

Ugu Lwethu - Our Coast. A profile of coastal KwaZulu-Natal

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7.1 Historical, Cultural & Traditional Resource Use

Much has been written about specific resources and features along the KZN coast. Many materials exist that provide evidence of the use of these coastal resources and the creation of certain features; the relics of hunters and gatherers, the activities of farmers, conservationists, soldiers and traders, missionaries and the many ordinary men and women of KZN, both historically and in the present.

When describing the historical and cultural uses of coastal resources, it is useful to examine these during three periods: 1) the pre-colonial, 2) colonial, which includes the apartheid period, and 3) post-apartheid period.

Pre-Colonial Period

Many hundreds of years before the arrival of the white colonial settlers, indigenous people, who made iron tools,

grew crops and raised domestic animals (mainly cattle), lived in the area that today we call KZN. In this time, kingdoms arose and families began to accumulate cattle as a form of wealth.¹ These kingdoms flourished in KZN due to plentiful rainfall and vegetation, especially along the coastal belt. This in turn allowed these groups to grow and live together in a more complex way. Labour became specialised and men spent time learning the skills of the woodcarver and blacksmith; conducting rituals and learning the art of being a warrior. The women were responsible for the cultivation of subsistence crops, while the men controlled the cattle which represented wealth and power.

Along the southeast coast of South Africa, a more hierarchical form of social organisation emerged, with powerful local chiefs paying homage to a king. The people from the Phongolo to the Mzimkhulu Rivers lived in small-scale units ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand individuals, ruled over by chiefs.^{2;3} The chiefdoms were clusters of shifting

Traditional fish traps at Kosi Bay.



Photo: Bronwyn Goble



homesteads, where the communities paid allegiance to the chief. These communities were relatively stable but did enlarge, reduce, and coalesce depending on local political and power relations.

Around the middle of the 18th century, some of the chiefdoms along the southeast region were amalgamated and the Zulu Kingdom emerged, led by King Shaka. He developed a military system and became the strongest leader in what is today the KZN region. King Shaka was defeated by the British forces in 1879, which ended the Zulu Kingdom, and in 1888, the territory north of the Thukela River was annexed as the Colony of Zululand.

During this pre-colonial period, indigenous people had full access to the coast and used this area as a source of food and for other resources. Evidence of this use is found all around the coast between the high water mark and 5 km inland.⁴ Evidence of the long-term use of shellfish as a resource for hunter-gatherers and settled communities can be found in the form of middens. They show evidence of the harvesting of turtles, seabirds and fish, as well as crustaceans, such as crabs and lobsters. There is also evidence of the consumption of large marine mammals, such as dolphins, seals and infrequently, whales.⁴ It is believed that middens have been constructed along the coast for the last 120 000 years,⁴ some being very large and deep, while others are much smaller and are likely to have been eroded.

The impact of these early inhabitants on coastal resources was minimal and they left little impact on the environment.⁵

The other important cultural resource that is a legacy from this period are the names of all the rivers that flow into the Indian Ocean, all having Zulu names: the largest being the Thukela, and other examples include Mdloti, Mfolozi, Umtamvuna, Mzimkhulu, Umkomaas and Manzintoti rivers.

The Colonial Period

A number of British adventurers, traders and hunters entered the coastal zone between the Phongolo and the Mzimkhulu Rivers from around 1830, and settled in a small community around the Bay of Natal. The trek boers entered into Natal from the North West, over the Drakensburg Mountains, and established Pietermaritzburg as the capital of their Republic. They established farms in the interior, but also settled a community at Congella, on Durban Bay.

The British annexed the territory (now called KZN) in 1843 from the Boers, who had occupied it from 1837 to 1842. The area became known as the Colony of Natal. The important changes that occurred in the colonial period were the alienation of communal land to British settlers for farming, and the creation of "native reserves". From this period, the population in the region grew as a result of both natural growth and the importation of indentured labour from India to work on the sugar farms and other enterprises.

The rural economy of the Zulu people was systematically disrupted with the emergence of colonial trade, whereby animal skins, elephant tusks, cattle and sometimes labour were traded for produced goods (e.g. farm implements, knives, guns, beads and mirrors).⁶ In the post-1889 period, a hut tax was levied as a way of getting labour for the emerging productive and commercial farming economy. This resulted in male family members migrating to the towns and commercial farms to earn a cash wage, ultimately resulting in the migrant labour system still evident in South Africa today.

Access to coastal resources was limited for black people and the most strategic land along the coast was allocated to white settlers for farming sugar. The hilly and drier areas of land further inland were allocated for "native reserves".⁶

During the era of the Union, after Natal had been incorporated into the Union of South Africa, with the defeat of the Boers by the British in 1899, the *Natives Land Act* was promulgated. This cemented the allocation of separate land for blacks, originally the "native reserves", and expanded these areas to accommodate the resettlement of blacks from "white areas" and farms. Later (after 1948), the apartheid government created the system of "homelands", and in Natal the "homeland of KwaZulu" came into being in 1976. Limited amounts of coastal land were allocated to the homeland, resulting in a lack of access to the coast for most black people living near the coast, and the exclusive use of coastal resources for white settlers and farmers.

It was during the colonial period that a number of small, "white" towns developed along the KZN coast; the largest being Durban, situated on the Bay of Natal. In the colonial period, Durban grew into a trade and commercial centre, with the beginnings of the first industrial development occurring around the port.⁷

From the late 19th to the early 20th century, the coast of Natal also became an important destination for tourists. White

workers from the Witwatersrand migrated to Durban and the Natal coast for their annual holidays. A series of small towns became established along the coast as tourism and service nodes. Traveling from south to north, these smaller towns include Port Edward, Southbroom, Ramsgate, Margate, Uvongo, Shelley Beach, Port Shepstone, Scottburgh, Umkomaas, Amanzimtoti, Umhlanga Rocks, Ballito Bay and Salt Rock. Durban and the south coast became a tourism mecca in South Africa and stimulated the tourism industry along the rest of the Natal coast.⁸

Post-apartheid

At the end of apartheid, the homeland of KwaZulu was reincorporated into Natal, resulting in the renaming of the province “KwaZulu-Natal”.

Four important historical facts have had an effect on access to the coast and its resources in the post-1994 period: Coastal resources once more have become open to all; the administrative restructuring of boundaries has led to the creation of a set of municipalities which now play a greater role in the management of the coast (*Section 10.2*); population and development pressure on coastal resources has escalated due to population and economic growth; and the Government has identified tourism as a means of facilitating economic and environmental regeneration in urban areas.⁷

This has led, over the past two decades, to large swathes of coastal land being developed for residential and recreational purposes as outlined in *Section 9.2*. Fortunately, a third of KZN’s coast has been proclaimed as a World Heritage Site (1999) – the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, which has led to increased protection of the marine and coastal resources in the north. This has been accompanied by a range of social and economic programmes to create benefits for local people, e.g. the beneficiation of land claimants, access to natural resources (such as ncema), and skills development for jobs in the ecotourism sector.⁹

From a pristine coastline hardly impacted by early indigenous hunter-gatherers to the mecca of “sun, sand and sea” tourism in South Africa, the KZN coast has undergone a transformation to a highly developed coastal zone. The coastal zone has since experienced pressure from increasingly rapid urban development including the development associated with the world-class ports of Durban (largest in Africa) and Richards Bay; the intensification of commercial sugarcane farming; and coastal urban residential sprawl through the growth of small towns and gated coastal estates. This development has been somewhat mitigated by the establishment of a coastal World Heritage Site in the north of the province. ■



Photo: Bernadine Everett

Fisher using a traditional spear.

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