

Case Study: Bushbuckridge Traditional Health Practitioners Bio-cultural Protocol

COMMUNITY BACKGROUND

- A large number of traditional health practitioners live in the Bushbuckridge area of the Kruger to Canyons UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in South Africa.
- They tend to their communities' physical, cultural and spiritual well-being through involvement in traditional medicine and cultural ceremonies. They also face a number of challenges.
- Over 5 months, culminating in August 2009, the Bushbuckridge Traditional Healers developed a bio-cultural community protocol.

KEY ISSUES

A. Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biodiversity

- Medicinal plants are grown in the areas they inhabit and are sustainably harvested according to spiritual values and customary laws such as seasonal rotation.
- They further protect biodiversity through the prevention of fires and plant poaching by others.

B. Traditional Knowledge and Plant Genetic Resources

- Traditional knowledge is gained through mentors, dreams, generations, and other traditional health practitioners, and is innovated and held ancestrally, communally and individually.
- Traditional knowledge is shared on the basis of consultation, reciprocity and benefit-sharing.

C. Prior Informed Consent and Benefit Sharing

- Those interested in accessing the health practitioners' traditional knowledge must adhere to customary and domestic laws regulating the transfer of knowledge.
- Customary laws require honouring of their ancestors and consultation with other members of the group of traditional health practitioners to consider whether and on what terms traditional knowledge can be shared.
- Process of prior informed consent depends on the type of user of traditional knowledge (i.e. traditional health practitioner students, other traditional health practitioners, academic researchers, commercial bioprospectors).

D. Challenges

- Their access to medicinal plants is limited by differential property rights in surrounding lands.
- They are discriminated against by police forces and Christian groups and struggle to gain income from their services due to widespread poverty in their communities.

RIGHTS & RESPONSIBILITIES

A. Rights within National South African Law

- National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act (2004).
- Bio-prospecting, Access and Benefit Sharing Regulations (2004).

B. Additional Community Demands

- Improvement of the traditional health practitioners' access to conservation areas and reduction of the over-harvesting of medicinal plants by others in communal areas.
- Recognition by government of the traditional health practitioners' contributions to and benefits from the region's biodiversity.

- Establishment of a medicinal plants conservation and development area.
- Engagement with local groups such as traditional leaders, health facilities, and church leaders to discuss the role of traditional health practitioners in their communities.

C. Community Commitment

- To continue providing traditional health remedies to our communities and to contribute to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity through customary harvesting of medicinal plants.
- To work with traditional authorities to better regulate communal lands and minimize environmental degradation and over-harvesting from other groups.
- To run successful community-based medicinal plants nurseries.