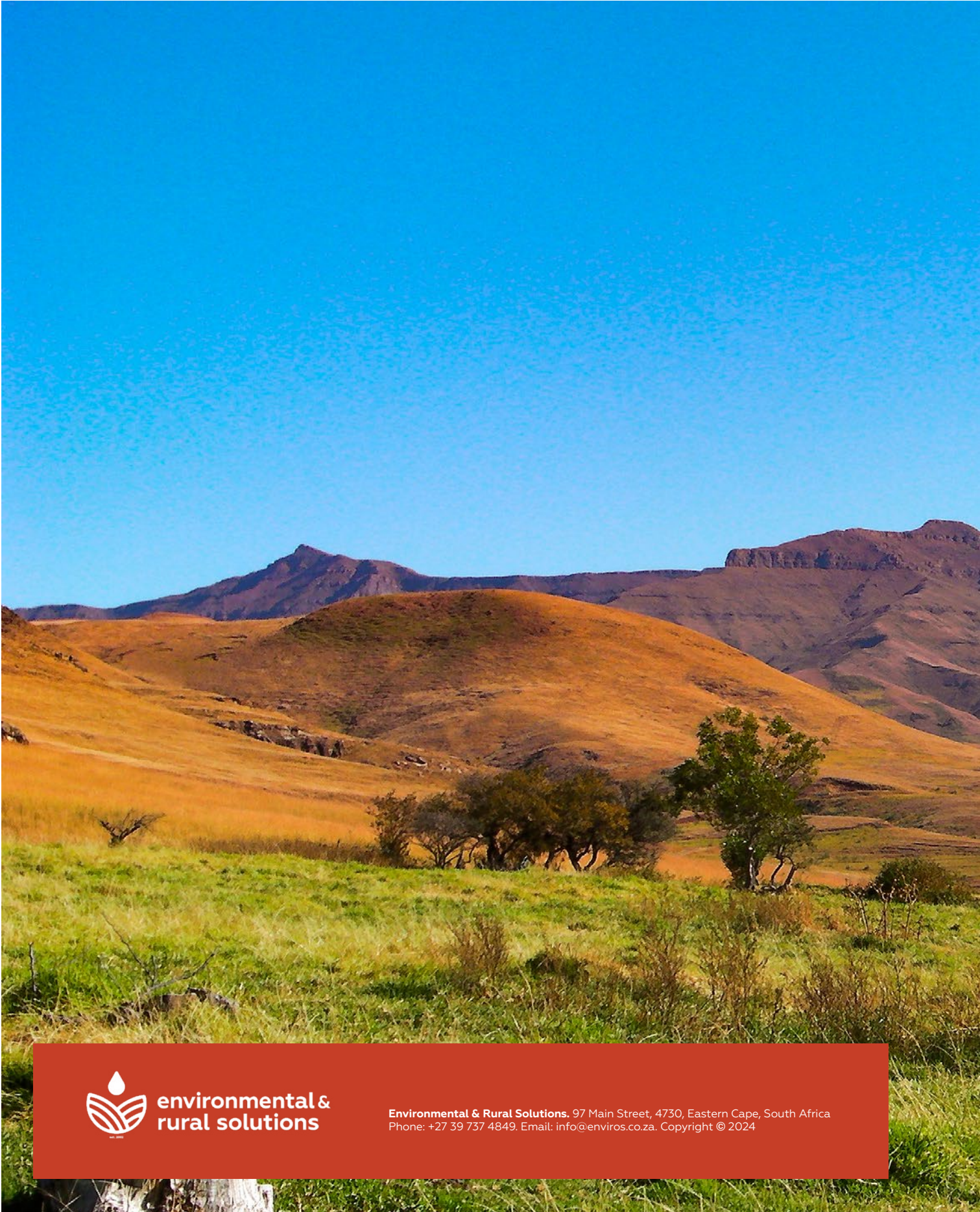




environmental & rural solutions

**Strategic Plan
2024-2029**



**environmental &
rural solutions**

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Letter from the Directors



Sissie Matela
Director of Environmental
and Rural Solutions



Nicky Mcleod
Director of Environmental
and Rural Solutions

ERS is a homegrown NGO of 18 local people, based in the Drakensberg mountains of South Africa, founded by two women in 2002, in Matatiele Municipal Area in the Eastern Cape. Our mission has always been to foster harmony between communal land users and natural resources, and we have survived as a social enterprise (not a registered non-profit) which has partly self-funded its actions through a mix of grants, consulting and pro bono work.

Despite our shoestring operational mode, we have had impacts beyond our stature which have been recognized beyond our local footprint: in 2019 our two founder-directors received the WWF Living Planet award, several donors have approached us to undertake projects, and since 2018 we were appointed as the Umzimvubu Catchment convenor by the SA National Biodiversity Institute. Partnering with Maliasili through the African Conservation Leadership Network has been a highlight through recognition of our impact and potential.

This somewhat happy-go-lucky approach with high dependence on the two directors makes us vulnerable: we have not had a clear strategy nor been able to secure sufficient unencumbered support for our core operating

costs, and this means we struggle to reward and retain staff. Despite that, we have had eight employees move on to much greener pastures over our 21 years, where they continue to have impact. We have grown to 18 people, 13 of whom are youth from the area. A recent investment impact dashboard exercise with WWF highlighted just how much impact ERS really has, as well as the need for more structured monitoring and story telling to share these impacts and learning.

The global trend is starting to show the need for better donor–community organizational partnerships, where deeper and more meaningful impacts can help to secure more resilient landscapes, and change the lives of the often-vulnerable rural people living in and managing them. This requires core support for operational effectiveness and longer term programs to replace short term projects. Maliasili has been instrumental in opening up courageous conversations about finding more equitable power balances, and leading the way in showing how this can be done.

After 22 years as the founder-directors of a social enterprise NGO, we have finally found clarity on an exciting, rather than daunting, evolution plan for the organization, moving us into a new phase of real maturity and deepening our impact on land and lives. Transitioning into a formally registered non-profit company through the encouragement and guidance of Maliasili is a big step, and we feel confident that our evolution will help ERS to improve performance and have deeper, longer lasting impacts for more people as well as for biodiversity.

We are incredibly proud to be the first South African portfolio partner with Maliasili, and humbled and grateful for its profoundly appropriate support.

About ERS

Environmental and Rural Solutions (ERS) is a non-profit social enterprise established in 2002 by visionary women leaders, Sissie Matela and Nicky McLeod.

ERS is at the forefront of transformative conservation that is inclusive of and benefits local communities. For over two decades, ERS has championed ecosystem health, intertwining traditional knowledge with modern techniques to protect water resources, restore degraded rangelands, support expansion of protected areas, and foster a local conservation culture and economy. We espouse an integrated landscape approach that incorporates all socio-ecological systems supporting livelihoods and promoting restoration of the degraded ecosystem. Operating within and alongside the Drakensberg Mountains, ERS is dedicated to restoring biodiversity, improving livelihoods, and enhancing local governance of natural resources.

ERS works in the Umzimvubu Catchment, which spans over 2 million hectares, of which two thirds is under communal ownership and managed under the leadership of traditional authorities. The region is a source of the last undammed free flowing rivers and tributaries in South Africa, such as the Umzimvubu River. The catchment is of critical global importance containing six key biomes; Forest, Fynbos, Nama Karoo, Savanna, Succulent Karoo and Thicket vegetation within the region. These biomes support over 2 000 plant and animal species that provide ecosystem services such as water provision, carbon sinks, erosion control, and livestock grazing. Also, the landscape is a source of materials for household use, which are crucial for poverty alleviation in the predominantly rural and peri-urban settlements. When these habitats remain intact, they play a vital role in carbon sequestration. Approximately 2 million people, mostly rural communities and peri-urban residents, directly benefit from water sourced from the catchment.

Like other key catchments in the country, Umzimvubu is earmarked by the South African government for advancement of 30 x 30 targets under the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). The whole catchment is a part of the Umzimvubu to Keiskamma Water Management Area, within which are two Strategic Water Source Areas (SWSAs) critical for water supply in the province



We espouse an integrated landscape approach that incorporates all socio-ecological systems supporting livelihoods and promoting restoration of the degraded ecosystem



and beyond. The area contributes to Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs), advancing conservation in areas that do not fit the traditional criteria but are mixed-use landscapes, protecting people’s rights and self-determination in managing their surroundings.

ERS has exhibited remarkable growth and resilience over the years, and we are uniquely positioned as a hub for learning and values dissemination for other organizations. Our model has attracted attention from both local and international universities, such as universities from South Africa, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, demonstrating the organization’s contribution to broader conservation science. While the common pathway to scaling is done by the same entity, the unique opportunity for ERS is to become a hub for learning, sharing their successful model as a way to scale. Due to its impactful work, ERS has received funding from a longstanding collaboration with WWF, through various corporate donors for initiatives such as spring protection and grazing management. In addition, funders such as the Lewis Foundation and the World Bank have approached ERS with potential funding opportunities. ERS’s impactful work has also attracted attention from local media outlets such as SABC, television and print media, government departments and parastatal agencies, solidifying ERS’s position as an important actor in sustainable and meaningful conservation in the landscape.

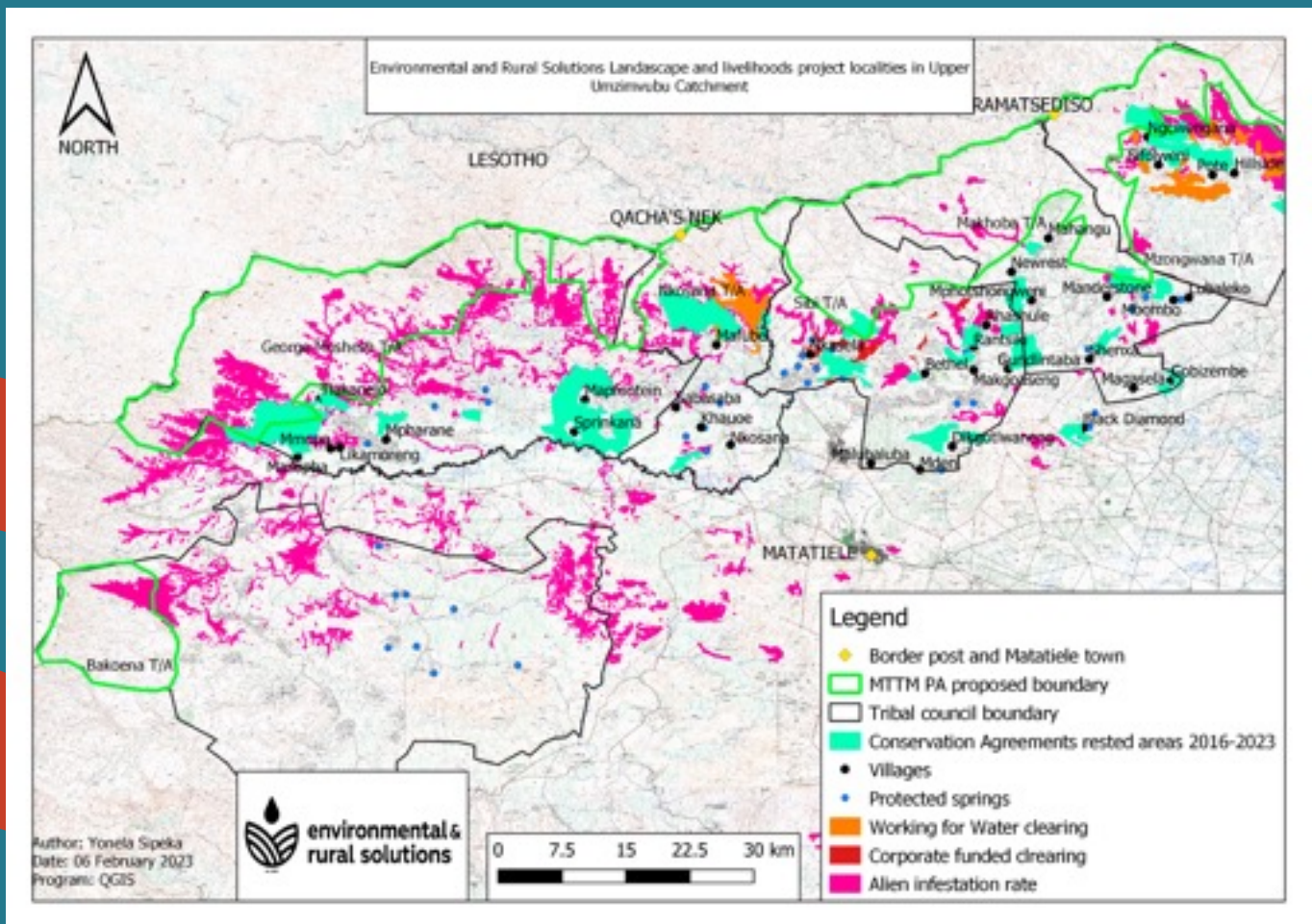
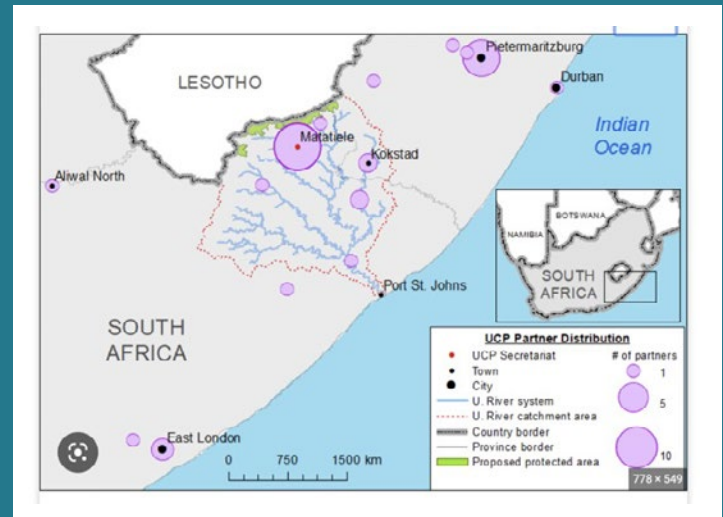


ERS co-founded and serves as the secretariat of the Umzimvubu Catchment Partnership (UCP). UCP is a coalition of local and international non-profit and for-profit organizations, as well as traditional authorities working in conservation and community development within the catchment. Inside the partnership, ERS collaborates with stakeholders, including government, traditional leadership, and other conservation organizations. ERS’s commitment to building capacity and collaboration has solidified our reputation as the go-to organization in the region for conservation and community development work, and crucial for preserving freshwater systems and catchments for people and nature.

Where we work

ERS operates in Matatiele in the Eastern Cape, a historically marginalized area which was part of the Transkei homeland under the apartheid government. The region mirrors South Africa's broader rural demographics, characterized by rising populations, rapid urbanization, high poverty levels and habitat loss.

Matatiele is particularly crucial as it encompasses the headwaters of the Umzimvubu River system, making any degradation within this area detrimental to the entire catchment. It comprises diverse ecosystems, including montane grasslands, scarp forest pockets and wetlands, providing habitat for a wide variety of plant and animal.



ERS workstreams

ERS uses an integrated landscape approach that takes into account all socio-ecological system elements within the catchment to advance interconnected workstreams and programs.

ERS creates space for local communities to rethink their relationship with nature, and together come up with solutions that benefit people and natural ecosystems. Our conservation model is centered around rangeland management, protection of natural water sources, expansion of protected areas and development of conservation economy through innovation and inclusion.

Grazing management for rangeland conservation

ERS and local communities implement strategies to sustainably manage grazing practices to conserve and enhance rangeland ecosystems. To achieve this, ERS enters into Conservation Agreements with communities, to implement a rotational grazing and resting system that supports grassland recovery. ERS and local communities monitor the rested areas for compliance and recovery. This citizen-science approach has a rigorous grassland science foundation - which is understanding the utilization, conservation and improvement of rangelands.

The rangeland management program includes for-profit business opportunities for small and large stock farmers. ERS, for example, supports building market linkages to provide a ready and fair price market for livestock. ERS, through an MoU, collaborates with Meat Naturally Africa, who conducts mobile livestock markets in the villages. Farmers are free to sell to other buyers but do not receive the reduced commission as part of the incentive package. We source funding for the rangeland support work from various donors including WWF and Conservation International (CI).

Alien vegetation clearing to protect water resources

ERS has cleared over 335 ha of invasive wattle species that infest the catchment and critical water source areas, through corporate-sourced funding in partnership with WWF's freshwater programme. These cleared areas are being rehabilitated to indigenous grass cover to help



Figure 3: ERS, through an MoU, collaborates with Meat Naturally Africa, who conducts mobile livestock markets in the villages.



Figure 4: ERS has cleared over 335 ha of invasive wattle species that infest the catchment

maintain ecological functioning and water replenishment. ERS employs Ecochamps from local communities who work with their community members to clear and monitor alien invasive plant species, and restore cleared land into grazing areas. Restored grazing areas in turn improve livestock health and increase the value and income for livestock farming households. This is particularly important in this area where livestock farming is the main source of income. Many of these cleared areas are maintained by volunteers from the respective resident communities who see the value in keeping invasive alien vegetation at bay and building the resilience of the landscape for the future.

In addition, ERS initiated an eco-charcoal enterprise project for youths. The enterprise uses the cleared wattle biomass to produce charcoal. The concept is to create value out of cleared wattle as an incentive for people to sustain invasive plant species clearance. ERS collaborates with enterprise support partners such as Avocado Vision and LIMA. The partners also raise funding to support developing the charcoal value chain. The enterprise is the first communal alien-wood charcoal project in Africa to be certified.

Ecochamps youth empowerment program

ERS runs a program targeting local youths with limited tertiary education possibilities, which provides contract employment opportunities for young individuals from local communities to work within their home regions

under various ERS programs. These young people are largely excluded from the mainstream conservation job market, and the ecochamps program provides in-service skills and work exposure. This has allowed some of them to secure permanent employment within ERS and with other organizations. Currently, there are nine ecochamps who form an integral part of the ERS structure as full time employees, amplifying the reach and impact of the organization's work.

These ecochamps engage directly with traditional authorities and communities, offering support in areas such as rangeland management, spring protection, livestock husbandry, and facilitating knowledge-sharing in community gatherings (imbizo/pitso). In addition to their community-focused responsibilities, ecochamps play a significant role in citizen science-based research, as well as learning exchanges with other organizations and government departments, contributing to presentations at conferences, and hosting media to disseminate ERS and partners work to promote the organization's model.

Spring protection and waste management

ERS supports the protection of natural springs for the provision of clean and adequate water to local communities within the catchment. The programme has seen communities spearhead spring protection and waste management, and springs that once ran dry due to alien plant infestation are flowing after clearing. The approach is based on the involvement of local artisans to



Figure 5, left: cleared area replenishing spring and dam.



Figure 6, right: local community employees comply with safety and clearing norms required by the state Working for Water programme, albeit funded by corporates through ERS.

help with simple construction, using local materials under the technical guidance of ERS supervisors, at a cost of around USD10 per person to access water for life. Over 40,000 people now have access to a reliable water source within 1,000 m of their homes, aligning with World Health Organization (WHO) global standards.

In addition and as part of spring protection, ERS works with communities in addressing waste management to reduce contamination of freshwater. This includes engaging with and supporting the local municipality, cleaning of local streams, and supporting households to better manage disposable nappies – a huge source of pollution for land and natural water sources. ERS has supported communities to develop waste management systems. We are also introducing alternatives in the form of affordable smart reusable nappies/diapers, and using this to create small business opportunities for community members in the distribution of these reusable nappies.

Expansion of protected areas

Over 50,000 ha of land under communal ownership is earmarked for the expansion of protected areas on the Upper Umzimvubu catchment. Together with conservation authorities and partner NGOs, negotiations were undertaken with traditional authorities to establish the protected area on land under their jurisdiction. ERS was instrumental in catalyzing this concept through a Green Trust grant in 2017, and links most of its activities as incentives for participation by traditional authorities and their people. The protected area is expected to

strengthen local management of natural resources while upholding local rights through contractual agreements. Furthermore, the protected area expansion will encourage the flow of investment into the area, creating jobs from ecotourism and associated business enterprises, as well as improving ecosystem services such as provision of clean and adequate water for communities. Through the UCP platform, ERS occasionally brings in experts to share with communities natural connectedness and how natural systems bring in ecosystem services.

Stakeholder collaboration

ERS is the Secretariat for the Umzimvubu Catchment Partnership (UCP), which seeks to implement an integrated landscape approach that recognizes the need for multiple stakeholders to put concerted effort into the landscape restoration. ERS co-founded the UCP in 2013 with Conservation South Africa (CSA), with the purpose of building complementarity in efforts to restore the catchment. The stakeholders in the partnership include local communities and their traditional institutions; for example through local Grazing Associations. Their inclusion in the conservation matrix empowers them to participate in decision making and ensures security of communal ownership of natural resources. ERS has been the catchment convener for the SANBI Living Catchments Project since 2017, and plays an intentional role in linking opportunity for effective participation by stakeholders.

Situation analysis

Achievements and organizational strengths

Over the 21 years we have been in operation, ERS has registered great success in the region and is highly regarded as the go-to organization for environmental and livelihood issues. Some highlights of our achievements and strengths are as below:

Promoting effective coordination and collaboration

ERS has been the driving force behind the Umzimvubu Catchment Partnership (UCP), serving as its co-founder and secretariat. Through its leadership, ERS has facilitated effective coordination and collaboration among stakeholders, making them a vital catalyst for local strategic partnerships. The UCP platform, which is composed of a wide range of partners including local implementing NGOs and government departments, intends to build complementarity in efforts to restore the catchment. This has seen more investment in the catchment restoration process, for example by the private sector. The stakeholders also include local communities and their traditional institutions.

Their inclusion in the conservation matrix empowers them as they participate in decision making and gives them security over communal ownership of natural resources including land, for example through conservation agreements. Despite facing resource limitations, ERS continues to support partners, demonstrating resilience and a strong sense of community and commitment to its mission. Our willingness to share knowledge with other communities shows a collaborative and inclusive approach, which may lead to mutually beneficial partnerships.

Spring protection and improved water quality

ERS has enabled securing of communal water sources for residents through the protection of over 44 natural springs. WWF, through various corporate partners and donors, supported ERS spring protection projects. ERS has also built local capacity for the preservation and maintenance of these vital water sources. This has ensured communities' access to clean drinking water for both people and their livestock, leading to improved livelihoods, better health, and overall well-being.

Conservation agreements to improve rangeland health

ERS has facilitated the signing of over 30 conservation agreements with local communities, aiming to add five more associations. These agreements bind communities to practice rotational grazing and resting to allow grasslands to recover. Accompanying incentives for communities increase compliance with the agreements. Results have been recorded demonstrating improvements in both quantity and quality of forage.

Supporting livestock farming and governance through Rangeland Associations

ERS has played a crucial role in establishing Rangeland Associations to promote livestock farming initiatives and strengthen local traditional governance institutions. We actively engage with local government partners, traditional authorities, local farmers, and NGOs in forming partnerships for water and rangeland management, setting a distinct example compared to other regions in the country. ERS signs conservation agreements with these associations, where incentives such as mobile livestock auctions, livestock vaccination, and fire management training are provided in exchange for compliance with agreed grazing management plans. ERS, farmers and youths jointly monitor compliance; a citizen science approach that promotes learning and sustains good practices.

Youth-focused approach

ERS displays a strong dedication to the youth, emphasizing a youth-focused approach. Our willingness to explore innovative strategies and our commitment to finding solutions are notable strengths. We have conducted extensive training with ecochamps which signifies a commitment to knowledge and expertise in environmental matters, allowing these young people to contribute valuable insights to their projects. ERS has a long-standing presence supporting youths in the landscape, enjoying a high level of trust and recognition for our work. Involving local youths and building their confidence and capacity is showing their incredible agency for leading change in the area and meaningfully integrating climate change mitigation actions into conservation strategy.

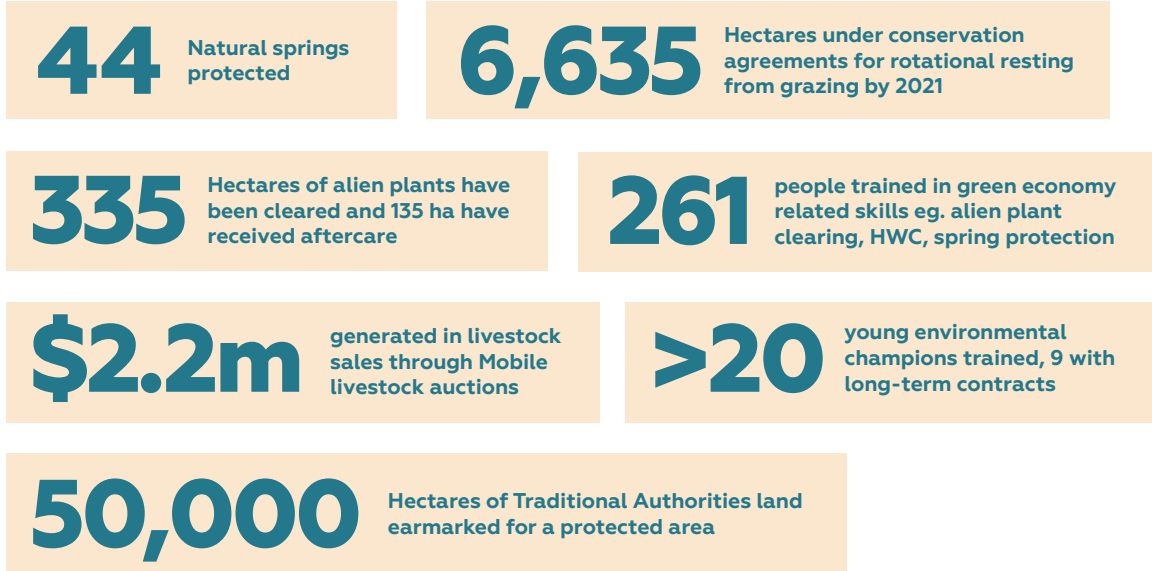
Over the 21 years we have been in operation, ERS has registered great success in the region and is highly regarded as the go-to organization for environmental and livelihood issues

Strong leadership

The organization is driven by strong leaders, who complement each other and have a strategic inclusive orientation. They prioritize funding and training for youth, showing a commitment to capacity building and cultivating young talent. Additionally, their ability to connect partners within and across the landscape is a significant strength. Their ability to draw upon indigenous knowledge and link it with scientifically rigorous approaches helps serve as a model for navigating the research landscape, offering valuable insights to the broader world.



Key Figures



Challenges and weaknesses

ERS and its partners and stakeholders identified several weaknesses that impact their operations and effectiveness, and need to be addressed:

- The organization often takes on many projects and initiatives at the same time, resulting in overwhelm.
- There is a reluctance to decline new funding opportunities because ERS needs all the money we can get to pay and retain staff, and remain operational.
- ERS experiences financial strain that extends to human resource management, creating difficulties in retaining and sustaining a well skilled and supported team.
- The Executive Directors are overburdened and continuously engaged in various tasks, including report writing. The pattern of taking on too much is not confined to individuals; the entire ERS team finds itself stretched thin due to an excessive project load, leading to a lack of focus and effectiveness.
- Until now, there hasn't been a formal strategic planning process that involved the entire team. While Mme Sissie and Mme Nicky had a strong sense of direction, strategic planning was more ad hoc and didn't include input from other team members. However, this is now changing, as the current process ERS has undertaken demonstrates a commitment to inclusive organizational planning.
- ERS serves as the secretariat for the UCP platform, but the platform's objectives and mandate overlap significantly with ERS's work. This role places an excessive burden on ERS to manage all administrative tasks, often diverting time and resources away from ERS's core activities and mission.
- There is a lack of reflective focus on learning methods. For instance, our MEL process is underutilized and undervalued, with insufficient integration into strategic planning. This is changing, as ERS recently sought support to streamline our MEL process and co-produced an impressive impact dashboard with WWF.



Threats

Internal threats

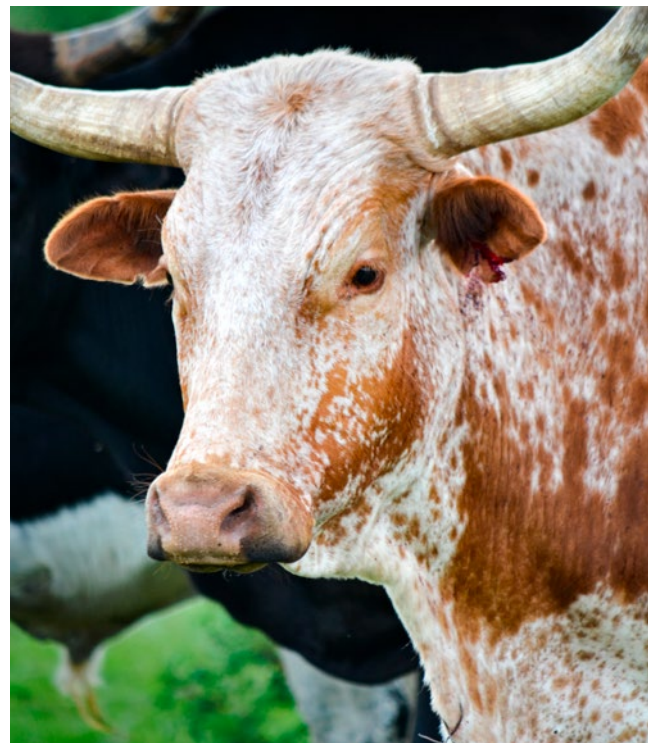
- Delayed evolution planning: ERS realizes the need to restructure and plan, as well as implement, for transition, but we began this process later than ideal. Although we have been contemplating on it, the lack of systems and financial resources to intentionally incorporate these ideas into planning and programs could harm continuity and institutional memory beyond the tenure of the founding co-directors.
- Lack of financial resources has been a major hindrance as ERS has never been able to pay salaries that match the new positions people have been promoted to. More than 70 % of our organisation's income has been from one source and they dictate how the funds should be distributed and spent, mostly covering project implementation.

External threats

- Political influences: local and traditional leaders often seek to assert authority over ERS, making demands for services beyond the organization's capacity, which impacts operational efficiency. In addition, there are also some requests from the government that constrain ERS capacity and yet if not handled with care could potentially impact our working relationships as well as our reputation.
- Perception that ERS is trying to 'do the job of the state' with municipal officials sometimes feeling threatened.
- Community misinformation: spread of misinformation within the community, negatively influencing ERS's organizational image. For instance, once some community groups circulated incorrect news suggesting that ERS receives substantial funds on their behalf. This has only happened once but constitutes a risk to ERS's reputation, as well as having the potential to erode trust.
- Climate change: the changing environmental landscape due to climate change presents new challenges that require increased innovation and support for affected communities. While this can be an opportunity to explore new directions, if not managed well it may divert ERS focus, and as such requires adaptive strategies and resilience, both for ERS and the communities we work with.
- Partners recruiting within ERS with a full knowledge that we build capacity.
- Competition over limited funding.

Opportunities

- ERS works in one of the major biomes in southern Africa, the grassland biome, of which 98% remains unprotected, presenting opportunities for the ERS model to be replicated for Payment for Environmental Services (PES) and Green Economy expansion nationally.
- For instance, the grasslands could be leveraged for communities to generate finance from carbon and biodiversity credits.
- The demand for ERS services in the landscape presents opportunities for scaling up in the region and at a national level. Opportunities are present in AIPs clearing and aftercare, conservation agreements and associated incentives, as well as businesses in waste management.
- ERS can be a learning hub to scale our conservation and community engagement model, as we already are for many other actors in academia and conservation action.
- As the secretariat of UCP, leading over 35 partners across the non-profit and government sectors, ERS is uniquely positioned to drive transformative change in the broader UMzimvubu Catchment landscape and other catchments as well



Strategic framework

Value proposition

Our approach revolves around three core themes, all contributing to economic sustainability and impactful livelihoods:

- Community-tailored solutions based on local knowledge systems, relationships, and community rights
- Innovation rooted in learning and reflection, and
- Respect for the environment and biodiversity.
- Partners contributing to the growth and development of ERS both in kind and financially unlike presently where most of the partnerships are just withdrawing knowledge and information.

Leveraging 21 years of expertise, we convene stakeholders for collaborative, agile, and inclusive rural solutions. Actively engaging rural communities, including young local champions, we co-learn and co-implement strategies for resilience to environmental challenges. Our adaptability is evident in the delivery of high-quality, community-tailored services for rangeland restoration, spring protection, and livelihoods, respecting community decisions and upholding their rights. Beyond restoration, we generate employment opportunities in conservation for rural youths. Our holistic approach integrates socio-ecological systems understanding, advocacy for community rights, and building solutions aligned with local knowledge, making us a trusted partner in the Umzimvubu catchment, contributing to lasting positive impact and shared success.

Our holistic approach integrates socio-ecological systems understanding, advocacy for community rights, and building solutions aligned with local knowledge, making us a trusted partner level

Values that guide ERS work

- Innovation: we innovate and pioneer rural solutions.
- We strive to act with honesty always: we uphold integrity, ensuring all our actions align with our principles.
- We fulfill our promises: we are committed to our responsibilities and work towards our goals.
- We treat everyone with honor: we respect each other and the communities we work with.
- Trust means a lot to us: we firmly believe in each other's capabilities and intentions, cultivating a strong sense of mutual reliance.
- We are accountable: we take ownership of our actions and duties, both towards our colleagues and the communities we serve.
- Working collaboratively for shared goals: we actively convene stakeholders in the landscape, leveraging different strengths to achieve common objectives and drive innovation.



Problem landscape

The Umzimvubu Catchment landscape exhibits rangeland degradation due to overgrazing, land and water pollution, and alien invasive species infestation. This is driven by poor governance systems, and has resulted in a decline in accessible grazing land and reduced clean water, with cascading negative impacts on livestock and water use in rural communities. Weak governance and planning result in fragmented and uncoordinated actions among stakeholders, with inadequate communication between actors and poor land use planning exacerbating these challenges. Organizations who work in silos lose the power of the collective. Ultimately, farming households in the region experience reduced productivity and decreased incomes.



Vision

Healthy resilient landscapes supporting secure rural livelihoods in the Umzimvubu Catchment

Mission

Promote landscape restoration for thriving rural livelihoods in the Umzimvubu Catchment

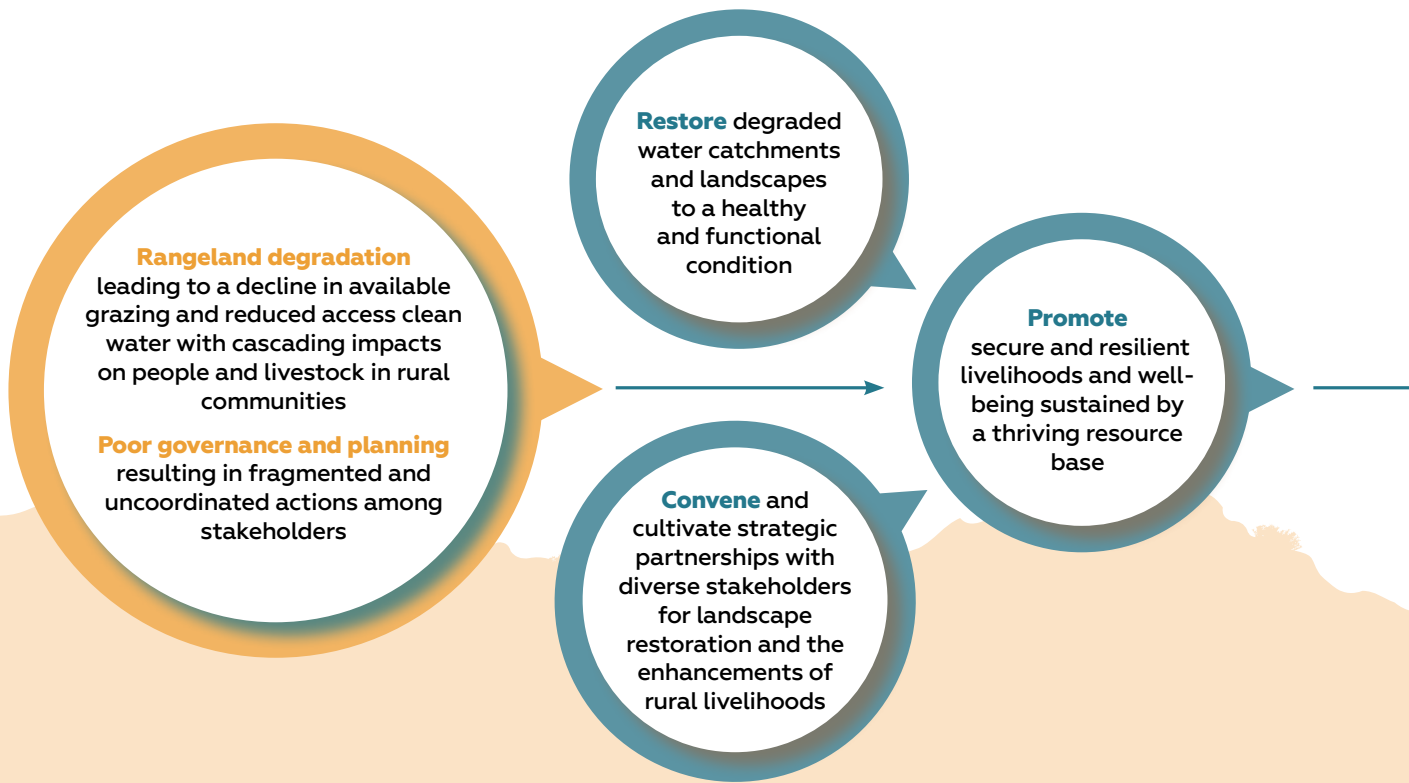


Theory of change

ERS will implement a comprehensive strategy anchored in three pillars: (i) restoring degraded landscapes, (ii) promoting better rural livelihoods and (iii) convening communities and stakeholders to foster crucial conversations for coordinated conservation action.

Conserve + Restore

The first pillar centers on the conservation and restoration of degraded landscapes within the Umzimvubu Catchment. ERS strives to restore the landscape by addressing rangeland degradation and advocating for sustainable grazing and land management practices.



Co-creation Innovation

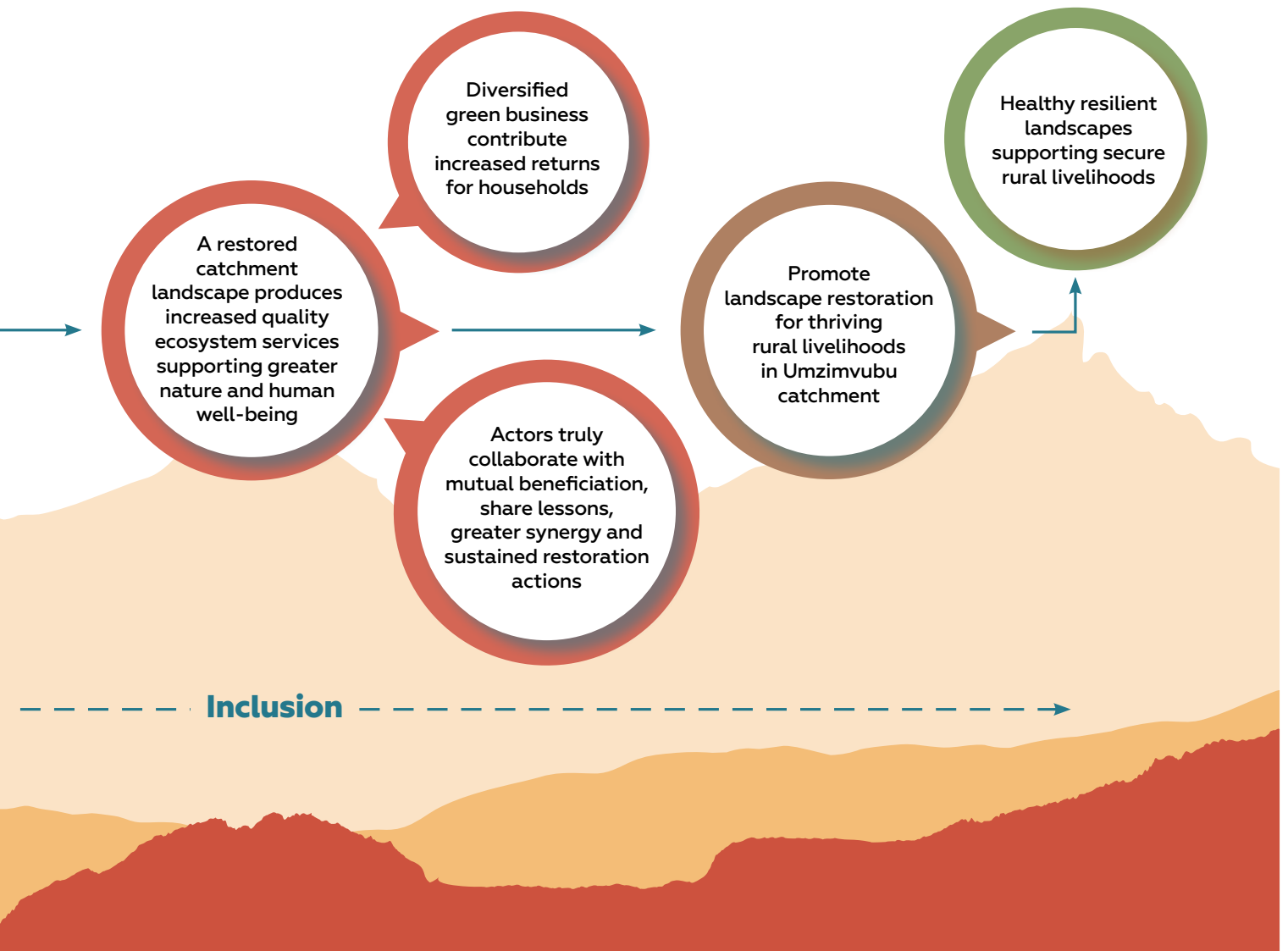
Promote better livelihoods

The second pillar aims to promote thriving rural livelihoods by fostering healthy and resilient landscapes. This includes securing rural livelihoods, supplementing household incomes, and enhancing community well-being. ERS plans to achieve this by:

- Protecting and enhancing natural water springs to improve water access for both livestock and the community, ensuring a more secure and potable water supply.
- Strengthening livestock husbandry to increase production and income.
- Focusing on employment creation, with a key emphasis on developing youth and green skills.

Convene + Converse

The third pillar focuses on facilitating open and inclusive dialogues to align community members and stakeholders with a shared mission for Umzimvubu catchment restoration. This collaborative effort aims at pooling resources and coordinating action for landscape restoration and fostering thriving rural livelihoods.



Strategic goals

GOAL 01

Restore degraded water catchments and landscapes to a healthy and functional condition, benefiting both ecosystem services and human well-being

Objectives

- Expand and maintain planned grazing management practices, facilitating rotational grazing and periods of rest to enhance grass quality, diversity, and quantity through regenerative practices.
- Manage the spread of alien invasive plant species (the wattle tree).
- Support the establishment of a protected area in the upper catchment to secure strategic water source areas and biodiversity.
- Engage and train communities in fire safety protocols and support community-based programs to reduce uncontrolled wildfires.
- Promote environmentally friendly waste management and disposal in the rural communities.

Targets for success

- Sustain 30 conservation agreements and grow each rangeland association to cover 80% of the area for rangeland management and restoration.
- Increase the number of signed conservation agreements by 10 over five years.
- Ensure that within five years, 90% of rural households have access to regulated waste disposal.
- 100 ha of alien invasives cleared and managed each year until 2028.
- 409 500 kilolitres of water from alien species clearing.
- Support fully functioning fire-fighting associations within 50% of traditional authorities by 2028.



GOAL 02

Promote secure and resilient livelihoods and well-being, sustained by a thriving natural resource base.

Objectives

- Promote eco-friendly business enterprises linked to rangeland restoration such as charcoal from cleared invasive species, selling of thatch grass and medicinal plants.
- Strengthen livestock value chains by equipping livestock farmers with knowledge in animal husbandry and market linkages.
- Enhance access to clean and sufficient water through spring protection and improved waste management.
- Foster non-consumptive tourism value chains, facilitating tourists' engagement with communities and landscapes.
- Create employment opportunities as spin-off benefits from rangeland restoration activities (from AIP clearing, charcoal, ecochamps, livestock husbandry and sales, waste management).
- Promote intentional support for youth agency and skills development.
- Foster climate smart food production practices to support household resilience

Targets for success

- **Maintain 12 livestock auctions** across six traditional authorities, **with the number of livestock sold** at fair prices **by farmers above 1 200 per year**.
- **Create over 300 jobs** from rangeland restoration and associated activities in five years.
- **50% increase in households with access to clean water from protected springs** in five years.
- Establish an **officially endorsed** and **well-resourced Ecochamps program** framework with clearly defined career pathways by 2026. Grow the number of Ecochamps from nine to 200 over five years.
- Increase household food security by 25% through climate smart homestead garden produce.
- Grow the number of ecochamps in proportion to available supervisory personnel

GOAL 03

Convene and cultivate strategic partnerships with stakeholders to facilitate landscape restoration and improved rural livelihoods

Objectives

- Catalyze, convene and support cross-sector partnerships to promote sustainable innovative solutions for landscape restoration.
- Foster planning, feedback mechanisms, and a culture of learning among UCP stakeholders to enhance collaboration.
- Advocate for and disseminate success stories of transformation that showcase the impact, innovation, and best practices in communal rangeland management.
- Create a protocol for stakeholder engagement within UCP, outlining clear roles and responsibilities.
- Facilitate the exchange of traditional knowledge and understanding of new challenges, enabling the development of effective solutions and enhancing the learning process.

Targets for success

- Create a dynamic stakeholder network map that actively engages in communication at least four times a year.
- Publish targeted media and awareness materials at least once a week on selected media platforms.
- Protocol for stakeholder engagement within the UCP developed by 2025.
- Establish a research hub/living lab in the catchment, building the knowledge foundation to support action learning, knowledge generation, and dissemination by 2026.



Implementation priorities

Organizational restructure and evolution planning

For 22 years, operating as a social enterprise, ERS has had significant positive impact in the upper Umzimvubu catchment. Degraded landscapes recovered, livelihoods improved, youths became active in conservation, and stakeholders are collaborating. And more can be achieved. However, the context has not remained the same. The funding landscape has changed, the climate has changed, the social demographics in the landscape have also changed. ERS itself has grown from a two member organization to a 20+ staff enterprise. Demand for our services has also gone up. All this has pushed the need to change the way we do business. We have therefore committed to shift our thinking.

We are in the midst of:

- transitioning into an NPC, a change that will enable us to open new funding doors, upscale and have more impact on our local communities.
- restructuring our organization to align with our 2024-2028 strategic plan. We are creating new positions to deliver the strategy. And along the way recruiting new staff to fill the positions.
- instituting a board to oversee the work we do. We have so far identified and engaged advisory directors to assist in the big picture thinking.
- revising our compensation structure to be competitive on the job market, to attract and retain good competent staff.

Demand for our services has also gone up. All this has pushed the need to change the way we do business. We have therefore committed to shift our thinking.



Fundraising

Key to successful implementation of this strategy is significantly improving ERS' portfolio of funding partners as well as the types of funding that ERS is able to access. ERS will focus on diversifying its funding, securing more core and flexible funding to invest in the team and core functions, and working to develop more diverse and long-term funding partnerships.

ERS will develop a comprehensive fundraising strategy that will focus on both long-term and short-term initiatives to unlock additional funding opportunities. The change in status to a Non-Profit Company (NPC) will open new doors, while we continue to capitalize on existing opportunities. This strategy will align with ERS's redefined mission and vision, seeking funding that aligns with our values and comes with fewer restrictions to promote long-term financial sustainability.



This fundraising effort is part of a broader restructuring process. For over 21 years, ERS operated as a small company functioning as a social enterprise, which limited the types of funding available. Since March 2024, ERS has been operating as a non-profit company. With our strong reputation and proven track record in delivering quality programs, and a greater emphasis on communicating our impact, we aim to expand our funding portfolio. WWF's South Africa office has been a key long-term supporter of ERS, with eight funding contracts since 2017, four of which are still active. This consistent support demonstrates the trust we've earned from long-term donors, but funding gaps remain for core operating costs.

A key part of this strategic plan is recognizing that having established ERS' work as a key model and example of watershed restoration and collaboration in South Africa, there is an urgent need to improve investment in ERS' growth, capacity, team, and reach. To achieve our key goals as described in this strategy, we aim to invest USD \$5,750,000 over the period 2024-2029. This ambitious budget will allow ERS to make critical investments in the following:

1. Strengthen our human resources as the core foundation of our work.
 - With a full-time staff complement of 9, core funding will enable us to fund team growth. We need 21 full-time staff to implement our strategy.
 - Retain capable staff with competitive salaries and better staff welfare.
 - Address key skills gaps in finance, programs and monitoring and evaluation to further strengthen our team.
2. Solidify our newly established non-profit status.
 - Invest in stronger communications to raise our profile and visibility
 - Set up management systems that support our new NPC
 - Set up a well functioning data management system and train all site team members and document our monitoring process
3. Reinvigorate and strengthen programs such as the alien invasives clearing
 - Establish local teams for spring protection and alien invasive species clearing.
4. Procure key equipment such as vehicles. Currently we have 2 project vehicles that are shared between teams and programs.

Although ERS has successfully delivered an impact on a budget of around \$300,000 in recent years, this level of funding has not been sustainable. It limits our ability to retain and invest in our team and deliver impact at the catchment level, which our robust model could easily support. In the near term, our goal for 2024 is to raise an additional USD \$150,000. This funding will provide critical core operating costs and enable us to expand our focus areas in line with our new strategic goals.

A key part of this strategic plan is recognizing that having established ERS' work as a key model and example of watershed restoration and collaboration in South Africa...

The table below outlines ERS's main program costs and fundraising goals for the next 5 years.

Item description for 2024-2028	Cost estimated (USD)
Core operating costs (salaries, office, admin, vehicles) for 21 permanent local staff with full benefits	\$3 200 000
Spring protection for 10 sites / 10 000 people per year	\$300 000
Alien invasive tree species clearing 350 ha	\$1 250 000
Maintain 30 conservation agreements per year and add 3 new associations per year	\$300 000
Ecochamps youth agency mentorship for 32 people	\$450 000
Climate smart food security	\$250 000
Total	\$5 750 000

In parallel, ERS intends to continue some consulting work aligned with its strategy to finance operations and reduce funding gaps. A dedicated team member oversees this consultancy work to ensure that the core mission is not derailed, while allowing consulting services to fund essential core costs.

Communication strategy

ERS will craft a communication strategy to enhance outreach and engagement with current and potential partners and funders, as well as deepen connection with the communities we serve. The strategy will focus on clearly outlining future financial needs, which will greatly aid fundraising efforts.

ERS will develop an impact desk to communicate the impacts achieved over the past two decades, highlighting projected impact.

Internally, the strategy will focus on effective communication within the organization in line with our goal of developing a well-resourced communication department that is adequately trained to effectively convey stories of impact and transformation.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning

ERS is committed to continued learning. Recently, we partnered with WWF and SoPACT– a social enterprise that supports organizations to streamline how they measure impact in a participatory way. As a priority, the organization will continue to improve our system of collecting data to track progress in our focus areas, and reporting impact to communities we work with, other stakeholders and to funders. The organization will also use its data to complement storytelling for wider audiences.







**environmental &
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