

How does Ramsar work? The case of Ndumo Game Reserve



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Introduction

The Convention on Wetlands is an intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources (Ramsar 2024). In this letter, I use the example of Ndumo Game Reserve, a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance in northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, to question the effectiveness of the Convention and appeal for clarity on its implementation.

Ndumo Game Reserve

Ndumo was proclaimed a provincial game reserve in 1924 to protect the hippopotamuses and the wetlands that support them. It is also important for Nile crocodiles, fishes and amphibians and is renowned for its birdlife. It encompasses the only section (10%) of South Africa's most biodiverse floodplain system, the Phongolo floodplain, to be protected.

In 2008, the reserve's eastern fences were cut, and since then, the Phongolo floodplain section of the reserve has been farmed, grazed, fished and timber has been cut, including rare sand forest (Figure 1). It is effectively no longer accessed or controlled by the conservation authority, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (Pooley 2021).

Ramsar to the rescue?

Assuming Ramsar would be one avenue to seek support for solutions to this situation, in June 2021, I began communicating with Ramsar Africa. They, in turn, communicated with Ramsar South Africa, and I was asked to supply evidence for my assertions regarding the status of Ndumo, which I provided. However, nothing happened.

When I enquired about what Ezemvelo was going to do about the situation at Ndumo in December 2021, they confirmed that:

Ezemvelo is very aware of the biodiversity importance of the Ndumo Game Reserve, and the listing as a Ramsar site because of [its] international importance. The expansion of these agricultural activities on the eastern bank has continued to expand and we are also very concerned about the impact these have on the Phongolo floodplain. (Ezemvelo spokesperson [Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife] pers. comm., 30 July 2021)

Regarding solutions, Ezemvelo informed me that:

All protected areas with land occupation and/or agriculture encroachment have been listed in a national programme which looks at the risk and possible impacts on biodiversity. These complex issues of encroachment require a multiagency intervention and ... Ezemvelo has requested that Ndumo Game Reserve be identified as the KwaZulu-Natal priority for a national support and intervention programme. (Ezemvelo spokesperson [Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife] pers. comm., 30 July 2021)

When Ramsar was asked for comment by investigative journalist Carnie (2021) for the *Daily Maverick* newspaper, their (quoted) response was: 'We are currently undertaking investigations before any comments can be made'.

If the ecological character of a Ramsar site is threatened, the member nation can request a Ramsar Advisory Mission (Ramsar 2024). This enables countries to apply global expertise and advice to problems and threats that could lead to a loss of ecological character. After a site visit, the team's draft report is reviewed by the contracting party, the revised final report is published, and the recommendations provide a basis for action at the site, possibly for financial assistance. I was therefore hopeful that a Ramsar intervention was possible and could help catalyse and support local action.

I followed up after a year with no comment or result. In 2022, I was informed that Ramsar South Africa had a long list of sites of concern, and Ndumo was not a priority. This was surprising for reasons outlined below. In 2023, when I followed up, I was advised that Ramsar SA had lost my report, and I resupplied an updated version, noting that the description of the site and its challenges on the Ramsar website is 28 years out of date (Ramsar 2019).

The 'national programme which looks at the risk and possible impacts on biodiversity' that Ezemvelo informed me about in July 2021 was about to launch, but to my knowledge, it has not materialised (Ezemvelo spokesperson [Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife] pers. comm., 30 July 2021). At least, no action has yet been proposed for Ndumo Game Reserve.

Most recently, in September 2024, Ramsar Africa informed me that Ramsar South Africa had 'confirmed [*Ndumo Game Reserve*] as threatened'. This felt like progress, until my contact at Ramsar Africa explained:

Normally in a case like this we offer support to assess the threats affecting the site with the aim of identifying mitigation actions. For this to happen, the country [*South Africa*] needs to make that request. However, they declined our request as there is a national entity in the country responsible for undertaking such assessments. The Secretariat has no operational mechanisms to undertake activities in a country without being invited by the country to act.

(Ramsar Africa [*Ndumo Game Reserve as a Ramsar Wetland*] pers. comm., 10 September 2024)

Therefore, we have an international convention where a signatory can confirm that a wetland is endangered and refuse to act or allow Ramsar to assess the situation or offer assistance. It is unclear why South Africa would not want expert advice or funding, or what the 'national entity' is, or what it plans to do. Or why the Ramsar Convention it is a signatory to, does not insist it provide some evidence that the relevant South African entity has undertaken its own assessment, and an intervention plan is in development. The Phongolo floodplain inside Ndumo Game Reserve has been occupied for 16 years now. It has been a matter of record for Ramsar since (at least) June 2021.

Looking ahead

In Ramsar's Strategic Plan (2016–2024), the priority areas of focus included targets 21 'Preventing, stopping and reversing the loss and degradation of wetlands' (Ramsar 2022:5) and 27:

Improving compliance with Ramsar provisions concerning Ramsar Site updates ... maintenance of ecological character and management of sites, improving the ecological character where not good enough ... the preparation of management planning processes for all Ramsar Sites, and implementation of



Note: Photographer wishes to remain anonymous. Photo taken in 2023.

FIGURE 1: Farming on the Phongolo floodplain inside Ndumo Game Reserve.

such management planning on the ground through the presence of staff, appropriate infrastructure and other resources. (Ramsar 2022:6)

Goal 2 of Ramsar's Strategic Goals includes Target 5: 'The ecological character of Ramsar sites is maintained or restored, through effective planning and integrated management' and Target 7: 'Sites that are at risk of change of ecological character have threats addressed' (Ramsar 2022:10).

As Ndumo Game Reserve meets all of these criteria, it should surely be a matter for the next Strategic Plan to consider what to do when signatories of the Convention refuse to allow assessments or accept advice or funding for their threatened Ramsar wetlands?

A group of South African natural and social scientists with long-term involvement in Ndumo Game Reserve have produced a special issue on the long history – and hoped for future – of scientific research in this small but special game reserve (African Journal of Wildlife Research, 2025). It was poignant to be doing so in the centenary year of its proclamation, with its future seriously in doubt.

I urge everyone committed to wildlife conservation in South Africa to take notice of what is happening in this provincial game reserve and Ramsar site. There are implications for protected areas in the country as a whole and for the reputation of the country as a signatory of international conventions for the protection of biodiversity.

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Author's contributions

S.P.P. declares that they are the sole author of this article.

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