

# What is in a grave? Conflict between the Golden Gate Highlands National Park management and park inhabitants

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the importance of graves which have become a source of conflict between the Golden Gate Highlands National Park (GGHNP) management and people residing in the park. The park management is currently in the process of relocating people who were historically living in the park before its proclamation as a national park. There is massive resistance from the park inhabitants, who vehemently argue that they cannot leave the graves of their relatives and ancestors. The GGHNP is one example of a national park in the world where humans have settled together with wildlife in the park. Living together as parks and people is a stimulant for competition on resource use and conflict on land use, land claims and economic benefits generated from the park. Drawing on focus group discussions, key informant interviews and personal observations, the conflict on graves involves an intense debate which is surrounded by conflicting values and perspectives. Because of this, it is not easy to find common ground owing to diametrically opposed cultural beliefs. Although it is quite clear that the park inhabitants and park management attach a different meaning and importance to graves, policy framework should acknowledge the importance of individual gravesites as they constitute vital indigenous cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Golden Gate; Graves; Parks people conflict; Culture; Relocation

## Introduction

The Golden Gate Highlands National Park (GGHNP) management is currently in the process of relocating people who were historically living in the park before its proclamation as the present day GGHNP. This has resulted in massive resistance from the park inhabitants who vehemently argue that they can not leave the graveyards of their relatives and ancestors. The present GGHNP is a product of the former QwaQwa National Park (QNP) which was originally a set of about ninety five farms which were incorporated into the GGHNP according to the provisions of

Section 18 (1) of the Qwaqwa Nature Conservation Act (No. 5) of 1976. The proclamation of the QNP is undoubtedly the source of the present conflict as no formal consideration was made to the inhabitants of these farms, who had been employed for decades as farm labourers by the farmers who were compensated, leaving behind their farm labourers (Slater, 2002). These former farm labourers are the people who are presently residing in the park where their relatives from earlier generations were buried. Slater (2002) gives an indication that authorities (government) had guaranteed the park inhabitants (farm labourers) secure tenure and grazing rights when QNP was

proclaimed in 1992. However, O'Malley (1997) argues that the emergence of institutional transformations, especially those that changed park management conditions, left the former farm labourers alienated from decision-making and virtually subjected to the current park policy and management rules.

The GGHNP is one such national park in the world where humans have settled together with wildlife in the park. De Villiers (2009) has observed that living together as parks and people provides rich ground for competition on resource use and conflict on land use, land claims and economic benefits generated from the park. In the GGHNP, it is common practice to find domestic animals like cattle competing for grazing space with wildlife (Figure 1). According to Nepal & Weber (1995), conflicts between people and parks have received considerable attention in literature though with few permanent solutions. Nevertheless, Nepal (2002)

reports that there are ongoing efforts to establish effective processes and mechanisms of reducing conflicts between people and parks although progress is usually retarded by political, socioeconomic and cultural factors. The mere sight of domestic animals and human inhabitants in the park impacts negatively on the aesthetic value of the park and reduce its worth as a valuable tourist destination. Wildlife is generally expected to be found alone in the park. Wight (1996) has observed that viewing wildlife is among the top four attributes needed in tourist destinations, particularly in North America. Other scholars (Brooks, Bakarr, Boucher, DaFonseca, Hilton-Taylor & Hoekstra, 2004,) have observed that tourists visiting national parks in America rank viewing wildlife and not domestic animals as the major reason for visiting parks. This is virtually the same for visitors to many of the world's protected areas, including the GGHNP.



**Figure 1:** Cattle grazing together with Burchell's zebra (*Equus burchelli*) in the GGHNP.

The conflict between the GGHNP management and the park inhabitants suggests there is really something in graves and graveyards. Graves are vital sources of data for archaeologists (O'Shea, 1984;

Cannon, 1989; Davidson, 2012) in analyzing stratification of society, gender relations, and the inter-ethnic relationship of different cultures (O'Shea, 1984). Archaeologists argue that graves and

graveyards provide evidence of horizontal (gender, age, descent, ethnic affiliation) and vertical (status, wealth, political office) societal structures (Chapman & Randsborg, 1981; Alekshin, 1983; Jamieson, 1995). A case in point is the Natufian graveyard from Western Galilee in Israel which provided data to archeologists on the burial practices of the Natufian people, whereby observations showed the construction methods of the graves, burial-positions, gender and age compositions, the material finds accompanying the burials as well as indications for changes through time (Belfer-Cohen, 1988).

In addition, graves are important in many fields of research including history, anthropology and palaeontology. They play a vital role in reconstructing mortuary ideologies, culture and provision of explanations of burial customs. Graves are of cultural significance to both the present and future generations. Reimers (1999) observed that in Sweden, graves function as communicative symbolic practices that construct and express collective and individual cultural and ethnic identity. In many African societies, the location of a grave is usually associated with the symbolism of a group's cosmology (Chapman & Randsborg, 1981). According to Miller and Rivera (2006), graves are an indication of humanity's need to construct a meaning behind death and reflect life into the places where the dead are interred. The location of grave yards holds symbolic meaning as well as practical historical meaning for the living relatives (Miller & Rivera, 2006). In modern day world, graves are one way of expressing status and the rich strive to document their wealth and power through them.

Elsewhere, the graves and graveyards of the pastoral Himba people residing in the remote northwestern part of Namibia have recently become a subject of debate on the proposed Epupa hydroelectric dam site (Bollig, 1997). The graves were popular for

tourists' photographs for many years but recently became a source of conflict. The Himba traditional leaders adamantly said that their culture would be at risk if their ancestral graveyards were to be inundated by the dam waters although proponents of the dam maintained that the graves could be relocated without violating the Himba custom (Bollig, 1997). In the GGHNP, there is the van Reenen family graveyard which is a popular site to tourists. The van Reenen family was buried in the GGHNP because they used to own all the land which the park currently occupies. The graveyard is well built and maintained and is a must see attraction in the park. In light of the preceding discussion, this paper examines the conflicting value of graves between the GGHNP management and park inhabitants. The conflict on graves involves an intense debate which is surrounded by conflicting values and perspectives. Because of this, it is not easy to find common ground owing to diametrically opposed conception of graves and cultural beliefs.

### **Materials and method**

The GGHNP, located in QwaQwa, is on the foothills of the Maluti Mountains (Taylor & Atkinson, 2012), in the north eastern Free State province of South Africa. The origin of QwaQwa dates back to 1974 when it was established as a homeland of the southern Sotho tribe as part of the homeland policy of the South African apartheid government (Slater, 2002). Administratively, the GGHNP falls under Thabo Mofutsanyana District but does not fall under a specified local municipality because it is managed by the South African National Parks Board. Photographic data on one grave yard of interest (see Figure 2) was captured using a digital camera (Samsung st 66). Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates were recorded for the grave yard using a Germin Global Positioning System. Three focus group discussions, each comprising 10 park inhabitants were held. In addition, key informant interviews were held with senior

officials from the South African National Parks, Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Thabo Mofutsanyana District, GGHNP management, South African National Heritage Council, and the local traditional leadership. The discussions were mainly centered on:

(1) the real meaning of the graves and graveyards to the park inhabitants and the park management.

(2) the cultural and religious significance of the graves.

(3) the legal and policy implications surrounding the source of the conflict (graves).

(4) the direction in which the conflict should take and possible resolution to the impasse. In short, the focus of the discussion was on why the park inhabitants were so attached to the graves of their relatives? The research gives an insight into these questions and provides a better conception of what really is in a grave.

*Graveyard description*

GPS Coordinates: S 28.48088

E

028.71917 Elevation 1860 ± 4m



**Figure 2:** Graveyard at the center of conflict between park management and park inhabitants.

This graveyard has intact graves which are well built and decorated. However, there are a few graves which are yet to be built and decorated like the others. The occupants of the homestead next to the graveyard recently had their homestead razed down by the park officials as evidenced by the pile of broken asbestos (Figure 2). The original inhabitants of the homestead are said to have left long back and the new occupants now being forced off the homestead are descendants of the deceased who are taking care of the graves. These current occupants sometimes sleep in the open next to their graves and disappear during the day to avoid detection by park officials.

## Results and discussion

Besides many other things that our investigation established as the reasons why park inhabitants do not want to relocate, a major cause for concern is that the GGHNP management is not really able to maintain the graves, especially in the absence of the relatives of the deceased. This is evidenced in one of the grave yards in the park (Figure 3), where the graves are caving in. This grave yard is now being solely maintained by the GGHNP management because the relatives of the deceased relocated long back. Castro and Nielsen (2001) argue that co-management

agreements between the relatives of the deceased and the GGHNP authorities could provide substantial progress towards dealing with this conflict. During discussions with one park official on why they were neglecting the graves, an interesting response emerged:

*"It is very costly and time consuming to maintain the graves and I don't really see anything so crucial in them".*

This kind of thinking sounds absurd but scholars like Strangstad (1995) argue that taking care of grave yards is morbid because land is currently a scarce resource and the grave yards can be converted to other uses. In addition, Strangstad (1995) believes graves should be allowed to fall apart and return to the earth to which everything will eventually succumb to.



**Figure 3:** Grave yard showing poorly maintained graves by GGHNP authorities.

Focus group participants emphatically stated that even if the park authorities were to exhume and relocate the graves, their significance will be virtually compromised and lost. An analysis of the discourse between the GGHNP authorities and the park inhabitants revealed that they both have diverging views on what is in a grave. For the park authorities, a grave is simply the locality in which the physical remains of a deceased person rest, whilst the park inhabitants see the grave as a focal point for defining identity, expressing relationships with the land and for practicing religious rituals (Bollig, 1997). Participants in the focus group discussions and traditional leaders said that they communicate symbolically with the dead at the grave sites and prayers are usually done when one

passes through the graveyard of the deceased relatives. Miller and Rivera (2006) argue that grave yards allow the living to revisit their memories of the deceased relatives and the graves are important places of ancestral veneration. In addition, the same authors report that graves facilitate the communion of the living relatives and the dead through religious and cultural activities, a fact which the park inhabitants concurred with. Because the graves are honoured by the current inhabitants who are being forced to vacate the park, it is not easy for them to simply give in and leave the graves which they see as places of reverence. Although the land being inhabited by the park inhabitants has been proclaimed as a national park, the inhabitants justify their resistance on the

basis of the graves of their agnates. Reining (1967) concurs with sentiments echoed by the people residing in the GGHNP by reporting that Haya men in the north western part of Tanzania often talk about the importance of '*staying by the grave of your father*' on matters concerning relocation.

The findings of this research also revealed that some of the park inhabitants resisting relocation base their argument on patrilineal beliefs. The park inhabitants have a sense of security from the graves which they believe provide a sense of cultural, spiritual and generational continuity. This is in agreement with Weiss (1993) who has observed that graves in Tanzania establish a position from which to orient future activities by encompassing horizons of the past and that the graves are an objectification of continuity and identification. Jamieson (1995) however argues that graves do not really matter but what matters is the connection between the graves, the land tenure system and the group's history. Other researchers like Lewis (1987) argue that graves instill a sense of permanency, which is why the people are resisting location as they believe the park is now a permanent place for them to stay. In view of this, the value of graves to the park authorities and park inhabitants in resolving conflict needs revisiting (Raval, 1994).

Park management decisions regarding the conservation of graves are inseparable from people's views and value system, because values inform people's ideas about appropriate behaviour and their priorities (Boonzaaier, 2010) regarding graves which are considered sacred sites. The rationale of relocating people is to conserve nature in the park and provide opportunities for tourism activities although the park inhabitants have their own cultural and religious beliefs tied to the graves. Although there is consensus among policy makers that tourism ventures in the GGHNP may

provide opportunities for stimulating local economic growth, the people do not see how they will benefit because previously they have not done so from the tourism activities in the park (Taru, Mukwada, Somerai & Chingombe, 2013). Protected areas are under immense pressure to maximize their tourism potential and are considered as economic generators that must finance themselves and stimulate local and regional growth (De Villiers, 2009). Nevertheless, the GGHNP is caught in between cultural obligations and income generation endeavors.

In light of the mix of what really is in a grave, the truth about this is absurd as reported by Jordan (1982) who has observed that graves are primarily for the living and not for the dead since they give an indication of the modern customs, beliefs and social structure of the living. Jordan (1982) further argues that a grave is a cultural legacy, from which the living draw inspiration (Schjonberg, 2005). This study revealed that the park inhabitants have sentimental feelings with the graves because of the historical, religious, or myths that the graves contribute to the culture of the living. Grave yards are places where the terrain of the living meets with the terrain of the dead (Miller & Rivera 2006). The burial customs and placement of an individual are viewed as the deceased's point of connection between this world and the next (Alekshin, 1983) and for this reason, many cultures including the GGHNP park inhabitants place an emphasis on the graves hence resistance to relocate. In view of the preceding discussion, it is quite clear that park inhabitants and management have diametrically opposed views on the importance and meaning of graves. Nevertheless, policy framework must incorporate the significance of individual graves because they form part of indigenous cultural heritage.

## **Conclusion**

Whilst relocating the park inhabitants is shrouded with merits and demerits to both parties, we are convinced that it is best for humans to stay away from wildlife in the park. It is no doubt the graves in the park are important, though from varied perspectives. However, it is an eyesore for tourists to see humans, domestic animals and wildlife wrestling for the same space. This scenario is also against environmental conservation principles and undoubtedly undermines environmental quality and sustainability of the park. In addition, other scholars (Wolfe, Dunavan & Diamond, 2007), report that the most crucial diseases of humans have animal origins, which justifies relocating park inhabitants.

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