

# Stewardship case study

## Sour figs: providing sustainable benefits for communities

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**CapeNature has opened some of its reserves to allow local communities to benefit from harvesting sour figs, while attempting to control large scale poaching:**

- **Substantial benefits now flow to highly impoverished local communities.**
- **Sustainable harvesting techniques are protecting vulnerable coastal vegetation.**
- **Local landowners are incentivized to maintain natural vegetation.**
- **Authorized harvesters help control poaching, and may in future contribute to patrols.**
- **Trust has been established through effective communication and genuine give and take.**

The objective of stewardship is to support conservation in a living landscape which includes local communities. Along the South West Coast, community groups harvest sour figs sustainably within reserves and work with CapeNature to help control poaching. This has resulted in substantial benefits for local communities and demonstrates the potential of CapeNature's commitment to support the development of a conservation economy.

Sour figs are used as a medicinal plant and to make preserves. These succulents have traditionally been harvested by local coastal communities. The primary harvest season runs from October to March, with a second, lower quality, harvest in the middle of the year. Traditionally people have harvested over the Christmas holidays to provide additional income for the festive season. The additional income has also been used to pay for school expenses at the beginning of the school year. Children have accompanied their parents on harvesting trips during their holidays, while students have also harvested through the summer months.

These coastal communities generally have high levels of unemployment and the income derived from harvesting these plants has been critical for the local economy.

In recent years a substantial commercial market has developed for sour figs. Local prices range from R35 to R65 per kilogram, while international exporters will pay as much as R100 per kilogram. The fruits are sold raw or processed into a jam.

### OVERHARVESTING LEADS TO REGULATION

The development of a commercial market resulted in people travelling to the area specifically to harvest the wild figs. These outsiders were often based in the large cities and harvested in a number of different rural areas. They had no incentive to harvest sustainably, resulting in substantial degradation. Rural communities observed that local yields had decreased by as much as 70% over the past 40 years.

In order to counteract this overharvesting, CapeNature decided to regulate this rapidly growing industry. Since 1975 permits have been required to harvest wild sour figs on private land and in reserves. Landowners also require permits before they can allow people to harvest sour figs on their land.

However, as a result of the substantial demand, there is still a high level of illegal harvesting both on private land and in reserves. This requires intense policing from the provincial nature conservation staff which is both time consuming and expensive.

### OPENING UP RESERVES TO BENEFIT LOCAL COMMUNITIES

When the provincial conservation agency became the Western Cape Nature Conservation Board in 1998 its new vision was to support "the establishment of a successful 'Conservation Economy' – to be embraced by all citizens of the Western Cape and designed to transform biodiversity conservation into a key component of local economic development in the province".

In line with this new focus, instead of policing local communities to prevent them harvesting in reserves, it was decided to work with them to develop sustainable harvesting programmes. This represented a significant change in approach for reserve managers who had previously spent a large percentage of their time and budget policing reserves to keep illegal harvesters out.

CapeNature decided to open up some of its reserves along the South West Coast to permit sustainable harvesting of sour figs. The harvesting of sour figs was the first instance where CapeNature had opened up its reserves for large scale

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sustainable harvesting, and so provided a valuable learning exercise.

In order to make this new approach work, trust had to be established between the reserve managers and local communities. This process was facilitated by a team who had specialized in sustainable resource management.

## ESTABLISHMENT OF A PILOT PROJECT

Along the south coast between Hermanus and Struisbaai there are four provincial nature reserves protecting highly diverse coastal fynbos. They are collectively known as the Walker Bay Nature Reserve. These reserves contain substantial populations of indigenous edible wild figs. The primary species harvested in this area, *Carpobrotus acinaciformis*, is particularly sweet and commands high prices from buyers. It occurs in coastal sands from Saldanha to Mossel Bay.

The first sustainable wild fig harvesting agreement was established when the U'Zenzele Community Development Project approached CapeNature in September 2006 for permission to harvest within their reserves. This Non-Governmental Organization is based in the informal settlement of Eluxolweni on the outskirts of Gansbaai and is supported by a number of sponsors, including the National Development Agency.

The Eluxolweni community has up to 85% unemployment despite being part of one of the wealthiest municipalities in the country. It is described as a subsistence community with many people relying on harvesting natural resources such as wild flowers and marine resources. Income derived from harvesting sour figs is therefore very important for the local economy.

U'Zenzele had secured funds to set up a processing plant for sour figs but needed to secure their supply. CapeNature granted permits to the U'Zenzele project to harvest sour figs at Uilkraalsmond, Quion and Pearly Beach which are all part of the Walker Bay reserve.

As the pilot project proved itself successful, the U'Zenzele Community Development Project (employing people from Gansbaai) was given permission to harvest in an additional area, on the De Kelders reserve near Stanford. This proved to be a mistake as the Stanford local communities justifiably felt that they should have been offered the possibility of harvesting this valuable local resource. A Stanford community group of disabled people was therefore subsequently granted the tender for the De Kelders component of the Walker Bay reserve.

## A VALUABLE RESOURCE PROVIDES SUBSTANTIAL BENEFITS

The U'Zenzele sour fig project secured a contract a large scale local buyer. The community has subsequently been granted land on which to cultivate *Carpobrotus edulis*, another highly palatable species of wild fig.

In addition to the material harvested by U'Zenzele themselves, CapeNature made the material confiscated from poachers available to the project at a reduced rate. The money paid by U'Zenzele for the confiscated sour figs was used by CapeNature to support conservation in the region, including patrols to control illegal harvesting. This confiscated material was then sold on by U'Zenzele to their buyers at a substantial profit. Seven tons of sour figs were confiscated in the 2008/2009 season. Having access to this confiscated material provided substantial additional benefits for the community.

The U'Zenzele project, harvesting at Uilkraalsmond, Quion and Pearly Beach, employed 170 people in 2007/2008. This number included both harvesters and the teams that clean and pack the product. In 2008/9 this increased to 205. They harvested 11 089kg of figs during 2008/2009 for which R153 500 was paid in wages. The Stanford group, which harvests at De Kelders, employed 10 people in 2008/2009. They harvested 3721kg over the 2008/2009 season. The wages earned by these people through sour fig harvesting represent a significant cash injection into the local economy.

## LESSONS LEARNED

This was the first time CapeNature had been involved in sustainable harvesting on reserves and workable protocols had to be established. During this interactive process many important lessons were learnt:

### *Distinguishing harvesters and poachers*

***“Trust had to be established between the community and reserve managers.”***

The reserve managers were concerned that monitoring harvesting would increase their workload. Initially they found it difficult to distinguish between poachers and those taking part in the accredited programme. As a consequence, many of the accredited harvesters had material confiscated. This built up frustrations on both sides. This was addressed by the establishment of a photo-based identity card system which enabled accredited harvesters to be identified easily.

Prior to this programme half of the reserve budget was spent trying to control poaching. Many of the newly licensed harvesters were previously poachers. The fact that they are now able to harvest as part of an accredited system has significantly reduced the amount of poaching. In addition, the presence of accredited harvesters decreases poaching by outsiders. When their presence alone is not a sufficient deterrent they contact CapeNature to alert them to the presence of unauthorized harvesters. As the legitimate harvesters work every day and cover a large area, the impact of this deterrent has been significant. However, the fact that seven tonnes of illegally harvested sour figs were confiscated during the 2008/2009 season indicates that poaching continues to be a serious problem.

#### ***Establishing best practice harvesting techniques***

The second concern of reserve management was that harvesting could result in degradation of the resource. In particular, they were concerned that having high numbers of people in the reserves would result in trampling.

Fortunately the manager of the U'Zenzele Project was very aware of conservation issues and raised awareness within the community of the importance of harvesting sustainably. An initial contract included the following:

- Areas suitable for harvesting were to be demarcated and harvesting would be restricted to these areas.
- It was agreed that a maximum of 50 people would harvest on any one day in each area.
- The harvesters agreed not to drive vehicles off the existing tracks.

Monitoring systems were to be put in place to evaluate the impact of harvesting. It was found that sour figs are relatively robust and that careful harvesting does not decrease yield.

#### ***Maintaining communication***

A number of meetings were held with the community to develop a common understanding of what would be required from both sides to make the project work. This process of communication was greatly facilitated by the availability of CapeNature staff able to speak all the languages spoken by the harvesters. Smaller groups came to the CapeNature offices for training in best practice harvesting techniques.

#### ***Finding common ground***

Initially, all harvesters had to enter the reserve at sunrise and leave at sunset. After the first year of operation the reserves agreed to allow harvesters to start harvesting in the late afternoon when the summer sun was less intense. This type of give and take built trust between the reserves and communities. The community was closely involved in drawing up a subsequent contract and therefore took greater ownership in its implementation.

#### ***Ensuring that local communities benefit***

CapeNature decided to work with community-based organizations rather than with individuals as this would provide a broader benefit and take advantage of existing democratic structures within the community, thereby ensuring representivity. The benefits that the community group gained from participation in the initiative encouraged other individuals to cooperate with the official programme. This brought additional people into the sustainable harvesting programme and further reduced poaching.

The problems created by the expansion of the U'Zenzele Project into the De Kelders reserve, without involving the adjoining Stanford community, taught CapeNature a valuable lesson. It was recognised that, in future, communities living adjacent to reserves must be given first option when harvesting permits are allocated.

Within the U'Zenzele Project profits for each individual decreased as the project expanded to employ more people. The U'Zenzele Project was also concerned that the price dropped significantly in 2008/9 as a result of the extension of harvesting rights to include the Stanford community. Competition for the same buyer reduced profits considerably. The challenge for the future is to expand the market to ensure

that the price remains stable while increasing numbers of people benefit.

## THE WAY FORWARD

The substantial benefit that the community derived from the harvesting in the reserve and the positive interaction with the conservation staff has significantly improved community support for conservation in the area.

### ***Gaining credibility for harvesters and benefits for landowners***

Private landowners are increasingly willing to allow harvesters access to their lands as a result of the credibility that the large scale projects have established through responsible harvesting within reserves. In return, the landowners receive a 30% fee from the harvesters which provides an additional incentive to conserve natural vegetation.

### ***Returning benefits to conservation***

CapeNature initially agreed to provide access to natural vegetation containing wild figs at no charge. They are now considering implementing a fee of 3% of the value of the harvest as a contribution to their control of illegal harvesting in the area. The community is supportive of this concept. The ongoing challenge is to continue to reduce the level of poaching so that the entire resource can be sustainably harvested to the benefit of local communities.

This project has demonstrated how CapeNature can achieve its vision of supporting a conservation economy by allowing local communities to sustainably harvest resources in nature reserves. The legalization of harvesting has contributed to the control of poaching, together with an equitable distribution of benefits to local communities. It has indicated a way forward for similar projects in other areas.

### **Key Words:**

*Stewardship, sustainable harvesting, community benefits, sour fig*

