



SOUTH AFRICA



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## INCLUSIVE LIVING LANDSCAPES WITH THRIVING COMMUNITIES

# CREATING KNOWLEDGE FESTIVALS

Knowledge festivals can support NGOs, governments and researchers in managing and researching natural resources in a more socially just way.

## WHAT IS A KNOWLEDGE FESTIVAL?

A knowledge festival is a vibrant, inclusive event that brings together diverse groups, such as local communities, scientists, policymakers and practitioners, to share and celebrate various types of knowledge.

Knowledge festivals offer a space for people to learn from and with each other.

## WHAT CAN A KNOWLEDGE FESTIVAL ACHIEVE?

First and foremost, they aim to bridge diverse knowledge systems. Instead of focusing only on expert knowledge, knowledge festivals recognise and value lived experiences equally, allowing for a more inclusive and intercultural exchange of ideas and perspectives.

Second, knowledge festivals integrate both art and science in knowledge co-production. The use of creative and participatory methods to share and co-create makes knowledge festivals more interactive and engaging.

## WHY ARE KNOWLEDGE FESTIVALS VALUABLE?

Most examples of research festivals around the world focus on utilisation (problem-solving) and dissemination of scientific knowledge. Unlike traditional conferences, knowledge festivals embrace both scientific knowledge and lived, local experiences by making use of diverse participatory methods. A knowledge festival is a way to engage local communities in reflecting on local challenges and solutions.

## WHEN AND HOW BEST TO USE KNOWLEDGE FESTIVALS?

Knowledge festivals are a valuable tool both for transdisciplinary research and for natural resource management projects. They can be used at different stages by both researchers and practitioners.

At the start of a project, they help everyone understand complex challenges, making sure all stakeholders share the same problem-setting and goals. During the project, festivals allow for diverse input from the community, helping adapt strategies based on feedback. They can also serve as an evaluation tool, gathering insights from those directly involved to assess the project's impact. By creating an inclusive atmosphere, knowledge festivals promote collaboration and learning, leading to more sustainable and effective outcomes.



**WATER ENERGY FOOD NEXUS**  
TOWARDS SOCIAL JUSTICE

[www.wefcommunities.co.za](http://www.wefcommunities.co.za)

## WEF NEXUS PROJECT

The project is an initiative by a consortium of four research institutions from the Netherlands and South Africa (see back page), partnering with WWF and an Eastern Cape-based implementing partner, Environmental and Rural Solutions (ERS).

While WWF has produced thought leadership on the WEF nexus over the years, this project took it a step further by introducing the concept of “WEF communities” as a bottom-up approach to integrating local decision-making into national frameworks.

Rural communities demonstrate potential for fostering self-determination while addressing trade-offs between needs for water, energy and food. The water-energy-food (WEF) nexus offers an integrated approach to managing such growing demands.

This factsheet provides guidelines to organise a knowledge festival and it includes a case study which draws on findings from a knowledge festival, in March 2024, held in Matatiele in the rural Eastern Cape in South Africa.

## WHY ARE KNOWLEDGE FESTIVALS VALUABLE?



**To empower communities and youth:** They help participants, including youth and schoolchildren, feel confident in sharing their ideas and experiences. They provide safe spaces where everyone's voice is valued, regardless of age or background. This empowers the whole community, especially the younger generation, to take an active role in shaping their future.



**To bridge different forms of knowledge for fair sharing:** Knowledge festivals connect scientific research with local and traditional wisdom, ensuring fair and inclusive knowledge sharing. They create spaces where diverse perspectives can come together, allowing everyone to contribute equally, regardless of their background or expertise. This exchange helps to build mutual respect and understanding across different forms of knowledge.



**To foster participation with mind, body, and spirit:** They engage people holistically, inviting participants to contribute not only through intellectual discussions but also through physical involvement (like

field trips or performances) and emotional or spiritual expression (through music, storytelling, and rituals). This deepens the connection to the issues being discussed.



**To celebrate cultural diversity:** Through art, music, performances, and the use of local languages, knowledge festivals make learning enjoyable and accessible. This makes the event not only educational but also fun and culturally rich for everyone involved.



**To encourage collaboration and collective learning:** By gathering people from different backgrounds (like communities, scientists, and decision-makers), knowledge festivals create a space to learn with and from each other and find practical solutions to local problems.



**To create real impact and community ownership:** Knowledge festivals often spark long-lasting change. They raise awareness about important issues and build connections that can lead to real solutions that communities can take ownership of.



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## THE WEF KNOWLEDGE FESTIVAL IN 2024

The Water-Energy-Food (WEF) Nexus Knowledge Festival, organised by local NGO Environmental and Rural Solutions (ERS), took place in March 2024 in Matatiele. Local communities and traditional leaders were involved from the start, ensuring diverse perspectives and ownership of the event. As part of the festival, a school competition focused on challenges related to the Water-Energy-Food (WEF) Nexus encouraged students to think critically about local issues and propose innovative solutions. During the festival, local youth change agents, known as Ecochamps, played a key role in the festival by facilitating communication—translating between local languages and English—so that everyone could participate comfortably in the language they preferred.

Over the course of the three-day event, more than 200 participants engaged in a variety of activities, combining research, art, and community-driven solutions. These activities included:

- **Roundtable panel discussions** where community representatives shared local challenges and discussed policy recommendations.
- **Traditional dances and songs** performed by local schoolchildren, celebrating the interconnectedness of water, energy, and food.
- **A theater performance** by Ecochamps that addressed local WEF challenges through storytelling and drama.
- **Poetry readings** by local community members, giving voice to personal experiences with WEF-related issues.
- **Field visits** to village sites, where participants observed local problems firsthand and learned about community-led solutions in water, energy, and food security.
- **Cultural celebrations** with traditional authorities, reinforcing the importance of cultural heritage in addressing local challenges.
- **Co-creation of problem-solution trees**, visual tools designed collaboratively by participants to identify key issues and potential solutions in their communities.
- **“Culture Day”**, where participants dressed in traditional attire, celebrating their heritage.

This diverse and interactive format allowed for rich exchanges of knowledge, fostering deeper understanding and stronger connections across the community.

**“Music is a universal language in our African culture. It was a brilliant idea! If you feel out of place or overwhelmed, music makes you feel present and collected. Also, to energise people. Some other people get bored quickly, but music and dancing make people feel comfortable; it captures people and it makes you be there with body, mind and soul.”**

– WEF Nexus Knowledge Festival attendee

# PRACTICAL GUIDELINES TO ORGANISE A KNOWLEDGE FESTIVAL

A number of lessons can be drawn from the experience of organising a knowledge festival. We present guidelines for organising knowledge festivals:

- ✓ **Inclusive engagement and community ownership:** Involve all community sectors from the start. This includes traditional leaders, schools, local experts, policymakers and community members to ensure the event reflects diverse voices and creates a sense of ownership. This fosters participation and ensures the festival is meaningful to everyone.
- ✓ **Empowering youth and future leaders:** Actively involve local youth in both the planning and activities of the festival. Create opportunities for them to explore environmental governance and sustainability challenges through activities like competitions, presentations and leadership roles. This helps inspire the next generation and gives them a voice in addressing local issues.
- ✓ **Multi-modal communication:** Use a variety of communication formats – like performances, visual displays and open discussions – so that everyone can engage, regardless of their background. Incorporate local art forms like music, dance and poetry to make complex issues more relatable. This approach ensures that knowledge is shared in a way that resonates culturally and is accessible to all participants.
- ✓ **Collaboration and partnership:** Build partnerships across sectors. Involve not only local communities but also researchers, local authorities and international organisations. Be mindful of traditional governance structures, local customs, budget constraints and logistical challenges like transportation. This ensures smooth coordination and respect for local practices.
- ✓ **Local sourcing:** It is important to ensure economic benefit remains within the community; thus, everything needed for the festival – from decor to catering – should be sourced from businesses within the broader community.
- ✓ **Respect for local and indigenous knowledge:** Ensure that both local/indigenous knowledge and scientific knowledge are treated equally. Adapt to the local culture and create space for community contributions in decision-making processes. This fosters mutual respect and ensures that the community feels valued and that their knowledge is honoured.
- ✓ **Sustained engagement:** Plan for follow-up actions and ongoing engagement after the festival. This ensures that projects and ideas initiated during the event continue to grow, keeping the community involved and helping manage expectations. Follow-up actions are essential to maintain momentum and show that the festival leads to real-world impacts.

This factsheet is part of a series. See also WWF factsheet on *WEF Ecochamps* and *Lessons from WEF governance*



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## THE OPPORTUNITY

The knowledge festival in Matatiele is a small-scale initiative with very limited impact worldwide. *Scaling up and increasing the number of knowledge celebration initiatives* around the globe could help to tackle the many sustainability challenges, both at local and global levels. We therefore encourage NGOs, government agencies and researchers around the world to consider knowledge festivals as a way to reflect on challenges and possible solutions with the local community in their work.

## FURTHER INFORMATION:

- The WEF Nexus Knowledge Festival in Matatiele: [enviros.co.za/wefnexusfestival](http://enviros.co.za/wefnexusfestival)
- The research project: [www.wefcommunities.co.za](http://www.wefcommunities.co.za)



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