

Empowering Communities through Frog and Wetland Conservation

By Jiba Magwaza, Threatened Amphibian Programme Intern

Conservation without the inclusion of people does not always work. In order to address the issue of South Africa being environmentally sound, education and training is vital because not everyone is aware of the fact that our ecosystems are threatened. As a Community Development student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and an intern of the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), Threatened Amphibian Programme (TAP) I have come to realise that increasing beneficiary consultation during project planning or beneficiary involvement in the management of project implementation or operation also increases project efficiency. One of the TAP projects that can attest to the latter is the vegetable garden project at Isipingo. The Isipingo vegetable garden project includes four local gardeners that used to plant their vegetables in a threatened wetland, this then partly disturbed its wellbeing. With proper engagement and through a conservation agreement drawn up with the gardeners, they have since moved out of the wetland and now plant on the edge where there is little or no disturbance. Of course this was not an easy task but it is amazing how community projects can run smoothly if stakeholders are engaged properly and are made part of the project as this empowers them.

Another exciting project that that seeks to develop communities we work with is the National Resource Management (NRM) project. Here we look at empowering our hardworking alien clearing teams through tool box talks. Tool box talks are used to engage alien clearing workers in Durban on issues of the environment and getting them to change their attitude towards nature but focusing on frogs and wetlands. I have seen how much these tool box talks make the teams excited to work with nature and to get more involved rather than just clearing alien plants and going home. Teams are now able to do monitoring of any species they come across be it fauna or flora, this is important because we need to know what other species are found around our working areas. Workers attitude surveys help us understand how the teams feel about the project that is if they happy or not and if they have any difficulty. The surveys are done using an individual questionnaire that is confidential, this is to make sure that everyone shares their experiences without any fear. It is heartwarming to see that teams now understand the reason behind their work and how it is important not only to them but to the whole ecosystem. A lesson that I have learnt working in these projects is that community development does not always have to take the form of monetary benefits, but one can also develop a community by sharing knowledge and education.