



## **PhD Study Opportunity - Carbon Credits Governance in Empowering Rural Communities: An Alternative Biodiversity Funding**

### **Executive Summary**

In a time of changing global conservation funding, where traditional methods have negatively impacted community livelihoods due to revenue shortfalls, this PhD research project proposes utilising carbon credits as a transformative and equitable alternative for funding biodiversity. This study, hosted at the University of the Free State (UFS) Geography Department on the Bloemfontein Campus and in collaboration with WildTrust, will explore the willingness of local communities in KwaZulu-Natal Province to participate in carbon credit schemes. By prioritising community voices and addressing governance challenges such as land rights and potential cession, this research aims to develop inclusive models that balance environmental stewardship with socio-economic resilience.

The project is structured around three interconnected pillars: (1) Community Willingness and Socio-Economic Resilience, (2) Governance and Equitable Land Stewardship, and (3) Innovative Funding Pathways and Policy Integration. With partial funding of R50,000 per year for three years, this initiative offers a PhD candidate the chance to drive real-world impact through mixed-methods fieldwork and interdisciplinary collaboration. This is a rare opportunity to conduct impactful PhD research at the intersection of conservation finance, community development, and land governance, with direct access to active carbon credit projects, established community partnerships, and one of Southern Africa's leading conservation NGOs.

### **Background and Rationale**

Global funding for biodiversity conservation is currently in flux, as donors shift their focus toward climate-aligned investments. This transition leaves rural communities in South Africa vulnerable to income losses due to disrupted eco-tourism and reduced access to resources. Carbon credits that utilise natural carbon sinks, such as forests and grasslands, offer a promising solution. However, their success depends on community buy-in and strong governance to prevent exploitation or displacement.

This research addresses a critical gap by empirically assessing community perspectives in WildTrust's operational areas, ensuring that carbon credit models are not only feasible but also equitable. In line with the University of the Free State's strengths in human geography and sustainability, the project will generate evidence-based recommendations for scaling community-led conservation finance in South Africa, aligned with the National Agricultural Strategy.

### **The Three Pillars of Focus**

The research framework is based on three key pillars, each addressing an essential aspect of the challenge while promoting synergies for comprehensive outcomes:

*Pillar 1: Community Willingness and Socio-Economic Resilience* - This pillar focuses on assessing local attitudes, barriers, and incentives for participating in carbon credit programs.

*Pillar 2: Governance and Equitable Land Stewardship* - This pillar analyses the governance structures within carbon credit schemes, emphasising land rights, equitable decision-making, and safeguards to prevent land cession or dispossession.

*Pillar 3: Innovative Funding Pathways and Policy Integration* - This pillar seeks to design scalable, community-centred carbon credit models and incorporate the resulting findings into policy to promote broader reforms in biodiversity funding.

### **Supervision and Application Procedure**

We are looking for a passionate PhD candidate to lead this initiative under the supervision of Dr. Regis Musavengane (UFS), Dr. Roelie Kloppers (WildTrust) and Dr. Tapiwa Nyamukapa (UFS). Please send your application letter, concept note, CV, and academic records to Geography Department at [GeographyBFNPD@ufs.ac.za](mailto:GeographyBFNPD@ufs.ac.za) by 05 April 2026. The successful candidate will commence on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2026.