters. The two systems might not always be complementary to the other, leaving a grey area where the two systems might work against each other as it can also result in a situation where the interests of a community-member (in an official role like work) conflict with the interests of the community. The social control that comes with the close-knit community of chieftaincy complicates situations like the latter, as community-members cannot (and won’t) step out of the system but are ‘hostage’ to the situation.

Harmony Khoza is an example of being caught between the two systems, as he is an employee of the GWL but also an inhabitant of Acornhoek. In the aftermath of the poaching incident, he was caught between the formal (governmental) system of the police, who advocated for the interests of the nature reserves and the informal community reaction to the incident. The close-knit community values looking after each other over the formal, governmental way, as it is an unwritten rule that you don’t rat out on poaching inhabitants. With Harmony being member of both, he is caught between the two responsibilities: being loyal to the traditional authority in town (and not ratting out the poachers), while being loyal to his employer (and reporting the poachers).

“And it gives you the pressure, because sometimes you know the people doing it [poaching]. You go to speak to them, you’re scared for your life. (...) I helped the guys last year to catch one poacher. (...) And
people came to my home and threatened me, saying ‘If we now get caught, we know who is the whistle-
blower.’” (Harmony Khoza, 03-05-2017)

The difficulty of being ‘caught between the two systems’ is not only dealing with the two competing authorities. Moreover, Harmony is suffering the consequences of his work responsibilities in his private life. Due to the unwritten societal rules, he cannot take these difficulties back to work for it would mean involving his employer (Jason Turner), an outsider, into the complexities of Acornhoek’s’ chieftaincy structure. Since chieftaincy structures rely upon a strong sense of ‘in-crowd’, this is unthinkable. Furthermore, this characteristic makes it hard for an outsider, a non-inhabitant (like me), to understand the internal powerplay.

However, being subject to both authority structures, nature conservation initiatives need to deal with both; department of environment and (local) governmental structures in official issues and local traditional authority systems as they are shaping the informal, local opinion. Being on top of the nuances of both juridical realities requires effort. Knowing who to speak to in Hoedspruit police, who is supportive on the Acornhoek side and managing the opinion of the community takes delicate manoeuvring:

“One has to navigate that very carefully, of course. One needs to make sure that you’re including all the right stakeholders where appropriate. (...) work with all the different interested and affected parties. That does make it trickier at times, because one has to be careful not to say the wrong things, step on toes, one way or the other.” (Interview Jason Turner, 27-04-2017)

“And the key is, if you’ve got the chief, the hosi16, supportive of what you’re doing, then half the battle is done. If you don’t, you’ve got no chance, you know.” (Interview Jason Turner, 27-04-2017)

As observable, the two provinces in combination with the traditional chieftaincy system bring along different authority structures in which all local practices are embedded. Both sides of the Orpen Road experience a different distribution of public resources and facilities. The chieftaincy structure tries to intercept the unequal distribution of facilities by managing resources on a local scale. However, people who are part of the two systems can get caught between contradictory interests. A playing field is creating where the political systems maintain a certain distribution of resources and means. Because of this, the two areas continue to develop apart from each other, leaving Hoedspruit out of reach for the poorer communities of Acornhoek, while the public facilities in Acornhoek don’t meet the communal needs.

The combination of governmental and chieftaincy structures has a twofold effect, as in some cases it benefits the community of Acornhoek, but it also has malign effects, as observable in the dark side of the social control. Research has shown that traditional authorities (TA’s) ‘are perceived as largely competent by local communities in securing access to good quality land for agriculture’ and experience ‘a much higher approval rating compared to local government’ (Anthony, Abonyi, Terblanche, & Watt, 2011, p. 12). Despite this widespread approval of these traditional authorities, the poaching incident at Mbube shows the beginning of what perhaps is a new era, as for the first time Acornhoek community members seem to actively break with the chieftaincy convention of not denouncing fellow community-members by warning the reserve and helping the chase.

The presence of different and at times conflicting authority structures has proven to be an underlying dynamic in the different local perspectives regarding the surrounding natural environment and its conservation. The different judicial systems, each with their own rules and interests, create not only two sides of the road in terms of governmental structures (the two provinces), each with their own policies, but furthermore, the interweaving chieftaincy structure complicates matters even more. The two sides of the road and the diverse communities on those both sides, each relate in a different and specific way to these (competing) authority structures, setting different scenes from which people operate, relate and gain perspective regarding issues where both sides interact, like the community-involvement practices of the nature conservation organisations aimed at the community in Acornhoek.

---

16 Hosi is another word for chief in XiTsonga.
Economic differences: Rural livelihoods versus Eco-tourism

‘Private game reserve for sale. 700 hectares including game: elephants, giraffes and many more! Contact your local real estate agent’ (Fieldnotes, 10-02-2017)

Driving into Hoedspruit you will find multiple billboards alongside the road offering private estates such as the above. Coining themselves as ‘gateway into the famous Kruger National Park’ (Fieldnotes, 10-02-2017), the town is focussed on tourists: European restaurants, shops with classic safari outfits, day trips to the Kruger Park. Tourism serves as the main source of income for the households in the Maruleng area (Statistics South Africa, 2011b). Located close to the Hoedspruit Airforce Base (that connects to Cape Town and Johannesburg), Hoedspruit receives many (eco-)tourists every year resulting in daily safari vehicles, packed with khaki-dressed foreigners making their way to the Kruger National Park.

The successes that derive from eco-tourism in Maruleng are not transferred to the wider region (including Acornhoek). Studies have shown that livelihood gains for communities adjacent to conservation areas are pessimistic (Chirozva, 2015; Dzingirai, 2004; Ferreira, 2006), as can be seen in Acornhoek. The wider distribution of benefits from conservation areas fail ‘to deliver on socio-economic imperatives’ (Ramutsindela, 2007 as cited in Chirozva, 2015, p. 185; see also van Amerom & Büscher, 2005; Duffy, 2006), as Acornhoek is not included in the developing sector of tourism and is lacking the resources and means to develop themselves. The lack of ‘significant infrastructure’ (Spenceley, Dzingirai, & Tangawamira, 2008) reinforces this, as Acornhoek is not easily accessible (or ready) for large streams of tourists making their way through and public facilities are absent or faulty.

Poverty in South Africa is ‘not only widespread and persistent; it is disproportionately rural, with 72% of the poor living in rural areas’ (Neves & Du Toit, 2013, p. 95), as can be seen in the case of Acornhoek. The high unemployment numbers force most adults to move to bigger cities in search for work (Statistics South Africa, 2016b, p. 28; see also Anthony et al., 2011; McHale, Bunn, Pickett, & Twine, 2013), leaving Acornhoek households often without one or two parents. Some people work in Hoedspruit, making the daily commute in the back of a bakkie. However, salaries are often low and workdays long. With the prices in Hoedspruit on a tourist-level, the salaries often do not suffice for participating in the Hoedspruit community as the two welfare levels are too far apart, thereby ‘reinforcing the economic marginalization of African economies’ as their dependence on primary goods maintains, while ‘demand and prices are externally determined’ (Ibrahim, 2013, p. 87).

The gap in welfare-levels has ‘accentuated poverty and economic inequality’ thereby decreasing the number of Africans who are able to participate meaningfully in the social and political life of their countries’ (Ibrahim, 2013, p. 87). This is also visible in Acornhoek, as low salaries, unemployment and high tourist prices in Hoedspruit and the Kruger National Park make that the town of Acornhoek and its inhabitants are suffering an endemic exclusion from the tourist sector: ‘Bushbuckridge still displays the character of a labour reservoir and a marginalised area in the midst of a region in which tourism, commercial farming and game reserves flourish’ (Mavungu, 2011, p. 74). Even though living next to it, most inhabitants I spoke to had never been to the Kruger National Park, or only once as they visited the park through subsidised school trips (Fieldnotes, multiple dates).

The characteristics of Acornhoek’s rural livelihoods

The centre of Acornhoek, ‘downtown’, is characterised by one tar-road that leads through the shopping area of town (Figure 7). During my three months of observations, is became clear that the economic activity is situated along this road: multiple little shops, as well as market stands, bus stations and a shopping mall. Most daily activities constitute around this main road, as people make their way to school, work or the supermarket.

Daily rural life is observable in the multitude of different activities displayed on this Main Road in Acornhoek. The areas affected by the rural marginalisation during Apartheid have often not been able to escape their marginalised position, resulting in ‘poverty nodes’ in the former homelands (McHale et al., 2013, p. 558). Creating

---

17 Bushbuckridge is the municipality in which Acornhoek is located, in the north-eastern corner of Mpumalanga province.
and sustaining livelihood in these ‘poverty nodes’ is characterised by specific aspects, as described by Neves and Du Toit (2013). Acornhoek, being located inside the former Gazankulu Bantustan and the wider municipality of Bushbuckridge, is one of these poverty nodes, that has ‘their origin in older, deliberately underdeveloped resettlement regions’ (McHale et al., 2013, p. 558), with the characteristics of rural livelihood clearly visible in town, as will be explained next.

To begin with, activities are ‘forged within various land-based and agrarian activities’ (Neves & Du Toit, 2013, p. 93). ‘As an adaptive response (...) to improve their situation and to diversify their livelihood options under conditions of persistent economic uncertainty’ (Foeken, 2005, p. 5) many people turn to forms of urban agriculture. Walking through Acornhoek, the agrarian character of livelihood activities is well observable. Most people grow their own crops, providing them with their own food, as well as a means to make money by selling their produce on the streets — thereby creating livelihood from the harvest of privately owned natural resources (Foeken, 2005; Twine, 2013; Vetter, 2013). Besides growing their own crops, people rent out land, which is known as ‘hidden capital’ as it is often invisible and a secondary source of income (Twine et al., 2003). When talking to Daphne, she told me that the crops that they grow on their farm are used for (1) their own food, (2) feeding the children in the daycare and that (3) all leftover produce is sold to the local Spar supermarket (Fieldnotes, 28-02-2017).

Livelihood is thus either created directly by growing and selling crops, or indirectly by making money from renting plots to others; in either case, it is ‘land-based’ (Evers et al., 2005, p. 34). The many forms in which urban agriculture can provide in livelihoods explains how it is ‘generally seen as a means of diversifying one’s income’ (Foeken, Michael, & Mlozi, 2004, p. 14; see also Foeken, 2005). Agriculture is widely used to ‘subside an income’ (Foeken, 2011) and functions for many households ‘not just as a livelihood source [but] as a means to survive’ (Foeken, 2005, p. 31).

Secondly, livelihoods are mainly made up of ‘small-scale, informal economic activities, both farm and non-farm’ (Neves & Du Toit, 2013, p. 103). Urban agriculture proves to be central in contributing households with food and ‘informal employment’ (Foeken, 2005, p. 5), as can be seen in the market stands along the Main Road, that fill up every morning with people selling home-grown crops, clothing and other handmade articles. With men often out of town due to migrant labour, it is especially the women who grow, sew, create and sell and thereby create an income. However, all these activities are informal, in the sense that they do not follow the ‘formal’ route through governmental institutions and tax-paying (Neves & Du Toit, 2013, p. 104). By not following this route, the

---

18 Privately owned plots where crops are grown are referred to as farms.
process is kept simple, giving people with less education, or entrepreneurial experience the possibility to create and sustain a small income out of home-produced goods.

The third characteristic of rural livelihoods is the governmental support that many people receive. In an attempt to reverse rural marginalised areas and support the poorest, several grant-systems are in place (Neves et al., 2009). Grants and subsidies account for an important part of rural livelihoods (Evers et al., 2005; McHale et al., 2013). They supply people with the money for investments that can help to start and improve local businesses, thereby improving the possibility to create and sustain a local livelihood for the population of Acornhoek. A community survey in 2016 stated that 79,8% of the total income in Bushbuckridge municipality was made up of social grants issued by the government (Statistics South Africa, 2016a, p. 14), making them quite unmissable in most rural households (Statistics South Africa, 2016a, 2017; Fieldnotes, 13-03-2017/01-05-2017). The social grant-system also has a downside. Going around Acornhoek many people explained to me that the social-grant systems create a ‘money for mahala’-attitude (mahala means for free) which can be problematic. For example, child-grants are offered for every child in a household. However, going around Acornhoek, people explained that a lot of women get more children to receive more monthly money without necessarily spending it on the children (Fieldnotes, 12-04-2017). Despite the abuse of the social grants that might occur, the grants are unmissable in the rural livelihoods of the Acornhoek community.

Lastly, an important characteristic is the presence of ‘culturally inscribed patterns of mutuality and social reciprocity’ (Neves & Du Toit, 2013, p. 105). As explained above, Acornhoek still knows a chieftaincy structure, which provides members of the community with (non-monetary) support. As it ensures security through economic and social inclusion, it is important especially for the poorest households in Acornhoek. As explained to me by a community-member, people look after each other: food, supplies and resources are shared, households without enough money to pay school fees are accepted for a discount into the local pre-school. The missing fees are paid by more wealthy community members, beneficiaries or through social grants (Fieldnotes, 08-03-2017).

The ongoing exclusion of inhabitants from Acornhoek in the wider regional economy and tourist sector maintains the rural characteristics of the livelihoods in the area and minimises opportunities for socio-economic development. Looking at the daily lives in Acornhoek, people are working hard to provide for their families and sustain an income, despite the high unemployment numbers. As illustrated above, livelihoods are made up of multiple income-sources (Twine, 2013). This has benefits, as the diversity creates ‘livelihood resilience’ but it also complicates, as people are dependent on separate income streams. The rural struggle for a livelihood takes on different forms as seen in the complexities that Acornhoek’s working and economic lives take on.

The big differences between the economies and deriving livelihoods set contrasting stages on both sides of the road. One’s living circumstances - the characteristics of their livelihoods - shape people’s priorities, relations and perspectives. Looking at both communities, it is clear that the need for socio-economic development in most rural Acornhoek households shapes their priorities regarding nature conservation. On the contrary, in Hoedspruit, the majority of town makes money of the deriving eco-tourists which result in a different foundation for their relationship with nature. With economic situations so far apart on the two sides of the road, it thus not only shapes the unbalanced interaction between both communities, but moreover it influences the (economic) relation community members experience with their surrounding natural environment.

Cultural differences: conflicting interpretations of ‘authentic Africa’

As the world is becoming more globalised (Eriksen, 2014), cultures are of increasing influence to each other. With tourists from all over the world visiting South Africa and the Kruger Park, their cultures come along as they visit and touch upon local people. The effects of an ongoing globalising world are observable in the two communities of Acornhoek and Hoedspruit, but in different ways.

Hoedspruit, with tourism as an important (economic) characteristic, is already internationally focussed. European influences are adapted into local shops as restaurants offer European cuisine and lodges target western tourists with their eco-estates and safaris to the Kruger National Park. Acornhoek on the other hand, is a different story, as the town is made up of different tribal families that all have their own cultural heritage and customs that are increasingly influenced by other cultures.
‘People are adapting, people are adapting from others. (...) Like other cultures, from European or stuff. (...) Yes, I would say that a lot of cultures are coming through. Because every time you see something, you look at them and instead of looking at yourself, you look at them and you’re like ‘oh I want that.’’
(Inhabitant of Acornhoek, Fieldnotes, 20-04-2017)

With South Africa and its trade becoming more globalised, tension arises between the global and the local (Eriksen, 2014). Not only the state, but also small communities like Acornhoek need to think about how they want to balance the international (that is tourism, international trade, new cultures coming in, etc.) and the local; their natural surroundings, cultural heritage, local trades (Eriksen, 2014; Ibrahim, 2013).

The effects of globalisation trigger a process where people are in an ongoing process of relating themselves to incoming influences, products and cultures. This process of redefining one’s identity leads to different interpretations of what it is to be ‘African’, or ‘South African’. As a result, ‘African countries are rapidly losing their cultural identity and therefore their ability to interact with other cultures on an equal and autonomous basis’ (Ibrahim, 2013, p. 88).

The different ideas on what is ‘authentic African’ are apparent in the two communities. On the one hand, the (South) Africa population (of Acornhoek) - and especially the younger generations - are incorporating western cultural ideals into their identity and culture in the ongoing process of relating themselves to the world and their surroundings (Fieldnotes, multiple dates) thereby moving away from the standardised (and obsolete) image of ‘authentic Africa’ that is maintained by the tourist industry (amongst others), as their promotion of the ‘authentic African experience’.

Authenticity, in this context is translated to ‘untouched’, or ‘indigenousness’, which is ‘widely seen as a key attraction for international and domestic tourists alike’ and ‘has attracted considerable attention in the tourism field in recent years’ (Ruhanen, Whitford, & McLennan, 2015, as cited in Fletcher, Pforr, & Brueckner, 2016, p. 1100). In this image of “indigenousness”, there is little space for a modernised interpretation of South African culture, as it emphasizes an ‘imagery about the African landscape (...) which includes Africans in the concept (...) but only if unadulterated by modernity’ (Draper, Spierenburg, & Wels, 2004, p. 341). This focus on the “indigenousness” creates an incomplete and unrealistic image of African society, as it leaves out the majority of its community.

The two interpretations of ‘African’ culture are at times contradictory and due to a serious lack of holistic understanding of ‘the other side’ seem to become more mutually exclusive in the process, as heritage is considered ‘old-fashioned’ by Acornhoek’s younger generations, while their modernised interpretation is coined ‘unauthentic’ by tourist campaigns or conservation tales that are built upon local colonial stereotypes.

**Acornhoek’s “authentic Africa”: a modernising community**

With more and more international influences, through tourists, travelling and media – other cultures are increasingly rubbing off on the inhabitants of Acornhoek. Especially the younger population (up to forty years old) feel a strong pull towards what they perceive as ‘European culture’. Speaking to inhabitants of Acornhoek, most expressed that if they had the money, they wished to travel to cities in Europe (or Dubai) rather than visiting South African tourist spots or other (neighbouring) African countries (Fieldnotes, 13-04-2017). Western cultures, like American brands, fast foods, but also European clothing and appearance are considered luxurious and high-status. A strong pull towards ‘sophisticated’ jobs is apparent, as people are increasingly concerned with their appearances and strive towards a more ‘western’ lifestyle. Furthermore, technological innovations and labour migration negatively impact the transfer of cultural knowledge to younger generations. As a result, knowledge on cultural heritage and local customs is declining in the ongoing process of modernisation under influence of outside cultures.
**Craving for ‘suit and tie’**

Going around town, various inhabitants explained to me that young South Africans aspire a job where they get to wear suit and tie. Jobs that include ‘getting dirty’ are considered ‘poor men’s jobs’ and ‘old fashioned’ – a connotation that no one wants (Fieldnotes, multiple dates). When asking someone who works as a ranger in a nature reserve what fellow inhabitants thought of his job, he said the following:

“They say “Ach, it’s not cool man, it’s exiting, but what would you gain from it?” You get that sense of saying “Ach, why am I doing it? Why not move to something different?” Because here in the rural areas, you hear about the city, you hear about Jo’burg and how it’s fun and exciting. (Inhabitant of Acornhoek, Fieldnotes, 17-03-2017)

As explained by community-members, other cultures are influencing aspects of local life. A ‘western’ clothing style is considered sophisticated and thus high-status. As people are under increasing influence of other cultures through media, the craving for material ‘western’ possessions is significant. In the process of continuous comparison over possessions and wealth with others, people are in an ongoing state of self-reflection and self-valuation. With this focus on materialistic possessions and image, a dark side comes along:

“It’s because today it’s more about impressing people. That’s one problem. That you want to impress someone. You can say you want to save money, so then you save. But at the end of the day you see your neighbour having something and then your children want it, you’ll say ‘Ach, let me go out and take money out of my savings to get it’. (Inhabitant of Acornhoek, 02-05-2017)

Because of this development, people are more individualistically minded and long-term planning is proving hard for most youngsters in town. Showing wealth is taking prevalence over creating a sustainable financial foundation, as the younger inhabitants have an increasing short-term focus (Fieldnotes, multiple dates). This lack of looking at one’s own position and possibilities in a wider perspective results in people aspiring futures that are not likely in the area, or short-time planning in terms of the decisions they make.

“It’s all about wanting, wanting and wanting, you know. It’s not like what you want to do for yourself. So, you don’t think inside, you think outside. In what way will people look at me like?” (Inhabitant of Acornhoek, 03-05-2017)

However, the local aspirations don’t match up with what is needed in the area. ‘Dirty’ jobs are filled by outsiders, leaving local community members without a job, or leaving for the big city. The pickiness, increasing influence of other cultures and the perceived infiltration of ‘outsiders’ for local jobs together are creating a shift in local culture. When speaking to an inhabitant about the local employment obstacles and how this relates to local culture and mindset, she replied the following:

‘Social worker, teacher or government is what they want. They don’t want to become a ranger, but that is what we have around here. Not the city jobs that everybody wants. So, teach them, reinforce them. Show them what we’ve got around here and what we lack and educate them to fill that gap.’ (Inhabitant of Acornhoek, Fieldnotes, 02-05-2017)

**From campfires to the electric stove: the loss of storytelling**

Besides the effects of globalisation, the technological revolution has also left its mark on the communities of Acornhoek and their cultures. Before the presence of electricity, families would gather around a campfire in the

---

19 Many jobs in the nature reserves are considered ‘dirty jobs’ and most ranger and fieldworker-positions are filled by people from neighbouring countries like Mozambique, Zimbabwe, or Botswana – or South Africans from Western Cape (Fieldnotes, multiple dates).
garden to cook and fill up the time by telling stories. Folktales, family stories and education on cultural traditions and shared (local) heritage would be passed on to future generations around this fire. With the arrival of electric cooking, televisions and mobile phones in combination with labour migration (parent(s) are away living in big cities), these traditions have worn thin. The entry of modern households-machines has created a shift in the storytelling traditions of rural South African families (Fieldnotes, multiple dates), having a profound impact on the knowledge of cultural tradition in the current younger generations:

'Because most of our culture, we don't have anything written down. We just living culture through mouth, you know from father to son. Generation after the next generation, but today the culture is dying out slowly because of technologies and we trying to adapt onto other people's culture.' (Harmony Khoza, 03-05-2017)

'The problem is today, during my growing up time, we would use to be more exposed to animals and culture. Today they are more exposed to technology and they don't live with their parents. They are away working. (...) And you cannot teach them about culture now, because you don't have the time. The only time you have with them is the weekend. What do you do in the weekend? You clean, take care of them. So, you don't have the time to like sit down with them and talk about the history.' (Inhabitant of Acornhoek, 02-05-2017)

Speaking to community-members in Acornhoek, many stated that their cultural heritage and traditional customs had gained a sense of old-fashionedness by the younger generations in town, coining their heritage 'history' and thereby illustrating a sense that cultural traditions are 'something of the past':

'You know, today, people think it’s not necessary anymore. With the initiation you go out into the woods for weeks to become a man. You hunt, you take care of yourself. But today you don’t have to because you can go to the supermarket. So, most youngsters don’t want to do it anymore. They think it is unnecessary and unhygienic – with initiation sometimes, you don’t bathe for weeks.' (Inhabitant of Acornhoek, 04-05-2017)

Many explained that the lack of digital machines created an image of poverty in the eyes of the now-young generation of Acornhoek, leading to the (un)conscious idea that their cultural heritage was characterised by old-fashioned traditions born from poverty.

_Mixing Muchongolo with television: redefining culture_

In reaction to the previously stated developments, the community members of Acornhoek are in a continuous process of reinterpreting their own culture. The ongoing game of relating oneself to the surrounding world is constituted in cultural norms, values and traditions. With different interpretations of ongoing developments, different identities (and cultures) are constituted which together make up the wider community of Acornhoek. The result is a heterogeneous community that embodies 'authentic' Africa by combining cultural heritage and modern influences into a narrative that fits the local sense-making processes. Differences appear to be most apparent between generations, as the younger population is more open (and eager) towards international and technological influences.

An example of this is the shift in religion. Religion plays an important part in (the process of making sense of) daily life in rural South Africa. A strong belief in sacred aspects of life that are constituted in animals, plants, areas is present besides the ‘imported’ religions like Christianity. Sangoma, or traditional healers, play a central role in society, as they are perceived to be gatekeepers between the ancestral and ‘normal’ worlds (Fieldnotes, 09-04-2017).

Even though they still make up an important part of daily rural South African life, a shift away from these traditional religions is visible in the younger generations of the community. Many young people see sangoma as

The two sides of the road
something of the ‘old beliefs’, constituting parts of their culture that they no longer identify with. Some even coin them ‘witches’, showing a sense of discontent. Whereas before people would visit a sangoma in times of sickness, younger generations are now preferring ‘modern’ healthcare in medical hospitals. In general, people state that younger generations tend to cling to the ‘easy appealing’ aspects of their culture (Fieldnotes, 27-04-2017), like their traditional dances and tribal attires:

“They will say “I know about the attire, about how to dress”. Not all of them will know about it, they know the dancing. ‘Where do you come from, where did this culture of you started?’, “I don’t know, it started long ago with my grandfathers...” They pick things that is more exiting for them, like the dancing.’ (Inhabitant of Acornhoek, Fieldnotes, 27-04-2017)

“They are going to pick the things that are exiting, like the dancing, the dresses, because it is colourful. But what about the history itself, what about your language? If you speak to a Shangaani person, there are things that they won’t tell you in their language. They will tell you in a different language, like in English. Then I think “Oh, no, our culture is dying”. People cannot finish a sentence without putting another people’s language in. Because they are saying “Ah, our language is boring, it is long”.’ (Inhabitant of Acornhoek, Fieldnotes, 27-04-2017)

The aspects that appear to be ‘surviving’ are characterised by their entertainment-value, as the attire and dances make up quite a spectacle and prove to be an economic opportunity, as the muchongolo (traditional dance) is quite the tourist attraction (Fieldnotes, 08-05-2017). With a declining interest in and knowledge of their cultural heritage, a new, modernised version of Africa identity is constituted (Campbell et al., 2001). This doesn’t (always) overlap with what the nature reserves and tourist organisations are coining as the ‘authentic African experience’, because ‘if local people would indeed economically develop, with all the material consequences, they would no longer belong in the inclusive European aesthetics of the African landscape’ (Draper et al., 2004, p. 343).

Hoedspruit’s “authentic Africa”: a forced “indigenousness”?  
An example of interweaving “indigenousness” with nature conservation (and to a lesser extent tourism) might be the tale of the sacred white lion. As the Global White Lion Protection Trust (GWLPT) is focussing on bringing back the ‘sacred’ white lion to its endemic region (Turner, 2017), their conservation strategy builds upon the ‘significant cultural importance’ of the white lion ‘to the local Sepedi and Tsonga communities of the Greater Timbavati Region’ (Global White Lion Protection Trust, 2017b). By intertwining the cultural aspect of the ‘sacred’ white lion according to ‘local tribal customs’, a cultural narrative of “indigenousness” is created that emphasizes the legitimacy of the conservation practices. However, when going around town, it appeared that this ‘local tale’ is rather unknown to Sepedi or Tsonga people of Acornhoek.
'I have not yet encountered a community member telling me about the spiritual value of the lions without having had contact with Linda or the trust. I'm not saying it's not true, but I would really like to encounter that person. I would really like somebody to tell me that, while his child is not in a Starlion school\(^{20}\). (Employee GWLPT, 06-04-2017)

Curious as I was, I wanted to find out for myself. I went around town, asking people whether they knew about the GWLPT and if not, whether they could tell me about the importance of white lions in their culture. Not one inhabitant I spoke to knew of this specific tribal tale concerning the white lion. Although many confirmed that lions play an important role in their tribal tales in terms of connecting with ancestors, the white lion did not seem to play a more significant role:

'I don’t know. I have never heard of that. We do believe that the lions symbolize our ancestors, so we must take care of them, but I do not know of this white lion tale.’ (Inhabitant of Acornhoek, 12-04-2017)

'White lion? Never heard of that. I know only about the lion’ (Inhabitant of Acornhoek, 13-04-2017)

With the GWL intertwining local culture into their conservation narrative, an emphasis is placed on that specific part of local culture. However, this narrative regarding ‘their’ local culture is not recognised or widely supported in the concerning communities around Acornhoek.

“Authentic Africa” is more than indigenous

By incorporating “indigenous” aspects like these into their businesses, organisations increase their legitimacy and can tap into different fields for support as their narrative has not only an environmental side, but also a cultural-heritage one (Fieldnotes, multiple dates). On the one hand they can build upon their conservation narratives and on the other hand they can tap into cultural tourism and funding.

However, as observed when talking to community-members, the image that is created is not a realistic nor complete image of Acornhoek’s cultures. By highlighting the cultural (heritage) aspects, organisations actively choose to only show a small part of modern rural South African cultures. However, as illustrated in this research, African cultures are on processes of continuous change as they are re-interpreted and defined by its members. With organisations focussing only on cultural heritage aspects, they indirectly deny this ongoing process. By focussing on the ‘indigenous’, a modernised, globalised interpretation of South African cultures, including new (modern) priorities are denied and are maybe too easily coined ‘unauthentic’.

By doing so, the local community of Acornhoek that does not adhere to the characteristics of ‘indigenous’, is pushed (and kept) in(to) a position in which they are not able to participate in tourist and conservation practices. Only by ‘staying “authentic” for tourists’, communities (and their cultures) are made into ‘merely an “indigenous brand”, where revenue ‘barely trickles down’ to the “indigenous kept community”’ (Koot, 2016, p. 1211). By generalising South African cultures and denying modernised interpretations and excluding those ‘who do not fit the picture’, tourist (and conservation) organisations create an ongoing marginalisation of South Africans and their cultures. People are only allowed to participate if they adhere to a certain image that fits the (white) (eco-)tourist sector. Not only is this marginalisation based on cultural stereotypes, it also creates an endemic exclusion from the deriving benefits of the sector for those who do not (wish to) conform. In doing so, it is ‘a form of cultural tourism [that] replicates rather than challenges colonial relations’ (S. Brooks, Spierenburg, & Wels, 2012, p. 206).

‘It’s difficult because everyone has their own culture. The nature reserves, they think they know the culture, but the culture is changing and there is a lot of them.’ (Inhabitant of Acornhoek, 27-04-2017)

---

\(^{20}\) Starlion Schools are schools in and around Acornhoek that are part of the community-involvement strategy of the GWL. On these schools, children are taught on environmental subjects, the importance of conservation through the ‘tale of the white lion’.

The two sides of the road
In contrast to the obsession with “indigenousness”, it is exactly the heterogeneity in interpretations and African identities that constitute “authentic Africa”. The ability to adapt, combine and mutually enforce is what makes up modern-day African spirit and identity. As long as tourist organisations and other initiatives don’t acknowledge that the ‘African experience’ encompasses more than indigenous culture, local communities like Acornhoek’s, with their developing priorities and culture, won’t be able to participate in these practices as equal partners.

Overall, the cultural dimension of both sides of the road has a profound influence on people’s perspectives on nature and its conservation. Different cultural traditions, beliefs and customs have materialised into a multitude of different cultural perceptions and narratives on (the relationship with the surrounding natural environment). As a result of these differences, diverse and heterogeneous communities exist, each with their own perspective on nature. The ongoing struggle over ‘authenticity’ influences this aspect of this research, as a new, more fluid interpretation of ‘Africa’ is sought and yet to be incorporated on both sides of the road.

Relationship with nature

Looking at the socio(economic) differences between the two sides of the road, differences in perspectives regarding the relationship with nature are apparent, as ‘one’s social orientation leads to ways to position oneself environmentally, while one’s environmental orientation leads to ways to position oneself socially’ (Clayton et al., 2003, pp. 11–12). As stated by Thondhlana and Shackleton (2015, p. 18), ‘cultural values are inextricably linked to resource use’. These cultural values ‘arise from a diverse and sometimes conflicting array of values’ (ibid., p. 18) and result in different priorities regarding nature amongst the communities of Acornhoek and between the Acornhoek community and the Hoedspruit community.

Hoedspruit - and especially the tourist sector and nature conservation organisations - perceive nature as ‘divine’ and relate themselves as ‘saviours’ or ‘stewards’ of their natural environment. By doing so, they place an emphasis on the importance of conserving nature as it is and highlighting the intrinsic value of the land. On the other hand, in the different communities of Acornhoek, other priorities are apparent and the relationship with nature takes on a twofold shape: it plays an important traditional, cultural role, while at the same time it is perceived of (economic) instrumental value as it offers resources and/or business opportunities.

As the two communities differ in value appointed to nature, conflicts arise in the role nature has in daily life. As Hoedspruit treats nature as intrinsic valuable, focus is on maintaining the natural landscape as it is. However, this proves also to economic benefit, as the conservation attracts lots of tourists every year. This leads to the question whether the intrinsic value of nature is hereby commodified to benefit its ‘stewards’. The perspective of intrinsic value and thus conservation (with a resulting decrease in accessibility), conflicts with the relationship of Acornhoek’s communities with nature – as their livelihood and cultural traditions stem from a more religious and instrumental value of nature.

‘Nature is what happens behind the fences’

Going around Acornhoek, one thing stood out when asking people about nature and their relationship with it: a large majority stated that ‘nature is what happens behind the fences’ (Fieldnotes, multiple dates):

‘Are you asking me what is nature? It is not here, here we don’t have any trees left’ | ‘We used to live with nature, our forefathers, but now there is none left’ | ‘We don’t have nature here, they put a fence. Nature is only for the tourists’. (Inhabitants of Acornhoek, multiple dates)

Behind the fences, located North of the Orpen Road, are the conservation initiatives that make up the Hoedspruit community in the eyes of the community-members of Acornhoek. Due to, amongst other things, the kilometres of fencing and signs stating to ‘keep out’ and red signs warning for lions, the people of Acornhoek feel a separation from their natural surroundings. The population relocations during the Apartheid, globalisation and (resulting) economic development together have influenced the relationship of Acornhoek’s community-members
with nature. Even though the collective feeling of separateness, the community is heterogeneous in their relationship with nature and diverse perspectives exist amongst the community.

Overall, nature plays an important role in (rural) South African lives. The concept of Ntumbuluko is central to South African cultures and (partly) constitutes a strong intertwined relationship with nature: ‘the bonds between the environment and the people are considered not only material but spiritual and moral’ as many ‘envision a kinship relationship between themselves and the natural world’. It can be argued that in these situations, my research role shifted from participant observation to a spectator observer (Attfield, 2009, p. 15; see also Anthony et al., 2011; Chitlango & Balcomb, 2004). A strong belief in ancestors and the connection of ancestors with the animal kingdom is noted in the following quote:

‘So, with the lions, we’ve got a good connection with the culture. As we see them as our heritage and our leaders or ancestors Because in our culture, we believe that when someone dies, that someone becomes our ancestor that will guide you. You can become an ancestor through using the animal spirit or become form of something that will help you to go through your part. So that’s why with the lions we are more connected and they are more part of... we call them our brothers and sisters.’ (Inhabitant of Acornhoek, 24-04-2017)

However, younger generations are losing their touch with the cultural part of Ntumbuluko due to the loss of storytelling and technological developments. Besides the belief in ancestors, Ntumbuluko emphasizes traditional use of natural resources (Chitlango & Balcomb, 2004; King, 2012). Looking at the sangoma (traditional healers), they traditionally use herbs, bones, rocks (natural resources) (Botha, Witkowski, & Shackleton, 2004) to constitute a gateway from the ‘real’ world to the ancestral world, thereby bringing together nature, religion and ‘reality’ (Fieldnotes, mutiple dates). All in all, from a cultural perspective, Ntumbuluko encompasses a strong intertwined interpretation of nature and daily life, seeing people as part of nature and nature as part of people (Fieldnotes, 19-04-2017).

Besides an important cultural role, nature and especially natural resources, is also important in rural livelihoods, as dependency on natural resources makes up the key characteristic (Neves & Du Toit, 2013). With the ‘new political and economic systems’ that would ‘rectify social inequities’ transformations have been going on in rural communities (Kirkland, Hunter, & Twine, 2007, p. 337). However, ‘meaningful social and economic change has been much slower’: community-members are dependent on their natural surroundings in terms of instrumental support for their livelihoods (Kirkland et al., 2007, p. 339).

The twofold role that nature plays in the rural lives of Acornhoek’s community is leading to a divide in their relationship with nature. On the one hand, people do feel a strong (cultural) connection with nature through cultural customs, traditional beliefs and ceremonies that are linked to certain areas in the natural landscape. However, on the other hand, their relationship takes on an instrumental character as people are depending on natural resources for their livelihoods — thereby commodifying nature and characterising it as economically valuable.

**Shifting relation: from necessity to opportunity**

In terms of livelihood dependence, there has been a shift in the perspective on nature. As before, rural livelihoods were directly dependent on their natural surroundings as they would hunt, gather foods and collect firewood (Anthony & Bellinger, 2007; Neves & Du Toit, 2013; Twine, 2005). Natural resources were a necessity in terms of survival for (rural) lives. Despite knowledge on resource degeneration, people disregarded restrictions ‘simply because they have no choice’ (Kirkland et al., 2007, p. 345; W. Twine et al., 2003). The lack of jobs, or supporting facilities (like electricity to cook instead of fuelwood) is coined most needed to alter the dependency on natural resources for livelihoods, as ‘employment was ranked as the most important community need overall, followed by health, school, electricity and drinking water facilities’ (Anthony et al., 2011, p. 9).

Coming from this ‘nature as necessity’ perspective in terms of sustaining livelihoods, nowadays the relationship with nature is characterised by (economic) opportunity. Whereas before, the natural resources were a primary source for survival, today the deriving tourist industry is what people coin as important in their relationship
with their natural surrounding and the importance to conserve. Tourism serves as a continuous growing sector that proves to bring in money. As an increasing number of people are visiting the area, job opportunities are growing, as is the opportunity to make money from it:

‘Yes, they know what is going on there, for some it’s for the money, for some it’s about their love for nature. But some, it’s more about money, easy cash. Because they know if there’s tourist, they get tips and gifts and stuff. So that’s why today they go to reserves to learn more about how to save animals. It’s easier to choose a career around nature, there’s money there and old people don’t become guides.’ (Inhabitant of Acornhoek, 02-05-2017)

Although both triggered by survival, before the livelihood dependency was characterised by primary interaction as people depended on the resources. Nowadays, the relationship with nature is influenced by the opportunity to benefit from the growing tourist-industry around it, commodifying the landscape and its resources as a way to make money: a shift from necessity towards opportunities.

Untouched Africa: open to who pays

Contrary to Acornhoek, nature north of the Orpen Road is characterised as something to ‘enjoy’, to spend leisure time, to relax. Nature is believed to constitute intrinsic value: it is valuable in itself (Hedlund-de Witt, 2013) and thus worth protecting for the sake of preservation. Nature and landscape are appointed aesthetic values and thus attractive for tourists to ‘come and enjoy’. Again, an image of ‘authentic Africa’ is presented, characterised by the romantic ideal of ‘untouched by human’s’ (Draper et al., 2004; Fletcher et al., 2016). However, in reality, they are “constructed” landscapes in both the physical and discursive sense as they are presented as ‘wild’ to its visiting tourists (S. Brooks et al., 2012, p. 208).

Rather than wild, these lands have regained their natural wealth through Apartheid policies such as population and game relocations and are now managed to ‘stay wild’ and conform to the image of untouched by humans. Striving to maintain this pristine image, conservation initiatives put up fences and signs to regulate human access and protect their natural wealth. Local Africans ‘tend to be divided into ‘good’ and ‘bad natives’ depending on how close they are to nature’ (Draper et al., 2004, p. 343), which has an effect on how local communities are in contact with the neighbouring nature conservation initiatives. Besides the divide between ‘good’ - and thus ‘authentic’ - Africans, locals are also continuously kept away from not only their ancestral lands but also the natural resources which they might depend upon in terms of livelihood. To a certain extent locals are included in the conservation practices, as they often fulfil the ranger- and fieldworker-positions in the reserves and the closer the local is to nature, ‘the more they have the right to stay in the area and benefit economically from conservation initiatives’ (Draper et al., 2004, p. 343).

The feeling that nature conservation organisations and game reserves are choosing animals over humans is present in the poorer (rural) communities in South Africa, as expressed in an opinion-piece from Newsweek (Burleigh, 2017). Although coined as ‘wild’ and ‘authentic’, ‘these spaces must succeed in the marketplace’ as they rely on ‘international and relatively rich nature tourists coming to South(ern) Africa to enjoy an unforgettable wilderness experience’ (S. Brooks et al., 2012, p. 208). Deriving from this economic incentive, the relations between these private reserves and the local communities are often on edge. Local communities are often left out (literally by fences) and moreover in the broader process of area development, eco-tourism and development. Furthermore, support for rangers is criticised, stating that there is only support (and money) for protecting animals, while the ones protecting the animals are left out to dry:

“‘Are you saying you prefer a rhino to a black man?’ For many white hunters, safari tourists and conservationists, the answer is yes.’ (Burleigh, 2017)

The industry of nature conservation and eco-tourism has proved to be one that is hardly accessible for local inhabitants, as prices are too high, access is not granted and job opportunities are scarce (Brockington &
Wilkie, 2003). Despite eco-tourism thriving in the area, benefits do not flow back to the community (Chan et al., 2007; Humavindu & Stage, 2015). An ‘inequitable economic system that results in unequal opportunity especially to Black South Africans while also generating high levels of reliance on natural resources to meet basic human needs’ is maintained (Kirkland et al., 2007, p. 348). Local rural communities still heavily rely on the ‘use of harvested wild resources and engagement in natural resource-based activities for spiritual and traditional purposes’ (Thondhlana & Shackleton, 2015, p. 18).

From a heritage perspective, local rural communities are in close relationship with nature. The current nature conservation practices, distribution of land and role for these locals is twofold. On the one hand, they are considered to stay ‘authentic’, ‘good’ natives that express their bond with the natural world through religion, culture and traditional beliefs (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Koot, 2016; Timothy & Boyd, 2006). However, the natural resource dependency that comes with this lifestyle is restricted through lack of access into the reserves to collect resources that play an important role in these cultures. The modernity that is expected from communities in terms of resource use and the push towards new methods like electricity, gas etc. is not supported with financial or institutional means (Koot, 2016), leaving the people caught between the two.

Overall, the relationship both communities have with nature differ greatly. Due to historic different ways in which both communities have related (and still do) to nature, a dissimilar foundation is established from which perspectives regarding their surrounding natural environment and its conservation come from. Traditions, symbolic references and livelihood necessities regarding natural resources have shaped both sides of the road into their diverse relationships with their natural environment.
Different societal agenda’s

This research set out to answer the following question: What are the underlying dynamics of the different narratives of local communities around Acornhoek, Mpumalanga, South Africa, regarding their surrounding natural environment and its conservation?

To answer this question, I will first give a short summary of the research in terms of context and the differences that characterise both sides of the road. Deriving from these differences between the ‘two sides of the Orpen Road’, I will explain that the ongoing marginalisation of the communities of Acornhoek has led to a societal agenda of livelihood development that does not correspond with the societal agenda of its neighbouring community: the nature conservation initiatives in the Maruleng community, who strive for biodiversity conservation and (eco-)tourism. Looking at the incident at Mbube as discussed in the introduction, I will discuss how the incident can be interpreted in two different narratives, as I discuss it as ‘livelihood vs. poaching’.

With both communities having a homogenous view of ‘the other side of the road’, I will illustrate how a lack of understanding of the agenda of the neighbouring party results in a continuous lack of constructive dialogue. This mutual lack of awareness and understanding creates unrealistic goals and involvement-strategies that do not incorporate the core priorities of both parties.

Synopsis

The community of Acornhoek has gone through significant changes in the last one-hundred-and-fifty years. The shift from tribal lands towards Bantustan has left a scar on the land and its people: soil erosion, decrease of biodiversity (Attfield, 2009; DEAT, 1997, 2005; Wilson, 2011) as well as demographics and socio-economic situation (Evers et al., 2005; Stull et al., 2015). The Apartheid years have had an omnipresent impact in terms of opportunities, growth and development in the community (Human Sciences Research Council, 2006).

Neighbouring resource-wealthy lands are aiming at biodiversity conservation and are trying to connect the two communities of Hoedspruit (and its nature conservation organisations) and the rural town of Acornhoek through community-involvement strategies. However, the spatial features of the area have a complicating influence on this process. The area is characterised by (geographical) separateness as conservation organisations and communities of Acornhoek operate between two judicial areas with three authorities, but are also separated in terms of socio-economic opportunities.

The governmental distribution of the area results in a difference in public facilities such as infrastructure, governmental institutions, schools and healthcare (Statistics South Africa, 2016a, 2016b). Also, the mix of two provinces and chieftaincy powerplays creates a twofold effect where weaker community-members are supported in positive cases, but where in some cases it has malign effects when interests conflict and people are caught between the two systems (Fieldnotes, 05-05-2017). The former Bantustan in which Acornhoek is located, is coined a “poverty node”; areas ‘that have their origin in older, deliberately underdeveloped resettlement regions’ (McHale et al., 2013, p. 558) and that are characterised by lack of (public) facilities and socio-economic growth.

As a result of the population relocations during Apartheid, Acornhoek is a predominantly black community (99,7% (Statistics South Africa, 2011a)), whereas Hoedspruit is in comparison very white (52% (Statistics South Africa, 2011b)). The ongoing lack of public facilities pushes the inhabitants of Acornhoek towards Hoedspruit in search of employment, better education and healthcare. Nevertheless, the two don’t mix. Furthermore, the two areas have a completely different economic set-up: Hoedspruit is focussed on and characterised by, international tourism (Statistics South Africa, 2011b; Fieldnotes), whereas Acornhoek’s economic situation is still primarily agricultural and characterised by rural livelihoods (Neves & Du Toit, 2013). Even though the two communities are both in close proximity to main tourist attractions like the Kruger National Park, the involvement in the deriving tourists couldn’t be further apart. With the community of Acornhoek not participating in this ‘big business’, they are missing out on the (financial) benefits (Briedenhann & Wickers, 2004; Kiss, 2004; Spenceley & Goodwin, 2007). A lack of infrastructure to support growth into this tourist sector reinforces this exclusion. The significant differences in welfare ensure that complete participation into Hoedspruit’s (tourist) economy and society, is impossible for the inhabitants of Acornhoek.
The different demographics and economic set-up of the towns creates different cultures. Acornhoek’s culture is based on traditional (tribal) cultures, which are in a continuous process of reinterpretation by its people as a result of societal changes and outside influences. The tourist town of Hoedspruit is tapping into their view of ‘authentic Africa’ as it resonates with their clientele who want to experience ‘untouched Africa’ (Fletcher et al., 2016; Koot, 2016). This process is impacting the younger generations of Acornhoek, since the ones who do not fit the image of ‘indigenousness’ are not considered ‘authentic African’ (Draper et al., 2004; Fletcher et al., 2016) and it is especially them who combine technological innovation and heritage in their African identity. As a result, modern-day Africa as a genuine and authentic culture is excluded from the process. This has economically detrimental effects as benefits from the tourist industry barely trickle down to those communities that do not adhere to the ‘indigenous’ culture (Koot, 2016). The endemic exclusion of the majority of African people from the wider region’s economy is continued (Fletcher et al., 2016) and the processes of rural marginalisation continue.

The traditional African cultures embody a strong connection with nature (Anthony et al., 2011; Hunter, Strife, & Twine, 2010), as observable in the reliance on natural resources for rural livelihoods (Neves & Du Toit, 2013). Ceremonies are linked to specific pieces of land and herbs and bones are used by sangoma (King, 2012; Simelane & Kerley, 1998). Overall, the aspect of *Ntumbuluku* is central in Acornhoek’s daily lives (Anthony, Abonyi, Terblanche, & Watt, 2011). With these sacred spaces and access to natural resources increasingly restricted by (private) game reserves and conservation initiatives, the population of Acornhoek is forced to find new ways to connect to nature and shape their connections with nature. Dependency on natural resources for the maintenance of livelihoods is still very much apparent, especially when there is a lack of access to natural resource-areas (W. Twine et al., 2003). However, the alternative of new resources like electricity and gas instead of fuelwood are scarcely distributed or supported in terms of grants or means, leaving the people stuck between old customs that are no longer available without providing sufficient alternatives.

### A case of ongoing marginalisation

When looking at the different aspects separately, the differences might not seem of great significance. However, when adding up all the small differences between the communities, a situation unfolds where the population of Acornhoek is suffering endemic exclusion from economic processes, Hoedspruit’s society, growing tourism in the region and left behind due to a lack of public facilities that could support the community in gaining knowledge, means, skills and prospect of creating development for themselves.

The combined situation of all these aspects results in a serious lack of social mobility for the inhabitants of Acornhoek, thereby leaving them behind in comparison to their neighbouring community: a case of ongoing marginalisation. Even though a harsh observation, Acornhoek is still, in a sense, part of a system of environmental apartheid and rural marginalisation, as they are continuously kept from cultural and economic centres, victim of bad (or no) public facilities and better education. This ongoing marginalisation has led to a view of ‘nature is what happens on the other side’, as the inhabitants of Acornhoek suffer an endemic exclusion from their ancestral grounds, natural resources and the opportunities for (eco-)tourism. At the same time, they are regarded ‘as an equal partner’ in, for example, conservation practices and tourism and expected to keep up without acknowledging and addressing the lack of means and opportunities that shape their marginalised position in society.

In terms of agency, the people of Acornhoek have their own ‘responsibility’ in bridging these two worlds. Questions can be asked on whether community members are making enough effort to integrate into Hoedspruit’s society and economy. As seen, many people don’t feel a cultural connection with Hoedspruit’s inhabitants, but crave for the opportunities in terms of socio-economic development. However, beside the fact that there is perhaps room for improvement for the people of Acornhoek to contribute to the bridging process, reality illustrates that they work against a very harsh institutional marginalising system. The community-members of Acornhoek experience an unequal access to opportunities and are thus unable to create a better chance for themselves as they lack the means. Overall one could say that Acornhoek does not get the chance to play a serious role in the wider region’s economy and community.

Different societal agenda’s
Livelihood or poaching?

The different circumstances in two communities result in different priorities: different societal agendas. The poorer community of Acornhoek has a focus on livelihood development, as can be observed in what inhabitants expressed as priority needs: employment, housing, better education and affordable electricity (Statistics South Africa, 2016a, 2016b). The community of Hoedspruit is focussed on nature conservation; either for nature’s best interests, or(And) because it serves the tourist industry and thus the economy (Spenceley et al., 2008; Spenceley & Goodwin, 2007).

The two different societal agendas are observable when looking back at the poaching incident that was described in the introduction. One perspective on the incident would coin it as livelihood, for it stems from the need to improve life-standard and wealth; as it would symbolise the priorities in the Acornhoek community. The other perspective narrates the incident as poaching, as it conflicts with their priorities: nature conservation. Asking the inhabitants of Acornhoek about poaching incidents in the area, all were dismissive of the act but explained that they nevertheless understood it:

‘I don’t approve of poaching, but I know people who have done it. It is because they needed the money.’
(Inhabitant of Acornhoek, 05-03-2017)

‘Well, the reason behind the poaching that is happening is because of poverty. That these guys are faced with, most of them are unemployed and most of them are uneducated, which is a touching fact. Because there is like schools around and there isn’t much that the neighbours are doing, taking these kinds into schools. Cause if one is educated they will know: ’in order for me to provide for my family, it’s best if I get a job,’ better than going into the reserves and poaching there, because I might get killed, get arrested, or something bad can happen.’
(Employee GWL, 24-03-2017)

Poaching opportunities seem tempting in an area characterised by widespread rural poverty. As a sentenced poacher explained to me, the prices of one kilo of rhino horn rises up to 120.000 ZAR (Fieldnotes, 09-04-2017), which calculates to €7415,52 per kilo, which is comparable to the annual income of the richest 8% of Acornhoek (Statistics South Africa, 2011a). Looking at those numbers, one can easily understand how poaching is lucrative to households who earn only a fraction of that in a year, as was also confirmed by a poacher and other inhabitants of Acornhoek:

‘Okay. Like me, I will tell. I don’t have parents, I don’t have a job, it’s poverty. So, I can say poverty pressure was the thing that made me go poaching. Because I also wanted to live a good life, a normal life. I had to poach to put food on the table and to clothe myself.’
(Interview poacher, 09-04-2017)

‘Well with regards to that, it’s very much a difficult cause, one needs to feed its family. And some poach so that they can sell the game and get money to buy food, take the children to school, buy a uniform, a lot of household needs that need money.’
(Employee GWL, 24-03-2017)

In contrast to the town’s priority of livelihood development, are the nature conservation organisations who are victim of the poaching incidents. With ‘the primary focus on highlighting the white Lions value in terms of culture, conservation, education, eco-tourism and ultimately spiritual enlightenment. (…) The objective is to reinvest in the cultural and conservationist value of the white Lions and thereby raise awareness of our earth value and urgent need for its protection’ (Global White Lion Trust, 2014). Poaching, or in broader terms ‘illegal harvesting’, conflicts with this objective as it damages the protection of the animal and supportive landscape.

When looking at the conflict that arises, the differences in allotted value stands out; where poaching individuals see animals (and plants) as instruments to improve their livelihood, the GWL sees the white lion and its habitat as intrinsically valuable. With the ‘primary aim of the White Lion Trust to harness the cultural importance of the white lions’ (Global White Lion Trust, 2014).
of white lions to local indigenous communities, to help protect the Kruger to Canyon (K2C) Biosphere and the greater lion population in this region” (Turner, 2017), the lions and land are prioritised over the local community, as observable in the organisations’ by-line: ‘as an organisation, our by-line is “lions, land, people”(...) and in that order’ (Jason Turner, 27-04-2017). Even though the GWLT, as a conservation organisation, is victim of poaching incidents and has a different objective than its neighbouring communities, there is understanding of the other side’s perspective, as Jason expressed:

‘Perspectives do differ, you know, a seriously poor community... one can’t blame them for their focus being, their immediate survival. (...) So, yes, philosophies are very different on the other side’ (27-04-2017).

During a snare-sweep in the Global White Lion reserve, Mbube, one of the rangers showed me the carcass of a wildebeest who had died in a poaching-snare (photo on the left) and the remaining traces of a snare in a tree (photo on the right).

The question whether it is livelihood or poaching has no definitive answer, for both narratives are true to the respective communities and it is therefore not the question that needs to be answered. Rather than fighting over the linguistics of ‘livelihood vs. poaching’, the question should be why it is that the priorities of two neighbours seem to be so far apart. Especially when community-involvement strategies are in place that are aimed at bringing the two communities together.
Afterthoughts

Bridging the gap

Despite the differences between the two communities, bridging attempts are made to create involvement with the other community. In an attempt to co-construct the local perspectives, it is necessary to give a nuanced account of what current efforts are already made to connect the two ‘sides of the road’. What initiatives are currently organised to get involved with the other side of the road, or have the other side get involved in your practices? A critical reflection on the current strategies might expose obstacles and hidden assumptions that are shaping current interactions.

The Global White Lion, as one of the nature conservation organisations north of the Orpen Road, have a community-involvement program, aimed at fostering ‘clear awareness of and concern about, economic, social, heritage, political and ecological interdependence’ (Global White Lion Protection Trust, 2017a). These education projects are aimed at primary and high-schools in the Maruleng/Mopani area (Global White Lion Protection Trust, 2017a). These projects are focussed on educating children on the importance of conservation and teaching them about their impact on the environment (together with the cultural value of the white lion) (Fieldnotes, 04-05-2017). Beside these community-involvement projects, local people are involved in the conservation practices through employment. A group of local workers from Acornhoek are brought into the Mbube (the reserve next to the Orpen Road), to work the field every day. Beside these fieldworkers, they have a few other employees from the region (or Acornhoek itself) employed. However, these local employees are only few, as most rangers etc. are from further away (Western Cape, Zimbabwe, Mozambique). Looking at the aftermath of the poaching incident for Harmony (see introduction), one can argue that this is understandable from both employee and employers side. By employing people from outside the community, employers experience the benefit of having employees who do not have a double loyalty (towards the organisation and the town (chieftaincy region)). The other way around, by working for an organisation outside of the chieftaincy region one lives in, although being it further away from family and friends, the employee doesn’t position himself in the difficult two-sided position Harmony is in working for the GWL near Acornhoek and living there too.

Attempts from Acornhoek at involvement and extended interaction with the nature reserves are minimal. Very few to none people visit the reserves, as they don’t have the money or interest. Although some of the local employees, in a way, spread the story of conservation, the importance is not spread widely and spreading work strategies is not part of an average weekend-spending. With a lot of rangers and other employees coming in from ‘outside’, many people in Acornhoek are dissatisfied with the employment-strategies of the nature conservation organisations (Fieldnotes, multiple dates). People are angry and disappointed that people are ‘flown in’ to take ‘their jobs’, especially since the unemployment rates in the area are so high. Besides, they argue that as a result of these employment strategies, local knowledge and a natural bond with the area are lost with the incorporation of ‘outsiders’ (Fieldnotes, 01-05-2017).

Despite a widespread lack of interaction with the nature reserves, there is a group that is still attempting occasional connection: the sangoma. As the traditional healers, they depend on local herbs, plants and animal parts for their ceremonies and muti. A deal has been made with the Global White Lion to grant access into the reserve for the sangoma from time to time to harvest the needed ingredients under supervision of the rangers or other employees (Fieldnotes, 22-04-2017). Finally, an important example of an attempt to cooperate was the help that community-members offered during the poaching incident in November (Fieldnotes, 07-04-2017).

Experienced obstacles

Despite current attempts at connecting the two sides, there are still bumps in the road. Both sides of the road experience obstacles in the (attempts at) interaction. Looking at the current interactions between the communities, I abstracted several key points that seem to obstruct constructive cooperation.

First, initiative for interaction and cooperation is very little coming from the Acornhoek community. People don’t know what is going on at the other side of the road and, more importantly, they currently don’t seem
too curious to find out. Dissatisfied with current employment strategies, community-members seem to feel left out of the conservation reserves and their practices, which seems to fuel the status-quo of non-interaction.

On the other hand, the community-involvement projects initiated by conservation organisations like the GWL are aimed at a small specific part of the community, thereby leaving out the majority of the community. The additional fact that the reserve is not open to visitors further contributes to a lack of knowledge about what is going on there and it’s not helping in initiating contact over conservation programs.

Secondly, the employees of the GWL that are living in Acornhoek are ‘caught’ between not only authority systems (governmental and chieftaincy) but also in terms of loyalty (to employer, or to social group as a result of chieftaincy system). Because of conflicting values and goals, the information on what is going on at either side of the road is not flowing to the other side as conflicts might arise for the ones bridging the two communities.

Overall, the attempts at connecting the two sides are insufficient. Attempts from both sides are not inclusive, leaving out large parts of both communities. Furthermore, current interactions are not benefitting the whole community as benefits are distributed to those partners that are strategically picked, leaving others out of opportunity to become a part. However, on the other hand there are very little attempts made by local community-members who are not enrolled in the community-involvement projects to start a project of their own to create interaction. An employee of the GWL commented the following:

“*It’s bringing the trust amongst the community, it’s like a bridge. A bridge between them and the community. But the bridge that they are forming, it’s not strong enough. People understand it and then they go... People now look at it and think ‘what will it benefit if they come to us?’ (...) Sometimes they bring donations and stuff, but it should be something that is more long-term. That the trust can be able to fund for. Not just like a R1000 cheque. Some schools have 1900 children, what are you going to do?’*”
(Employee GWL, 03-05-2017)

**No constructive dialogue**

The two sides of the road each have their own priorities and objectives. As seen, the two communities have minimal interaction, as inhabitants of Acornhoek don’t know what is going on in the nature reserves and the nature reserves only speak to a small proportion of the population and on few occasions. As a result, the two communities do not seem to be aware of what is going on at the other side of the road, which has implications for their interaction, the development of their societal priorities and the success of the community-involvement projects.

Firstly, through minimal interaction, the homogenous image that both sides have of ‘the other side’ is maintained. For inhabitants of Acornhoek, all nature reserves north of the Orpen Road are the same, as they all look the same: fenced, prohibited access, lush and full of natural resources. However, they are not aware that the reserves differ in their approaches to conservation, tourism and community-involvement. The other way around, the nature conservation organisations maintain a homogenous image of the community of Acornhoek through their limited and directed contact with only a few community members, who are often also confirmative in their opinions regarding the white lion objectives: ‘*Linda she chooses the school very strategically. She would deny it, but that’s how she chooses it*’ (employee GWL, 03-07-2017). Through the minimal contact between the two sides of the road and the directed interaction, the homogenous view of the ‘other side of the road’ is maintained. This means that both sides are not aware of the (complexities in the) agendas of the other parties and the different perspectives that are alive in the community.

The distorted level of knowledge about the other side of the road, both in terms of people and agendas, leaves opportunities unused for contact and constructive dialogue on (shared) goals. Because of this, certain community groups are excluded from the development and execution of plans. The fact that there is minimal dialogue has multiple negative results as the communities maintain this lack of knowledge, minority perspectives are not taken into account, there is no broader community-building and no constructive dialogue takes place on the objectives and strategies of both parties.
Because of the lack of constructive dialogue, there is little opportunity to find common ground and construct sustainable cooperation. Since the diversity of perspectives of Acornhoek’s communities is not taken into account, strategies developed may not fit the community, for they are designed with a homogenous view that is constructed through information from a small number of people that do not necessarily represent the community. Furthermore, the lack of dialogue leaves no opportunity to learn from each other, influence each other, let alone co-create.

The lack of contact is thus not only maintaining unequal positions in terms of societal possibilities, it is an inhibiting factor in the development of the region. The two parties don’t know each other, both in terms of individual people as well as perspectives, priorities and cultures. By not speaking, these positions are maintained and strategies aimed at the ‘involvement of community’ don’t fit or only cater to the needs of a small part of Acornhoek’s community. Since the two don’t seem to come together closer, there is a continued lack of knowledge on the others’ agenda, objectives and goals. This gap ensures that there is no opportunity for the both sides of the road to come together and find common ground in their objectives and strategies and together create sustainable, inclusive projects that cater to shared goals of the communities around Acornhoek.
Bibliography


Bibliography


Appendix: Recommendations

Current community-involvement strategies are aimed at getting a local community involved in the conservation practices of a conservation organisation. Projects are designed to teach locals about the importance of the work of the conservation organisations, the importance of the nature they conserve and how they can contribute to their goal. Projects are too nature conservation-oriented, neglecting the also pressing needs of socio-economic development in the communities. To improve this, steps need to be taken to give community-involve-ment a more inclusive character.

The interpretation of community-involvement by the GWL is more community-outreach, as the GWL stays central in the relationship. Involvement should mean an involvement from both parties with the other side, a mutual relationship that is reciprocal. So instead of thinking ‘how can we ensure that the local communities are involved in what we do’, the question should (also) be reversed: ‘how can we become involved with the communities, in their needs and goals’. Community-involvement practices should encompass the conservation organisations as part of a wider community, that is both conservation and non-conservation. By characterising yourself as part of a wider community, your objectives become part of a wider, more collective, set of objectives that cater to the needs of the diversities of the broader community. As expressed by an employee of the GWL:

“Specifically for the community development. Just saying community development, I don’t like calling it community development or community outreach, because for me it is exclusive and not inclusive. It immediately excludes me from the community and it excludes, in this particular context, Hoedspruit from Acornhoek. Whereas, within the greater Timbavati, we are a community.” (Employee GWL, 03-05-2017)

A new definition of community-involvement where reciprocal involvement is central could ensure the combination of socio-economic development and conservation practices that is so often sought. This mutual involvement asks of both sides to get involved with each other, to be concerned about shared and/or individual goals and to strive to improve the community together, in the light of set objectives. In practice this translates to the different parties to go and stay with each other, immerse oneself to get to know the unknown communities.

This means, firstly learning to listen to each other. Listening to other perspectives, needs, priorities and acknowledging them. This mutual awareness and acknowledgement may in its turn lead to common ground and shared objectives. Only if all problems, needs and objectives – be it big or small - that are known in the communities, can they be on the wider community’s agenda. Ideally, objectives in the communities should become shared objectives, for any problem is your problem. However, this is a big step to take. For now, focus should be on listening, awareness, acknowledgement. The GWL should acknowledge the socio-economic development objectives of Acornhoek as existing and vice versa: the communities of Acornhoek should acknowledge the importance of sustaining their natural surrounding by supporting the conservation practices of the GWL. A next step in coming together could be one of ‘deep democracy’, where the different parties seek common ground by asking ‘what else do you need to support this plan?’ By including priorities and objectives in this way, steps can be taken in combining what may, at first, seem contradictory goals.

To achieve this, all members of a community need to get to know each other. Nature conservation organisations need to acquaint themselves with locals, their history, their culture, their economies, their needs and dreams. Only if aware of what is going on in the communities, can there be spoken of common grounds for involvement and contributing to a solution/improvement. The other way around, locals should get to know the conservation organisations and their objectives.

So, open the reserves, share information! Hosting events might lower the threshold for community-members to seek contact. Key in this process is going into the communities for more than just a moment; go and live in town for a couple of weeks and dedicate your time to get to know the communities, their diverse perspectives, needs and individuals. Not only will it improve the relationship between individuals and parties, help in understanding each other’s objectives and improve legitimacy, but by knowing and acknowledging a diverse community in all its heterogeneity and various needs, a sustainable, reciprocal involvement is created. Hopefully leading to a cooperation where objectives of socio-economic development and conservation might exist together instead of in competition.

Appendix: Recommendations