



THE DECLARATION HISTORY OF THE MOUNTAIN ZEBRA CAMDEBOO PROTECTED ENVIRONMENT

[Camdeboo National Park](#) and [Mountain Zebra National Park](#) are situated between Cradock and Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape province. South African National Parks (SANParks) have designated a buffer zone around these two parks, focusing on the areas outside of the park that need to be protected to allow the park ecosystems to function naturally. Buffer zones (as per [the strategy on buffer zones for national parks](#)) consider three main elements when being designed: catchment areas (securing the water provision for the parks), natural priority areas and viewshed areas to protect the scenic characteristics of the park. For Camdeboo and Mountain Zebra National Parks, their buffer zones overlap and collectively cover about 840 000 hectares primarily made up of private land, mainly owned by stock farmers and private game reserves.

The two parks and their buffer zones are situated in a formally recognised conservation priority area. The area makes up a large section of the [National Protected Area Expansion Strategy](#) (NPAES) and is a priority to secure as a protected area.

The area is deserving of formal protection status for many reasons

- Consolidation of the Mountain Zebra and Camdeboo National Park buffer zones.
- Contributes to achieving regional and national protected area targets, including making a significant contribution to conserving thirteen national vegetation types poorly conserved elsewhere in South Africa.
- Conserve an area with unique and valuable scenic and landscape characteristics including the Valley of Desolation and Plains of Camdeboo.
- Conserve a transitional area between four biomes, and in doing so increase climate change resilience and adaptation potential for the area in general and the two parks in particular.
- Conserve the Sneeuberg centre of endemism.

- Conserve a diverse assemblage of plants and animals.
- Conserve important water catchments for the Great Fish River.



*Farm staff showcasing a
Dioscorea Elephantipes (Elephants
Foot) – Marvke Stern*

For SANParks to help protect this conservation priority area, they would need to partner with the private landowners around the two parks. This is where the Mountain Zebra Camdeboo Corridor Project was born.

The project was facilitated by the [Wilderness Foundation](#) and funded by the [Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund](#) (CEPF). The two-year project was aimed at creating a corridor of protection between Camdeboo and Mountain Zebra National Parks with a target of 45 000 hectares. It consisted of three options to achieve this goal. The first option was a 'Proud Partner' agreement which did not provide much support or require any real commitment from the landowners apart from supporting the project. It was designed to capture the willingness of the landowners who wanted to take part but were not comfortable committing to anything too formal. The other option was the Contractual National Park option. SANParks has the option of signing a Contractual National Park agreement with a landowner if the property in question meets

certain conditions. Becoming part of a Contractual National Park means to manage land in terms of a park management policies (to put it very simply) and would not be conducive to the kind of stock farming methods operating in the Karoo. It could however be of benefit to some of the game reserves relying on ecotourism. The third option, to become part of a protected environment (PE) was the winning option.

The project was exciting and challenging at the same time as design and implementation happened simultaneously. With the landowners opting for the PE, the project needed to make sure that they fully understood what the declaration as a PE would mean for them, how the declaration process was to be completed and what the long term conditions would be for its status and its partnership with SANParks. It was clear that no landowner could sign as part of the PE without knowing fully what such declaration would entail and what the implications would be.



Angora goats on the plains (Bronwyn Botha)

The process of figuring out all the details began. The declaration process is clearly defined in the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act (Act 57 of 2003) (NEMPAA). The Minister of the Department for Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) or MEC may declare a PE. As SANParks is a national body and the main partner and facilitator of the proposed PE, it made sense to have it declared nationally through the Minister.

Any PE needs to have a management authority formally designated by the Minister. SANParks resolved not to be the management authority but rather leave that to the landowners themselves. It was

decided to create a landowner's association designated as the management authority for the PE. A constitution was drafted by the project management team, which was workshopped with the Landowner's Association Steering Committee and reviewed by all 64 initial landowners to create the final version.

At the same time, a set of drafted regulations were developed for the PE by the project team and workshopped with all the landowners to result in a realistic set of regulations that could be presented to the Minister for approval. The regulations worked together with a zonation plan and highlighted permissible and non-permissible activities for each zone. Looking at the general make-up of the average farm, developing management zones was simple. The PE would consist of two zones, the high impact and low impact zones. High impact zones referred to any part of the farm that was transformed and included the homestead, arable lands and any man-made structures like dams. In this zone, landowners were able to do any activity as long as it is legal in terms of South African legislation and did not move away from agriculture or ecotourism land uses. The low impact zones referred to the natural areas of the farm where one could still manage routine infrastructure like farm tracks, fences, water points and holding pens/kraals. The only requirement for this zone is that should any development be planned that would trigger a listed activity in National Environmental Management Act (NEMA), to re-designated it as a high impact zone, and that any Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process be followed.

It is important to note that the PE is not anti-development but aims to ensure developments proposed in the area are not to the detriment of the environment or land uses of the area. The PE does not challenge property rights and each landowner is well within their right to develop as long as it adheres to South African legislation and process.

Due to the fact that landowners were to maintain full responsibility of land management on their properties, it was decided that the PE would not make use of Notarial Deed Agreements and that membership of the PE would not be binding on successor of title. Any landowner signed as part of the PE would be part of the PE in perpetuity unless they decided they no longer wished to be. The landowners, by law, may undeclared their properties. In other models where protected areas had to be more prescriptive and have financial investments in the land, this approach would be very risky. But in this compatible environment with management being the responsibility of each landowner, there was little risk why someone would want to undeclared his/her property.



Springbuck in the Samenkost (Bronwyn Botha)

Each PE must have a management plan, which must be submitted within 12 months of the date of declaration. However, the project time frame would not allow to develop a full management plan following the formal management plan process, while making sure that the landowners understand the fundamentals of such a plan. This was critical as it would have the most impact on the ground. The project team drafted the key management plan programmes, which was proposed to each landowner. This draft spoke only of key objectives and basic actions and was approved by all the landowners involved. By the time that the

“Intention to Declare” application was ready to be taken to the Minister for approval, each landowner had signed a “Consent to Declare” agreement. The agreement had landowners accept four conditions.

1. Each landowner gave SANParks the consent to declare their properties on their behalf as part of the PE
2. Each landowner agreed to be a member of the Landowners Association and signed acceptance of its constitution and understood that it was proposed that the Landowners Association would be made the management authority of the PE
3. Each landowner agreed to the draft regulations that would be submitted to the Minister for approval and agreed to zone their properties accordingly
4. Each landowner agreed to the basic principles of the management plan and understood that a formal management plan would need to be created and approved by the Minister post declaration

The "Intention to Declare" application was handed over to the Minister at the end of the project in March 2014. The application included a letter requesting the declaration of the proposed Mountain Zebra Camdeboo Protected Environment (MZCPE) by the MZCPE Landowner's Association (MZCPELA) including the request to make the MZCPELA the management authority of the proposed MZCPE as well as a letter of support for the proposed declaration from the CEO of SANParks. The application included a biodiversity assessment/'Motivation to Declare' document, a copy of the proposed regulations, a copy of the MZCPELA Constitution and a full verified Schedule of Properties (a register of legal descriptions of all properties to be included in the MZCPE).



Temporary pans after the rain (Bronwyn Botha)

The MZCPE was declared by the Minister on 1 April 2016 and she designated the MZCPELA as the management authority. The regulations as accepted by the Minister was also published in the same gazette (Gazette No. 39891).

"The Declaration of the MZCPE is the fulfilment of a dream for conservation conscious & sustainability minded family focussed landowners. The unique collaborative melding of ideas for the fulfilment of this ambitious initiative bears testament to the character & resilience of all participating parties. The establishment of the MZCPE substantiates the imperative of the secure biodiverse ecosystem intricately involved with and supportive of the Mountain Zebra and Camdeboo National Parks. My involvement with the formation and realisation of the MZCPE allowed me to bear witness to a flood of goodwill, a longed for expression fulfilled, and a deep gratitude and reverence for the Karoo and its people." – Ed Kingwill (First Chairman of the MZCPLA)

The start of the GEF-5 PA Project in 2015, allowed SANParks to take the newly declared MZCPE to the next level. The MZCPE had a few months to put the management plan together for submission to the Minister for approval. This was an intensive process and required both, internal review by all landowners involved as well as the relevant sectors in SANParks, and a full external public participation process for 60 days. The draft management plan was submitted to DFFE early in 2017 and was formally approved by the Minister in August 2017.

One of the programmes within the newly approved management plan was the Protected Environment Expansion and Consolidation Programme, which sought to further consolidate the fragmented MZCPE and, in partnership with SANParks, secure more of the parks' buffer zones.

The SANParks Buffer Zone Coordinator, who was the project manager of the previous phase of creating a corridor of protection between Camdeboo and Mountain Zebra National Parks could just pick up from where things were left off and relationships could grow from when they started in the first project in 2012.

"I always have deep respect for the first group of landowners in the original project who raised their hands and ultimately volunteered to be the guinea pigs. The trust they placed in me to go partly blind into declaration is deeply moving and, in the beginning, quite terrifying as I did not want to let them down. Going back out into the landscape armed with a much clearer picture of what the MZCPE meant and what its implications were, the new landowners were able to be more confident in their decision to join. The original landowners were the original creators of this all and the documents built on today came from the foundations they helped set, to them I will be eternally grateful" – **Bronwyn Botha (Buffer Zone Coordinator)**

Recruiting new members was happening at the same time while the management plan was being implemented. Many other conservation organisations were coming on board to partner with the MZCPE as opportunities were being unlocked. It saw landowners and others embrace the vision and objectives of the MZCPE. The predominant reason landowners became part of the MZCPE seemed to be the market benefits that became possible within the textile industry as the industry took notice of the landowner commitment and their association with the MZCPE. The MZCPE Management Plan Tool developed for the landowners helped them to achieve aspects of the Responsible Wool and Mohair Standard certifications and has become a great incentive to join the MZCPE. Landowners operating tourism ventures see great potential in the MZCPE brand and its partnership with SANParks and what it could mean for their own marketing strategy. Many landowners also just joined out of excitement to be part of a bigger conservation and agricultural community and to be involved in the exciting projects it opened up.



Windpumps scatter the landscape (Bronwyn Botha)

The buy-in from landowners in the landscape has resulted in two more "Intention to Declare" applications to the Minister. If successful, it will see the MZCPE grow to just more than a million hectares in totality and will include 198 landowners.

"The declaration of the MZCPE is a fantastic initiative and it's great that landowners understand that all the biodiversity cannot be conserved in national parks and on state land and that it is not up to the State to do this solely. The project is fantastic because we all have the same goal and everything is happening under one banner creating opportunities for other initiatives to come from it and has resulted in more interest from the outside world due to this unity. It is difficult to showcase conservation efforts as an individual, but as a collective the impact cannot be ignored. We are hoping that the next declaration process will be successful because if it is, the scale and the more consolidated and unified landscape will have even more clout and will make everyone stand up and take notice" – **Jaco Loots (Current MZCPLA Chairman)**

The declaration of the MZCPE has been a celebration of firsts. It was the first PE to be declared nationally through the Minister and, even with the original declaration alone, holds the record in DFFE for the largest protected area to be declared in one go. The partnership with the MZCPE has been a first for SANParks and the potential the MZCPE has to assist in the management of the park buffer zones is unique.

The MZCPE membership process remains completely voluntary, meaning that each landowner who becomes part of the MZCPE 'family' does so because they want to be there and believe in what the MZCPE aims to achieve.



*Old stone fence pillars are a reminder of days gone by
(Bronwyn Botha)*

The MZCPE would not have become a reality without the partnership with SANParks and the enabling environment they created to get the project going. Thanks need to go out to the many partners that helped SANParks and MZCPE navigate their way, like the Wilderness Foundation, Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency (ECPTA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in South Africa and the DFFE. Thanks also need to go out to CEPF for funding the original project and the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) for making the last five years possible under the GEF-5 PA Project and for supporting the MZCPE in so many long

term ways. And to the heroes of this story, the landowners of the MZCPE - this story would not have been written without them. SANParks is looking forward to writing the next chapters together.

"To have been the driver of such a unique project has been the highlight of my career and a story I will be part of no matter where life takes me. Many may see the hectares achieved, but I walk away being more deeply impacted by the number of landowners on this journey with us, and by their passion, drive and commitment to safeguarding this stunning landscape and the biodiversity it holds for generations to come"

– Bronwyn Botha (Buffer Zone Coordinator)

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