

# IMPACT STORY

## EMPATHEATRE

Changing Understandings  
and Engagements with ocean  
dependent communities:  
*Umkhosi Wenala*





The play *Umkhosi Wenala* aims to create an innovative participatory decision-making space where rural youth can have a voice in the creation and management of MPAs, processes that otherwise exclude cultural, spiritual, and other local perspectives.

Photo: Neil Copp

**In South Africa, acute tensions have arisen between pursuits to develop the blue economy, establish Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), and sustain local livelihoods and cultures. Furthermore, the exclusion of small-scale fishers (SSF) and Indigenous peoples from ocean-related decision-making processes has heightened actual and potential conflicts.**

“Empatheatre” is a methodology pioneered by a collective of artists and academics based at Rhodes University and the Durban University of Technology. It is a form of transdisciplinary and transgressive research that serves to convey and elicit empathy with the experiences of ocean-dependent people who are seldom heard or understood in the public domain. The methodology also serves as collaborative public storytelling praxis that can support public dialogue and participatory policy practices.

The play *Umkhosi Wenala* offers an innovative participatory decision-making space where rural youth can have a voice in the creation and management of MPAs, processes that otherwise exclude cultural, spiritual, and other local perspectives. It offers restorative public storytelling to address issues of fairness and inclusion.

### Responding to local calls for art and action

In the Mbazwana region on the northern KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) coast, a local community theatre runner attended a production of *Lalela uLwandle* during its 2019 run and was struck by its resonances with challenges in their own community. They asked Empatheatre to return to explore possible collaborations to address significant tensions around the local Marine Protected Area (MPA). Isimangaliso is a UN World Heritage Site known for its population of coelacanths, an ancient fish thought to have gone extinct along with the dinosaurs before it was discovered in the 1930s.

South Africa’s expansion of its MPA network is intended to safeguard the ocean and the services they provide, but it has also negatively affected small-scale fisher (SSF) leaders, traditional leaders, coastal youth, and other coastal citizens. Historical and contemporary human rights issues related to MPA expansion include but are not limited to: forced displacement of communities from coastal ancestral land; heavy restrictions to access along the

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Photo: Dylan McGarry

coastline in disregard of sustainable customary practices; exclusion from MPA planning, zonation, and other decision making; and culturally inappropriate and ineffective participatory processes on these issues.

## The play's development

In June 2021, 13 young performers/activists from the Mbazwana Arts Centre met in a preliminary workshop with marine sociologist and Hub researcher Dr. **Philile Mbatha** (University of Cape Town, South Africa). Dr. Mbatha has researched forced removals of coastal communities during apartheid and the lack of fair and equitable benefit-sharing around World Heritage Sites.

During her PhD research, she had surfaced stories in the region by working with Indigenous knowledge holders, many of whom had been elders of the workshop participants and had subsequently passed away. As an isiZulu speaker from Umlazi, Dr. Mbatha has been carrying stories and histories gifted to her through this research for almost a decade, and she finally had a chance to share many of them with the participants.

"It's a rare moment when academic work comes back to a community in the language of the place, and that it can be fully held and used by the next generation to whom the stories rightfully belong," Dr. **Dylan McGarry**, co-creator of Empatheatre, says.

The youth from the Mbazwana Arts Centre, eight elders, and Hub researchers based at Rhodes University, Durban University of Technology, and the University of Cape Town also took part in counter-hegemonic mapping exercises that

## It's a rare moment when academic work comes back to a community in the language of the place...



Dr. Dylan McGarry, Empatheatre co-creator

brought 200 years of history to life. They made interactive chalk drawings on the hall floor that mapped the KZN coastline; participants marked on it where they were born and narrated an early childhood memory pertaining to that place. Gradually the cement floor of the arts centre hall came alive with white chalk lines and illustrations telling a myriad of stories "that introduced us to rivers, coastlines, homesteads, lakes, plantations, cattle, horses, hippos, and magical snakes and baboons of the area," says Empatheatre co-director **Neil Coppen**.

Another transgressive and generative exercise involved drawing a chalk timeline across the expanse of the arts centre floor and asking participants to pick up a piece of chalk and fill in the timeline with narratives, anecdotes, stories,





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Photo: Jackie Bruniquel

myths, events, and historic episodes that they personally felt impacted the Mbazwana region and their own lives. Over the course of a week, the team and participants paired stories and histories with landmarks and places, weaving together their memories of the region. Participants were also encouraged to return to their communities in between these sessions to interview their elders about other stories of the land and sea, returning to populate the timeline and discuss their findings. Dr. Mbatha was able to then triangulate and corroborate these stories with her own research, and greater detail and depth emerged in this iterative 'call-and-response' meaning-making.

Through these preliminary workshops, we produced a new dataset on intangible cultural heritage and a rich 200-year oral history articulated by local communities and knowledge holders. At the close of the workshop, a shared project WhatsApp group was created.

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a period of six months, the WhatsApp group generated a wealth of incredible interviews with local fisherfolk, sangoma (traditional healers), and elders from Mbazwana and other communities surrounding the Isimangaliso World Heritage Site. The WhatsApp group continues to surface powerful narratives, mythologies, and belief-systems pertaining to the region, with all dialogue, sharing of stories, and collaborative analyses of the stories occurring in vernacular isiZulu.

**Unpacking unjust conservation**

In the course of the preliminary workshops and associated activities, the 13 young people from Mbazwana Creative Arts became co-researchers. They then stepped into the roles of co-playwrights and actors. Over a series of three separate, one-week workshops, together we co-developed a new empathetheatre musical, *Umkhosi Wenala* (Zulu for "Festival of Abundance"). We drew on the data collected over the previous months, creating relational maps of the stories. Through call and response methods, these were added to the theatre production and living map of these stories and concerns.

*Umkhosi Wenala* expands on key themes that emerged in *Lalela*, such as Indigenous peoples' customary laws and intangible cultural heritage related to the ocean and their displacement due to the creation of MPAs. It also introduces new themes, including gender inequality, inter-generational

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Participants were provided with a mobile data allowance from June to November 2021 to continue interviewing and sharing stories centred around the research questions and collective interests decided at the first meeting. Over





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dialogue, and the capture of economic benefits by community elites. Beyond this, it offers a unique and novel contribution to local marine decision making by sharing a 200-year history from the perspective of local knowledge holders, in their own language and idiomatic reasoning, that previously had been excluded or silenced from decision-making processes.

The musical, a fictional but close re-telling of stories from the region, focuses on two twins, brother Nkosana and sister Makhosazana. They inherit a kingdom after their grandmother, a queen, disappears, said to have drowned in the ocean. Destined to rule together, the two Nkosis are divided by circumstance and political forces beyond their control.

After two decades of betrayal and conflict between their competing kingdoms, the situation escalates with the arrival of a fence that cuts the communities off from their village and resources, bringing past tensions and new resentments to the surface. The production weaves together many relevant moments from the last century of Northern Zululand's history, using humour, pathos, satire, puppetry, ritual, and music to tell its story.

**With the legacies of apartheid, many perspectives and histories have been excluded in decision-making.**

Neil Copen, *Empatheatre* co-founder



The project unpacks some of the many factors that have led to the unjust fortress conservation that local people face today. The play reveals many facets of perspectives of the region's people, mirroring back different levels of agency, power, and connection to the struggles at hand. For example, it critiques current approaches to zoning and other forms of spatial planning for the rural areas surrounding conservation and mining concessions, while at the same time modelling alternatives devised by local knowledge holders.

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The play and its post-show discussions facilitated by researchers provide a deep, immersive engagement with a rich, thickly described narrative of the region's history and present. The show is creating new spaces, methods, and protocols for how Indigenous and local knowledge, contemporary social dynamics, historical injustices, and cultural phenomena can be foregrounded in decision-making processes.

**Bringing together over 500 knowledge holders**

*Umkhosi Wenala* toured the region surrounding the Isimangaliso MPA in 2022. The production brought together over 500 different knowledge holders who participated in post-show discussions. The audiences included local Indigenous authorities and leaders who offered feedback





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on the performance, the ethics of representation, and the text itself. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Perhaps most surprising, seeing as the play critiques certain forms of local governance, local authorities commended the play and actors for revealing these concerns. One younger traditional leader claimed that he had never seen this full critique or even known this full history, as it was not taught to him at school; he later asked to read Dr. Mbatha's research and learn more.

Feedback from elders, youth, and most importantly young women, showed they were deeply engaged and attentive to the nuances found within the story. One young woman remarked that the most unbelievable part of the production was not a mystical coelacanth carrying an ancestor emerging from the sea, but rather a moment in one of the final scenes when a young woman stands up and speaks in a public meeting, as this never happens in real life in her community. She later reflected in a feedback form that watching the lead female protagonist speak her mind had given her the courage to do the same in the post-show discussion.

This is an example of how co-developed models and scenarios, created with different knowledge holders and then portrayed in a play, can help to dismantle unjust and unequal forms of cognitive justice and model useful co-designed alternatives.

**We work with researchers, community leaders, and other knowledge holders to use the post-show discussions as a think tank to draft a peoples' charter on marine protection.**

The first iteration of the play allowed the team to adapt it to focus even more on how audiences can work with the complexity of addressing past injustices in how decisions are made in contemporary governance. A further tour across KZN is planned in 2024, with a particular focus on a public consultation process underway in a neighbouring MPA farther down the coast. Alongside the extended tour, we aim to work with researchers, community leaders, and other knowledge holders to use the post-show discussions as a think tank to draft a peoples' charter on marine protection.

The preparation of this play provided significant livelihoods benefits to local artists, actors, and craftspersons. Young artists and actors received honoraria according to nationally-established entry-level salaries, in addition to receiving mentoring and support for their artistic career progression. One artist has been recruited as a part-time cultural consultant with an animation company on recommendation from Empatheatre researchers, and two others have gone on to become research assistants for other projects in the region.

In addition, local craftspersons were employed to develop the set, props, puppets, and costumes for the play, giving them an opportunity to showcase their artwork nationwide.



At FAO, early insights from the tour of *Umkhosi Wenala* were shared with policy makers and practitioners involved in sustainable fisheries and marine conservation.



Photo: Neil Coppen

## International relevance

A documentary of this research collaboration, *Festival of Abundance: The Making of Umkhosi Wenala*, has been recently completed. The film unpacks the empathatre methodology undertaken to research and develop the play as well as the major themes of the production, its aims, and how it offers a new decision-making space to respond to local ocean-related conflicts.

Empatatre researchers participated in the closing events in Rome of the UN FAO's International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture in March 2023, where they showed a portion of the documentary to share key aspects of the methodology. Early insights from the tour of *Umkhosi Wenala* were shared with policy makers and practitioners involved in sustainable fisheries and marine conservation. As described in the case study "Across Scales: Shifting Ways of Working," our workshop was positively received by UN officers and NGOs dissatisfied with their own consultation procedures.

The Rome events provided an opportunity for us to explore with various international development organisations how they can include innovative methodologies in their work to make marine protection more inclusive and just. A number of organisations are eager to integrate the creative approaches we've co-developed with SSFs to better engage with, and secure the rights of, SSFs within ocean governance.

Going forward, we are excited to explore how these approaches can be adapted and included in the work of international development projects with SSFs and how they

might be used to support more inclusive and meaningful consultation processes at the national level.

Collaborative and inter-disciplinary research is being undertaken to study the multiple ways in which empathatre, and particularly the plays developed under the One Ocean Hub, are human rights practices: that support the understanding and protection of human rights by duty bearers, as well as practices that protect environmental human rights defenders and contribute to the legal empowerment of human rights-holders.

## Key source:

*Festival of Abundance: The Making of Umkhosi Wenala*. Available on Youtube [here](#).



Photo: Neil Coppen

