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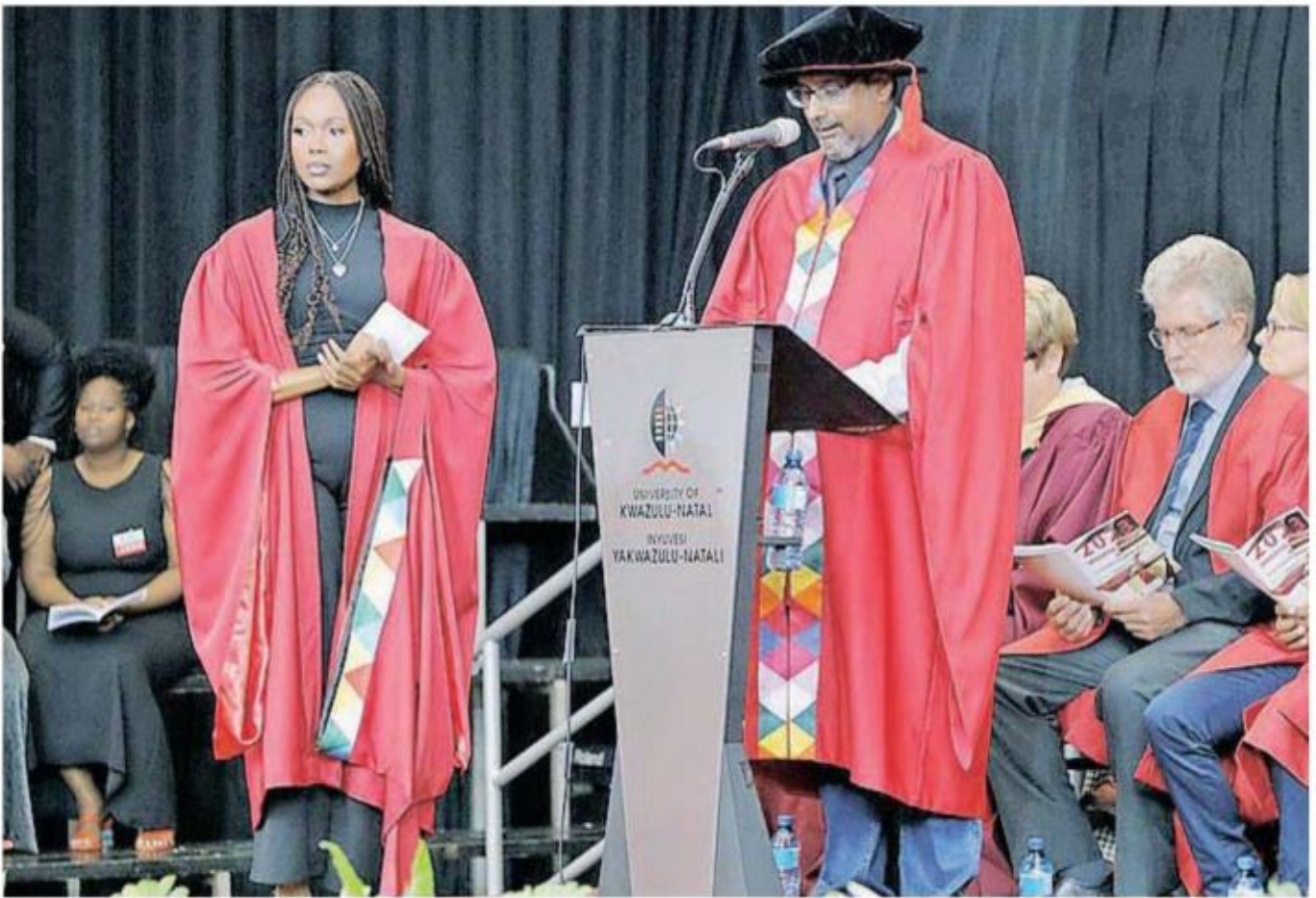
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DOCTOR Nomthandazo Manqele has been awarded a PhD in ecological sciences from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. | ABHI INDRARAJAN

CONSERVATION

Study of vultures lands Manqele a PhD

DAILY NEWS REPORTER

A STUDY on the use of vultures in traditional medicine in KwaZulu-Natal and the conservation implications of this practice landed Dr Nomthandazo Manqele a PhD in ecological sciences at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN).

During her research, Manqele said she became aware of other issues, such as stock theft, that affect livelihoods.

Manqele said a relationship with wildlife was not a feature of life in her semi-rural setting. She nurtured a love of nature, however, and a school trip to the Umbogavango Nature Reserve cemented her desire to pursue a career in the natural sciences.

After completing school at Kwa-Makhutha Comprehensive, Manqele progressed to a BSc Honours in geography and environmental management.

She undertook an internship with Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife that provided her with more conservation skills and

reinforced her desire to pursue a career in nature conservation. Manqele then did her Master's degree at UKZN.

In the study, she assessed the drivers and impact of illegal hunting for bush meat and the trade in serval and oribi in South Africa, focusing on the KZN Midlands.

Manqele interviewed hunters who killed the animals for their skins and meat, and for use in traditional medicine.

The research looked specifically at the use of vultures, currently the most threatened group of raptors in the world, by traditional healers, focusing on study sites in Zululand.

Manqele said she found that while animals do not have intrinsic medicinal properties as plants do, in traditional medicine there are practices aimed at facilitating the extraction of attributes and/or behavioural traits of animals for belief-based uses, such as retrieving stolen goods, bringing back lost lovers and good fortune.

"In vultures, people have observed what they interpret as a 'sixth sense' or clairvoyant ability as the birds detect the presence of carcasses across huge distances.

"This perceived quality, and the increasing scarceness of vultures, makes them a sought-after element in traditional medicine," Manqele said.

She said her research was challenging yet enlightening, as she encountered traditional healing practices unfamiliar to her, seeing slaughtered endangered animals and interviewing people involved in the illegal trade.

Manqele said she found people were intrigued by vultures and did not want them to disappear, as they acknowledged the birds being part of their natural heritage and their value in clearing the environment of carcasses as well as their importance in traditional medicine.

She said she was driven to contribute to conservation that meets the needs of both people and wildlife.

