

THULI MAKAMA

Conservationist and activist

The winner of the 2010 Goldman Prize for Africa fights to link environmental conservation, human-rights protection and sustainable community development in Swaziland

EMILIE FILOU

The 15-page booklet *Cries in the Wild: Testimonies of Victims of Human Rights Abuses* is a harrowing read. Published in 2004 by the Swazi environmental action group *Yonge Nawe*, it details the systematic use of violence by park rangers. It is a cautionary tale of conservation gone wrong, a situation Thuli Makama, the NGO's director and lawyer, is determined to end.

Makama's initial motivation in the early 2000s was to increase community involvement in conservation. It soon became obvious that as well as being excluded from wildlife management – and on occasion forcibly evicted from their land – local communities faced ongoing intimidation and violence from rangers, notably from Big Game Parks (BGP), a private wildlife company.

ANTI-POACHING MEASURES

BGP was founded by Ted Reilly in the 1960s and now runs three game parks covering around 40,000ha. Reilly is widely recognised as the original conservationist in Swaziland, but as poaching got out of hand during the 'rhino wars' of the 1980s, so did the policing on his three reserves.

In 1991, the government amended the Game Act to toughen sanctions against poachers. Section 23 gives park rangers immunity for acts of violence committed to protect wildlife. In 1998, the Game Act was then passed under the direct rule of King



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Mswati III and could no longer be challenged by parliament.

Many credit Swaziland's zero-tolerance policy against poaching with restoring wildlife levels. But Makama says that the lack of scrutiny over the use of extrajudicial violence led to the abuse of human rights. "It goes against the nature of our constitution, which guarantees the right to life and the right to access the law," she says.

BGP denies accusations that it has acted outside the law. "Rangers are legally empowered to employ counter-active force sufficient to effect arrests," the organisation said in a statement. "In all cases, the police are either present or are called immediately after the arrest. The case is then handed over to the director of public prosecutions,

who decides what, if any, action to take against the arrested person(s) and indeed the arresters, if the law has been broken." BGP points out that poachers know the consequences of their actions and argues that poaching offences tend to be committed by criminal networks selling bush meat, ivory and rhino horns rather than by destitute communities. The company also says it employs 360 Swazis in its operations, many from local communities.

LOCAL VICTORIES

Makama's goal is to get communities engaged with conservation management, not merely employed, and Swaziland already has best-practice examples to follow. "The privately-run Mbuluzi Game Reserve is a nature reserve run by the Shewula community, and it has worked wonderfully," she explains. "The Shewula now understand the value of wildlife since they have a stake in preserving it."

Her message is being heard. In 2009, she won a legal challenge to have NGOs represented on the board of the Swaziland Environment Authority. In April, she won the 2010 Goldman Prize for Africa, an accolade dubbed the 'green Nobel'. As well as international exposure, Makama will receive \$150,000. "Some of this money will help us bring to justice three cases of killings of alleged poachers that took place in 1992, 2008 and 2010," she says.

Makama says she is hopeful about the future and her hope lies in Swaziland's institutions. "I'm confident that if the court is seized with the cases, the facts and all the history, they will definitely find in favour of these communities," she says. "I have no doubt about it." ●