

Bathurst commonage



How do we manage its various uses sustainably?

History

Erf 1, Bathurst – the Commonage – is believed to have been given to “the citizens of Bathurst” by Queen Victoria, but few people seem to be clear about exactly when in the 19th century, and our idea of who those “citizens” are has changed a bit since then!

The purpose was primarily to provide a resting and grazing space for draught oxen and horses, so its first use was as a giant “filling station”, like the Co-op today, or tomorrow’s EV recharge points!

Like all commonages, all over the Eastern Cape and also in the UK, Bathurst commonage belonged to everyone and no-one. It was free to use – for logging, for agriculture, for grazing, whatever.



And it’s more or less survived like that for the best part of 200 years, although there have been periods when it was quite seriously degraded.

Examples include when the early settlers chopped out all the big yellowwood trees for building timber and firewood, and the big sneezewoods for firing lime kilns and river steamers, and making fencing posts. There are still no big sneezewood or yellowwood trees, and therefore no more cape parrots in this area.

And again, before 1942 there was totally uncontrolled use of the land, with serious degradation of the vegetation, leading to erosion.

What is the Commonage and what does it do?

It is several thousand hectares of **Thicket**, interspersed with a bit of grassland, on mostly quite steep hilly terrain, in a swathe around Bathurst.

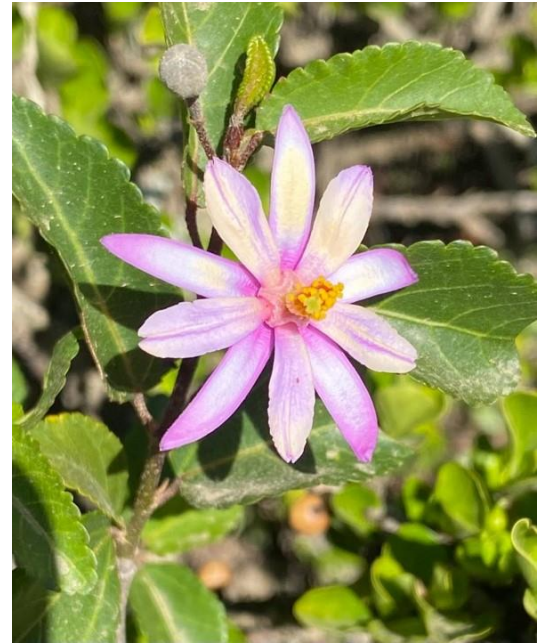
It's a large part of the essentially picturesque, rural character of our area.

It also provides major eco-system services, that is natural benefits. And, unlike grass, continues to deliver these benefits as much during droughts as in good years.

The most important of its natural benefits is that the bush of the commonage **contributes to our air quality** – increases oxygen levels, sequestrates carbon, reduces dust.

Thicket prevents erosion from occasional heavy rain, ensures enough water seeps into our underground resources, and helps to filter run-off into streams and rivers.

Bush provides food, for people, animals, birds and honey bees. Many of the local Thicket fruits are very useful dietary supplements in terms of vitamins and minerals, besides being a potential income generator if converted into saleable products like preserves, jams and chutneys. And the plants provide browse material for game as well as cows and goats.



What are people using the commonage for now?

At least nine categories of present-day use.



RECREATION. This includes walking/hiking, horse riding, mountain biking, 4 x 4 ing (especially when it's muddy), exercising dogs, relaxing in nature, camping. These activities are almost exclusively associated with Village residents (white people).

The two **causes for concern** are **erosion resulting from 4x4ing**, and the fact that **people leave cattle gates open** and stock that should be kept separate gets mixed up.

There is **potential for job creation** through the training of guides for birding, hiking, conservation, etc.

LIVESTOCK GRAZING. An estimated 600 cattle are running in four camps on the commonage, and an unknown number of goats, perhaps a few pigs.

These belong to various owners, mainly from Nolukhanyo, Freestone and Thembisa. Some are continuing a practice started by their grandparents.

Causes for concern are potential over-grazing resulting in degradation of the vegetation, and potential conflict in the community as to grazing rights.

Of potentially greater concern is the fact that there are cattle "farmers" in the township who are using the roadside rather than the commonage as grazing.

Meanwhile this activity **provides an income** for a number of families.



TRADITIONAL CEREMONIES. Both the winter and summer “bush schools” and many traditional religious ceremonies take place on the commonage, and have probably done so since before it was formally declared as Erf 1.

No significant concerns attach to these uses, apart from the possibility that fire burning huts at the end of “bush school” may get out of control.



MEDICINE HARVESTING. Both the amagqirha themselves and commercial medicine harvesters gather herbs, roots and barks from commonage plants.

Generally traditional healers are very respectful and careful in their harvesting. **The cause for concern** is that commercial harvesters tend to be unconcerned about sustainability.

HUNTING / AKA POACHING. When it’s not Rhino, hunting is generally not with firearms, which would in any case be illegal in a municipal area.

Hunting with packs of dogs is common, though also illegal. It is, however, a traditional Xhosa sport, as well as a way of providing families with food and/or an income.

Setting snares is another common, and also illegal, form of hunting.

The causes for concern here are the **culture clash** between groups in the Bathurst community, and the matter of **sustainability for wildlife** and biodiversity.

GATHERING FIREWOOD. It has been noticed that this has increased since load shedding started.

The **major concern** is that we should not repeat the mistakes of our forefathers and chop out all the best woods to meet our short term needs.



AGRICULTURE. A few people have been trying to “farm” areas of the commonage. For example, plastic covered tunnels have been erected and abandoned. A small area is occasionally ploughed. This could be a **major source of much needed food and provide a number of jobs**, without any further incursions into natural bush.



AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH. There are those who say the ARC research farm is also on commonage land. As the current Rhodes study has discovered, it is in fact very difficult to establish exactly where the boundaries of the commonage lie, and just what its extent is, or what its original extent was.

MINING / QUARRYING There have been various applications i.r.o. sand mining and the reopening of the Freestone rock quarry. We don't know at this stage what the outcomes may have been.



WASTE DISPOSAL. The municipal rubbish dump is on the commonage. So are a lot of informal and illegal dumpings of rubbish!

The management and policing of the rubbish dump and illegal dumping should form an important part of the commonage management plan. At **present dumping is a health hazard** to animals (6 cows dead in 2 years) because of plastic, and a source of toxic poisoning for humans due to frequent illegal fires. Heaven knows what is leaching into groundwater and the Lushington river from which much of our drinking water is pumped!.



Who's to manage and reconcile all this?

Well, at least since 1994, the municipality. But how?

In Ndlambe the management of the commonage falls **under Local Enterprise Development**. This is after all LAND, in a land-hungry country with a highly unequal ownership of land, and land is for development and reform, right?

What's supposed to happen is that the municipality should be working in conjunction with a community-based **Commonage Management Committee**. Does it? Heavens, no! It is supposed to publish a management plan as part of the spatial development planning process. Has it? No! Well, they said in July they'd send the draft to us, but it hasn't yet arrived.



The aim of the current community initiative

To ensure the survival of the commonage for our children and grandchildren – so they can continue to benefit from it as we do.



How? What works in conservation?

“Fence-and-exclude” does not work long term.

It’s a “colonial” style of “conservation imperialism” and it has failed or is failing everywhere.

What does work is the inclusion of all stakeholders and interested parties

in decision making and management of natural resources.

If they are not valued by and delivering value to their local communities, natural heritage sites are doomed.

Therefore a Commonage Management Committee is the only reasonable way forward.

It’s not simple, and is unlikely to be easy, but credible representatives of all interested groups need to sit together and develop an agreed (and enforceable) set of guidelines for the sustainable use of one of Bathurst’s (and Ndlambe’s) treasures.

The Bathurst Residents’ and Ratepayers’ Association proposes to take on this challenge in consultation with all relevant stakeholders to get the municipality to set up a Commonage Management Committee and to publish a management plan acceptable to all parties.



Elizabeth Milne

Chair: Bathurst Residents’ and Ratepayers’ Association

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