

## **Abstract**

In this study I set out to explore how actors, discourses and material conditions interact in processes of land restitution and nature conservation, and further how these processes impact on livelihood practices and landscapes. With the Dukuduku forest in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, as a case I attempt to answer the following research questions: (i) What policies, discourses and practices have contributed to the present struggles over the Dukuduku forest; (ii) what formations of power, landscape and resource rights are the outcomes of these processes; and (iii) how do actors form narratives, advance interests and claim rights, and with what consequences? These questions are addressed in four interrelated papers, placed within the field of political ecology, where discourse and narrative analysis and environmental history are central. Primary data consists of interviews with forest dwellers, as well as with key persons in various sectors, such as conservation, forestry, agriculture and the land restitution apparatus. In addition, archival inquiries and analysis of historical accounts, maps and aerial photographs have been essential.

The Dukuduku forest lies adjacent to the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, a World Heritage Site in the littoral region of northern KwaZulu-Natal, and is a key example of the difficulties of reconciling concerns for rights to land and livelihoods with nature conservation in post-apartheid South Africa. This study shows, firstly, how state attempts at creating useful landscapes, through perceptions of empty and fertile land, has been an overarching theme in the history of the forest area. While the resident Africans were forcibly removed in the wake of forestry operations during the past century, the forest was increasingly valued as an indigenous forest. Informal settlements were established in the forest from the late 1980s, and a claim for the return of right to the forest through the country's land restitution scheme was lodged in 1998, by a group of families claiming ancestral rights. Although it has been gazetted, the claim remains unsettled to this day, and during the last decade the land claimants have been outnumbered by people settling

in the forest area without ancestral rights. Meanwhile, initiatives are underway to secure parts of the historical forest area for conservation, and incorporate it into the wetland park.

Through an examination of an unresolved claim for land restitution, this study points to some of the challenges with a process that attempts to link a distant past to the present. These processes create great expectations, at the same time as they disregard socio-economic change and landscape transformation over the last century, since the forced removals in the 1930s. In providing for such communities of the past, land restitution is part of a process where authority and sense of community are challenged in unpredictable ways. Although land restitution carries a strong moral appeal, it is challenged by local complexities and instead of bringing closure on a troubled history, it may lead to new conflicts emerging and old conflicts resurfacing. Moreover, this study demonstrates the importance of representations of the past for struggles over land and resources. History is, in processes of nature conservation and land restitution, mobilised and drawn upon in various ways, through reference to notions of timelessness and origin. Narratives explaining the transformation of the forest area also come with certain prescriptions for appropriate future land use. My analysis of these competing visions for the future, shows how issues of land rights, through claims to land restitution, are overshadowed by imperatives of conservation.