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Author: ` Vusi Mthlane

Study on vultures secures doctorate

BY Vusi Mthalande

A WOMAN from Adams Mission graduated with a PhD in Ecological Sciences on May 3, from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) after her extensive study on how the use of vultures in traditional medicine is impacting endangered species.

A former KwaMkhutha High School learner, Dr Nomthandazo Manqele's relationship with wildlife was sparked after a school trip to Umbogavango Nature Reserve, cementing her desire to pursue a career in natural sciences.

According to a statement from the university, Nomthandazo was accepted for a Bachelor of Social Sciences in Environmental Management at the institution.

"She progressed to do a Bachelor of Science Honours in Geography and Environmental Management, after which 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," read the statement.

Nomthandazo's master's degree was funded by the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) and it assessed the drivers and impact of illegal hunting for bushmeat and trade in South Africa. She interviewed hunters who killed the animals for their skins, meat and for use in traditional medicine.

"This research spurred her on to her

PhD study, also funded by SANBI, which 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. Supervised by South African Research Chair in Ecosystem Health and Biodiversity in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, professor Colleen Downs, and SANBI's Dr Sarah-Anne Selier, Nomthandazo 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, acquiring intelligence or good fortune and so forth," read the statement.

Nomthandazo's research has been described as challenging yet enlightening, as she encountered traditional healing practices that were unfamiliar to her, saw slaughtered endangered animals, and in some cases, interviewed people involved in the illegal trade.

After the study, she was able to provide feedback to tribal authorities and contribute to the drafting of a management plan for vultures with the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment.

She has recently taken up a post-doctoral research fellowship at the Vaal University of Technology to examine the impacts and evidence of climate change at World Heritage Sites and its implications for tourism.



Dr Nomthandazo Samantha Manqele congratulated by her mother Nokuthula (left) and sister, Thobile.

