



## **Value chain analysis of the Witsieshoek Community Conservation Area and its environment**

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In terms of Chapter 13, “Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development” of Agenda 21, mountains all over the world are considered as fragile ecosystems, where biodiversity, land cover and land use patterns are not only highly spatially variable but also under threat from human activities. Consequently, mountainous areas comprise complex social-ecological systems, coupling natural and social systems, the dynamics of which are poorly understood. Despite the substantial literature that already exists on mountain-based ecosystems in South Africa focusing on ecotourism and sustainable development, tourism and conservation of biological and cultural heritage planning, marketing and economies, the effects of recent climate change on mountain tourism, and the impact of these and other land uses on the environment, there is little evidence suggesting that the dynamics of mountain based socio-ecological systems have been given sufficient research attention. Even more limited is research on the sustainability of these systems.

Consequently, this project focuses on two critical issues related to montane social-ecological systems: (1) the nexus between people and their environment through the value chains that local communities derive from their natural environment within the Eastern Free State Bioregion, and (2) the sustainability of development practices in the region, especially those related to natural resource extraction and tourism. The central question in this project is about the extent to which communities that are found in the region, including those juxtaposed to the recently proposed Witsieshoek Community Conservation Area (WCCA), an integral part of the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation Area (M-DTFCA), and found along the Maluti Tourism Route, which links a number of tourism attractions and natural resource extraction nodes, will be sustainable in a policy environment where natural resource extraction is seemingly “unregulated”. Therefore, objectives of the proposed research are:

- To determine the types of resources that local communities derive from the proposed WCCA and how these communities are benefiting from the resources.
- To identify the main challenges that threaten the environment in the WCCA, including those related to human settlement (informal settlement in particular), natural resource harvesting and development.
- To determine the value chains that are derived from the WCCA and its surroundings (including those related to route tourism), and establish how improved conservation practices can enhance the potential sustainability of these chains.

The project has a number of sub-themes, embracing a doctoral thesis on the sustainability of montane tourism and three honours dissertations.

For more information: Refer to Dr Mukwada’s profile listed under Researchers/Project leaders