The Management of Communal Grazing Areas of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa: People, Vegetation, and Policy Interactions

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Introduction Scientific studies indicate poor range condition in communal areas ; high stocking rates and poor management are suggested to be contributing factors . Policy-makers use these findings to formulate policies aimed at improving these rangelands . In most of the cases perceptions and coping strategies of the resource users are not solicited . These recommendations are based on grazing system studies founded on the equilibrium theory , which assumes semi-arid rangelands being at equilibrium . It assumes that if rangeland carrying capacity is exceeded , the equilibrium between grazing pressure and the regenerative pressure of the vegetation will be upset , resulting in a deterioration in the state of the rangeland environment . However , these views have been criticised (Behnke & Scoones , 1993 ; Sullivan & Rohde , 2002 ; Homewood , 2004) . An investigation of the communal people's perceptions on the condition , erosion status and traditional institutions in the village was initiated to assess the relevance of the current policy and other initiatives implemented to improve range management and condition .

Materials and methods Socio-economic data were collected using participatory rural appraisals and questionnaire-based surveys in 553 households in eleven villages of Amatole , Chris Hani and Ukhahlamba districts of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa . Basal cover estimation was conducted in three villages to corroborate people's perceptions on range condition .

Results and discussion Respondents were not familiar with any national range management policies . Lack of or existence of weak local level institutions and absence of rules governing use (30%) were some identified constraints in range management . 49% of respondents considered their veld as in good condition and the basal cover results slightly matched the people's perceptions . Institutions controlling access to range significantly ($p<0.05$) varied with villages , with a higher percentage of respondents acknowledging lack of institutions in all villages . Tribal authority institutions are strong in only two of the eleven villages . The success of any intervention to improve communal area grazing management depends to a large extent on the presence and effectiveness of local level institutions and organizations (Rasmussen & Meinzen-Dick , 1995) .

In focus group discussions participants indicated that soil erosion , bush encroachment , change in grass species , lack of fencing and uncontrolled burning are the challenges on their rangelands . They also observed that species like *Acacia karroo* , *Euryops pyroides* and Acacia *mearnsii* (black wattle) are problem woody plants . There is generally a mismatch between scientific results on condition (low basal cover) and the perception of villagers (good condition) . This indicates that the condition of the rangeland , to villagers , is in relation to use , which is largely grazing their livestock .

Conclusions We conclude that the complex processes inherent in communal rangeland functioning need a holistic approach , involving resource users , scientists and policy formulators for improved management to bear fruits . Inadequate publicity of range management related policies , and failure to incorporate resource users in policy formulation and implementation contributes to the weak or lack of local level institutions .

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