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Ordinary Magic: The Alchemy of Biodiversity and Development in Cape Flats Nature

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I was new to nature conservation when I became Cape Flats Nature's first project manager in late 2002 and was introduced to the ecosystems formally known as the Cape lowlands: once an unbroken mosaic of dunes and wetlands, the lowlands now offer a few highly fragmented and often degraded natural habitats.

The Cape Flats I had known before, as a life-long citizen and social activist in Cape Town, was one of social, not natural, fragmentation, marked by the railway lines designed to separate communities according to skin color under Apartheid—White, Colored, Black African, or Indian. This classification determined people's political, economic, and social rights and status—from the right to vote, to where one could live and work and what work one could do, to the quality of education and health care one received. In my mind, the Cape Flats starts just beyond the leafy suburbs of the white and largely wealthy on the slopes of Table Mountain. It extends to the outer boundary of Cape Town's largest township, far from Table Mountain and economic opportunity, where residents are most likely black, unemployed, living with HIV/AIDS, and crammed into the shacks of sprawling informal settlements without basic services. In between these two extremes, Cape Town's creole communities live sandwiched in space and on the scale of inequity—most much closer than they would like to their fellow black citizens.

This fragmentation in the social fabric is marked by gangsterism, high levels of substance abuse, and pervasive violent crime: all permeating homes and families with a destructiveness that Apartheid's architects would relish.

Since the advent of democracy in 1994, people live as equal citizens before the law, but both the spatial and less tangible fractures of discrimination and inequity have proved hard to mend. Citizenship is easier to express through a cross on a ballot slip at election time than through everyday engagement with organs of government, despite the exemplary constitution, translated into ample policy and legislation, that frames our democracy.[1]

The nature conservation sector's work in Cape Town reflected the social fragmentation of the city. Until the 1990s, the focus had been on conserving the fynbos, or shrubland, of Table Mountain and engaging nearby wealthy white communities. In most national contexts, the work was biased toward large protected areas in rural landscapes. Little effort had been put into conserving smaller urban fragments where the majority of citizens and decision-makers are located—Statistics South Africa's 2006 census indicates that 53.7 percent of South Africa's population was urban.[2]

Historically, nature conservation practice had focused on protecting nature from people, seeing them as separate from natural systems. Cape Flats Nature played an important role in giving expression to a landscape approach to conservation planning in which people are seen as part of "living landscapes."[3]

A Radical Intention

In 2002, Cape Flats Nature started sustainably managing Cape Town's Biodiversity Network by building local capacity through the city's previously disenfranchised majority population. The hope was for ordinary citizens of Cape Town and government decisionmakers—local and otherwise—to value biodiversity conservation. Given the ecological and social context of the work—fragmented nature sites, fragmented communities—this intention was nothing less than radical. It was formally framed in the project's title as "mainstreaming biodiversity."

Though a contested phrase, for us "mainstreaming" was about building the meaning and relevance of biodiversity in the everyday lives of ordinary people living around nature reserves, contributing to what was important to local people, and doing it in a way that strengthened local community structures and processes. It was both about addressing community needs through nature conservation and about catalyzing conservation action as an ordinary part of community life. It was about building an understanding of how natural systems support life in our cities. Our work challenged "biodiversity first," a notion deeply held among traditional nature conservators, who saw it as their role to provide voice to biodiversity amid uncaring citizens. Cape Flats Nature was instead interested in building a constituency for conservation among citizens who understand themselves to be living as part of natural systems.

This conception of mainstreaming asked us to enter every community with humility, open to people knowing, understanding, and valuing nature differently. It demanded honesty and explicit acknowledgment of where we were coming from—the conservation world—and our passion for what nature has to offer.

The first phase of Cape Flats Nature, through 2006, was designed to demonstrate that conservation sites can be managed in a way that benefits and involves local communities. These four years concluded with tremendous success that resounds today through the broader culture of conservation in Cape Town.

The second phase, from 2007 to 2010, deepened and spread those good practices. We did this in two ways: first, through institutional collaborations with City Biodiversity Management and other relevant groups in order to share practices across different sites; and second, by supporting the introduction of management at two new sites in the city. Throughout its tenure, Cape Flats Nature maintained a catalytic role, never directly managing the sites with which it worked.

We began with seed funding from the City of Cape Town and the Table Mountain Fund of WWF-SA, together with in-kind contributions from other partners—the South African National Biodiversity Institute (the implementing partner), and the Botanical Society of South Africa. These founding partners had a substantial history that culminated in Cape Flats Nature, which enabled us to receive a small project development grant from a potential international donor for full scale project implementation.[4] We used this to do our planning.

Acts of Listening

More than 10 years ago, we started by listening to the stories of anyone who had worked with or who knew the communities around the four pilot sites assigned to the project. Sites were allocated based on their proximity to previously disadvantaged communities and their diversity of size, vegetation type, and history of community engagement. The 39 hectare Edith Stephens Wetland Park, for instance, comprised a natural seasonal wetland and a built storm water detention pond. It had the most developed infrastructure, with a farmhouse restored for use as an environmental education center and an amphitheater constructed from dumped rubble. It is centrally located between five diverse residential communities and Cape Town's agricultural area. Philippi is historically Cape Town's vegetable basket and also includes some of the city's densest black African informal settlements, Hanover Park and Manenberg are historically "colored" communities, and Nyanga and Gugulethu historically "African" with a mixture of formal and informal housing. The infrastructure at Edith Stephens was developed and alien vegetation cleared through engagement with the surrounding communities, but the site was only being accessed in a very ad hoc way at the time Cape Flats Nature started—it was not yet alive with community activity.

Wolfgat Nature Reserve and Macassar Dunes Conservation Area, two other project sites, hug the False Bay coast and are covered with Cape Flats dune strandveld. They border Cape Town's largest "colored" community on the Wolfgat side—Mitchells Plain, created through forced removals from the city center under Apartheid; and Cape Town's largest African township on the Macassar side—Khayelitsha, formed unplanned, as economic migrants flocked to Cape Town from the Eastern Cape "homelands" illegally looking for work in what was demarcated as a "colored" labor preference area. Macassar Dunes has more than 178 plant species in 1,000 hectares, many of which are used in traditional African medicine, whereas Wolfgat Nature Reserve is smaller (248 hectares), but protects spectacular coastal limestone cliffs.

Finally, Harmony Flats Nature Reserve is a small nine hectare site containing critically endangered Lourensford alluvium fynbos, with over 220 plant species in this small area. It is surrounded by low and middle income "colored" communities on three sides. An upmarket housing estate was developed on the fourth side during the course of the project. Community members had torn down a fence surrounding the site, plagued by too-frequent fires, and positive community activity was infrequent and short-lived. There was very little organization at the community level, and initial efforts in these communities entailed knocking on doors of Reserve neighbors.

All of our early work within local communities was more than a process of information gathering. In the shadow of Apartheid, it was a process of observation, of beginning to understand the narratives of inclusion and exclusion, fragmentation and healing. This process helped to orient our new effort and set the tone for how we would learn from practice as we went along.

The listening process helped us map the social system around each of the sites and to understand the starting point for a conversation. With this, we formulated a foundational visioning question for a project design workshop for each site, and decided whom to invite. We were as inclusive as possible, making the extra effort to think laterally about whose work could benefit from access to nature—from formal political structures and NGOs to individual residents living close to the sites.

We did not promise anything to communities. We simply offered Cape Flats Nature as a space for people, together, to imagine what was possible. The initial visioning workshops set the tone for a "working with" relationship around the sites, primarily between the city and civil society, as opposed to a patronizing "working for" or an antagonistic "protecting against."[5]

Based on this site-level listening over a three month period, we selected community champions from each site to take the process forward. Together with local institutional partners, we asked these champions how Cape Flats Nature could provide support. At a workshop held towards the end of 2002, two priorities highlighted through this process fundamentally shaped Cape Flats Nature's intervention.

First, the city needed to provide dedicated on-the-ground management for each of the sites. It was not surprising that nature conservation officials saw this as important, given that it would swell their scarce ranks. But community leaders also wanted a real person to talk to about their plans for the sites. In part, Cape Flats Nature was being asked to build a conduit to local government and, through it, stronger civil society engagement.

Second, site champions requested the opportunity to learn from each other. This led to the formation of the Champions' Forum, where community and conservation management champions from the partnership sites convened to share experiences and learn together. It has met quarterly since early 2003, with the content and form of the sessions determined by the participants. Since early in its formation, the Forum meetings have rotated across the sites, with partners at the host site playing an active role in describing the rich natural resources and social engagement, as well as challenging issues, particular to their site.

Moving into Action

Cape Flats Nature never implemented activities itself, but worked with local community partners to think through site activity objectives and help plan and draw support for them. For example, inviting environmental educators to contribute and provide materials, organizing other city departments to contribute traffic control services or bags for clean-up activities, or promoting the activities in local community media. We didn't pay for the time given by individuals and people in local organizations, as this was their contribution to the partnership. This remains a much-debated issue, but the absence of any promise of income in those early days allowed for integrity of intention in the engagement. After each activity, we would bring together everyone involved to reflect and draw lessons for further activities.

The absence of real financial incentive in the partnership, and this rigorous effort to learn continuously, demanded that we and our partners really get to know each other and work through difficult issues. In this way, we joined the ecological and the social into a less fragmented whole—just as we were hoping that people would begin to see the value and beauty of nature, we were all beginning to see the value and beauty of social process as a facet of ecological wholeness. Collectively, we were developing a sense for what it takes to maintain a living environment on all levels through the wonder and challenge of paying attention.

With detailed write-ups about work to be done on each site, we received funding to implement the full project, and I was able to recruit the project team to start in 2004. The core project team was responsible for catalyzing, supporting, publicizing, and documenting our approach, maintaining the institutional partnerships, and driving partnership advocacy efforts. A team of nature conservation managers was hired for on-the-ground management of each partnership site.

Our mandate in employing the nature conservators was to find newly emerging, black nature conservation graduates, preferably from the communities in which the project worked, or otherwise from areas facing similar developmental challenges elsewhere in the country. The nature conservators were employed by the project implementing partner but seconded to work under city management responsible for the project sites. One of the project components was to secure conservators' permanent employment by the city on the basis of sound demonstration that they could contribute to delivering on the city's development objectives. This was partly to address the Apartheid legacy of a predominance of white nature conservators in the city and beyond. But, equally, because understanding the communities with which we worked and being able to engage with people on their own terms formed such an important basis for the work.

I am often quoted by the nature conservators as telling the new team during their induction program in their first week on the job: "You're allowed to f**k up, as long as you learn from your mistakes and share the lessons with us all." Part of the magic was in that approach.

Growing a Living Practice

Against institutional realities, the formal roles and responsibilities we had set out for the nature conservators were quickly revealed to be wishful thinking.

The approach of the previous generations of nature conservators had been that of the "lone ranger" able to liberate resources from elsewhere in the city through a network of relationships built over extended periods of time and often with strong mentorship from an elder. The young people we employed were post-Apartheid, the first critical mass of black nature conservators in the city, and they weren't able to access mentorship or build networks in the same way as their white predecessors. We were also under pressure from the city and other donors to demonstrate success within relatively short time periods.

Only a few months into the project, the nature conservators had been shunted across different departments as part of several restructuring exercises. They remained without operational equipment (including phones and computers) and were feeling overwhelmed by the size of their jobs and the minimal support they received from the city. They asked to meet weekly with Cape Flats Nature's core project team and we agreed.

Through these weekly team meetings, work alongside each other in the field, quarterly site review meetings, and day-to-day pondering in our offices and reception area, the practice grew between us, together with myriad questions about it.

The intimacy established through regular contact meant that we paid as much attention to nurturing the development of our team as we did to nurturing community partnerships. The nature conservators often used what they learned from our Cape Flats Nature processes to develop teams on their site. The Cape Flats Nature team was part of early efforts in this direction, but after time it took on a life of its own. *And this may be the real magic: the work of the project out there in the world was nurtured through the work we did internally. We transformed our external reality through our internal practice*.

For example, one of the sites had inherited a steering committee comprising officials and community representatives, put together by city planning officials responsible for renovating an old farmhouse into an environmental education center. It was part of the nature conservation manager's brief to coordinate and work with this steering committee. But she found that it took vast energy to convene the committee, and meetings did not result in significant action at the site. After listening to her feedback over an extended period of time, the Cape Flats team agreed that she should try a different strategy. She chose to "go out" to community structures, and soon found herself

participating actively in the local community policing forum. Over time, this resulted in the use of the environmental education center to host peace talks between rival gangs in the area, and as a location for youth diversion activities such as holiday programs.

At another site, a manager was also experiencing community engagement as a drain, finding the effort she was putting into an annual youth clean-up hike disproportionate to the reward. She brought this feedback to the team over a period of time, but was encouraged by her peers to persist and look for opportunities to draw on community support to achieve her management objectives. Then, a community member who had met her through one of the clean-up hikes alerted her to substantial illegal dumping taking place within her site boundary. A local city councillor was implicated in the dumping. And though the manager was limited in the official action she could take, she was able to work with members of that community to address the issue. The engagement also expanded her network of community champions.

Throughout, the role of Cape Flats Nature was to build capacity, first in discussion about effective conservation practices, then increasingly as a collective space for listening to experiences and learning through case studies. Cape Town hired the nature conservators in 2005, and they became permanent employees in 2006, though the institutional environment remained unstable for some time to come. As the nature conservators became more independent and absorbed into city management processes, the project team developed its own learning processes, skills, and methods in order to bring fresh ideas into the forums with nature conservators and community partners. Over the years, the "touch" of Cape Flats Nature was lighter and lighter, but always deeply invested in learning. In 2007, we put this learning to work with two additional sites in Cape Town that previously did not have dedicated management, and also shared it through processes with staff of the city's newly formed Biodiversity Management Branch as a whole.

Towards the end of the institutionalization phase of Cape Flats Nature's work, we developed the case studies into a book, *Growing Together: Thinking and Practice of Urban Nature Conservators*,[6] published just as the Cape Flats Nature project was closed in 2010. Seeing our work reflected in the book was a learning process in itself, just as our thinking evolved and grew through the writing. The extent to which building community was so central to Cape Flats Nature's practice—that braiding of social and environmental fabrics through engagement, not just a delivery of services to a passive citizenry—had come up in our second evaluation five years into the project, but it took me until the book to hear it fully. I imagine it was hard for me to immediately perceive this because I was so wrapped up in the ordinary magic of our practice. It was in the relationships we engaged in: the way of relating expressed through the myriad ordinary activities undertaken with a love and respect that is too often absent. There is very little of my voice in the book. Yet, I marvel at how much my original intentions came back to me through the words and stories of others.

The Community as Fence

In preparation for writing this paper, I interviewed one of the nature conservators with whom I had worked from the beginning. She identified "the space to form [her] own opinion" as critical to her development as a young professional, now responsible for allowing others space to do the same.[7] She placed the learning processes we had developed at the core of her current practice.

For me, this is the most striking manifestation of Cape Flats Nature: the people who remain engaged on the ground, building the practice as they work—those with whom we worked directly in the team, those with whom they went on to work, others who came into the city later and for whom the practice resonated. New projects that focus very explicitly on reaching biodiversity targets also include elements designed to maximize socioeconomic benefits and engage community stakeholders. At all levels of biodiversity management in the city, we now see the fingerprint of Cape Flats Nature.

Nature conservators who were part of the Cape Flats Nature team have decided to continue with case study learning practices adopted through the project, and have expanded their group to include other colleagues interested in building the practice. The Champions' Forum also continues: the City of Cape Town facilitates it, and participants determine its character and form. Mentorship is recognized by the city as vital to building a strong team in biodiversity management. The practice has bred a life of its own.

This quality of the practice that emerged through Cape Flats Nature—"ordinary magic"—can give us heart: ordinary people in all levels of government and in communities (regardless of context) can create it. In this case, it took only eight years to root. It persists now. It continues to grow without the protective shell of the project that once held it tight.

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I am in a group of seven or eight community partners, together with a senior manager from the city's Biodiversity Management Branch who has been antagonistic towards Cape Flats Nature and unsupportive towards the nature conservators who came through the project. He is questioning the viability of community-led conservation action, challenging the rest of us to define community, challenging the notion that the community can be the "fence" of the nature reserve. I watch with pride as, one by one, the community champions speak powerfully from their experience about what they have done to protect "their" reserve; speak about what the reserve offers their community; what motivates them to protect it; and where and how they act on behalf of the reserve. I don't say a word.

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It's May 2011, nearly a year since Cape Flats Nature closed, four years since I worked directly in the project team. I'm hosting a learning exchange group of nature conservators of various ranks from another of South Africa's eight metropolitan municipalities. We're visiting some of the original Cape Flats Nature pilot sites. Two days in, I'm feeling like the proud mom of grown-up children.

An environmental education officer who wasn't around in those heady days when the project began meets us at a site. He transferred into nature conservation from a decommissioned power station in the city. He passionately shares his practice with the group. I recognize his practice as the Cape Flats Nature practice, but it has grown in him and through him, with the other nature conservators who were intensely involved at that time, and without us. He is engaging different community partners in different ways. He does law enforcement by inviting drug-taking youth to participate in reserve activities. He is passionate and alive in his work.

At another site, the visitors are horrified that informal—"illegal"—brick recyclers plying their trade on the border of the reserve are being encouraged by the nature reserve to formalize their livelihood activity. The nature conservation manager is pursuing this activity in partnership with an NGO based in that community and the city's Economic Development Department. She's also looking at developing a small soccer field between the nature reserve and the site where the brick recycling activity takes place. The idea is that it will serve as a buffer, and prevent children in the informal settlement from crossing the national road to get to the field across the way. (Recently, a child was killed after being run over by a car.) This project has taken years of relationship building with and through community partners. It looks poised to be realized. It wasn't something Cape Flats Nature had thought of. It has grown in a way that reflects the principles we worked with, but it takes the practice, quite literally, into new territory.

At the same site, a community-implemented Expanded Project Works Program (EPWP) has brought in

workers to clear an invasive plant from the storm water detention pond. The invasive has severely damaged birdlife and other aspects of the ecosystem at the site. The problem has been around for years, and bureaucratic bungling has destroyed any faith in the city's ability to address it through ordinary operational budget allocations. They go beyond the boundaries of a typical EPWP project, researching the viability of replacing the function of the invasive in the ecosystem with an indigenous edible plant used in traditional cooking. University students are recruited to conduct the research. Laborers on the project are trained in research skills. Other NGO partners are sought to provide the laborers with work experience in other fields beyond the reserve. Not a cent relating to the project is managed by the reserve staff. They manage the labor team and coordinate training in the skills required for the work as well as other abilities that will render the laborers more employable at the end of the project. They work through tough issues with the team—things as basic as punctuality, reliability, and respect for people from diverse backgrounds—in the ways we learned to confront tough issues in Cape Flats Nature. But the ingenuity of this partnership lies solely with the nature conservation manager and in the relationships she has built over the years. She is stretching the practice beyond anything we did. It is new and fresh and alive.

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