

“HOTELS IN NATIONAL PARKS CAN’T CAUSE BIODIVERSITY LOSS OR DESTROY A PARK?”

In responding to the article published by The Star on 06 March 2011 written by Dr Salomon Joubert and titled “Using hotels to raise cash for Kruger Park not the answer” it is important to dispel a few “myths” which have been perpetuated in this article first.

The government of South Africa continues to financially support national parks despite other crucial socio-economic responsibilities. It is a fact that over the years the operational grant given to SANParks has been progressively dwindling, however government has compensated for this by providing SANParks with funds for many other key capital projects the organization would not have had the resources to implement or maintain. In the last five years government has contributed R1.9 billion. The government has committed to continue funding SANParks on the different programmes despite increased pressure brought on by the global financial crisis to an amount of R711 million in the next three years. For anyone to imply that government has withdrawn its financial support is a complete fallacy based on fairy-tales rather than fact. However, the reality is that SANParks self generates about 80% of its operational funds, something which may soon be happening in many other countries. Governments the world over can no longer afford to finance parks at 100%. For the record, SANParks is by no means dependent on “survival mechanisms”. We have, among our peers in Africa, the strongest balance sheet, cash in the bank and a 12-18 months fully paid order book. We are not cash-strapped!

Secondly, to imply that the several surveys conducted by SANParks were on the Malelane Hotel and that they rejected a hotel style establishment is to be selective with facts. The decision to embark on the Malelane development was not based on any survey done by SANParks but an opportunity that arose when the old Malelane Sun Hotel was burnt down in 2007. This opportunity was aligned to the 10 year old assessment done by the McKinsey business consultants which recommended that for SANParks to survive financially it was imperative to expand the product offering and opportunities. Further to this McKinsey identified that although at the time Black South Africans constituted 78% of the country they constituted only 4% of park visitors. I will not get into the reasons as to why this was so. SANParks has been able to increase this value to 27% thus far and this has been through implementation of various interventions. Further Research by TNS Survey on ‘holiday habits’ showed that black people were not coming in big numbers to the parks due to historical reasons of deliberate exclusion and that they were not too impressed with the tourism product offered as it didn’t talk to them but to those who understood the “*Guardian Spirit*” of Jan Smuts and the “*all-pervasive wilderness ambiance*” of Stevenson-Hamilton. After all black people were not expected to appreciate these high-order wilderness values.

The next myth that needs attention is that hotels can destroy biodiversity. There is no scientific, empirical or even anecdotal evidence to this effect. Hotels have been established in a number of national parks in at least the last 100 years without eroding the parks’ wilderness qualities or changing the primary mandate of the parks. The advent of hotels inside proclaimed national parks is not even new in South Africa itself. We have a hotel inside the Golden Gate Highlands National Park which has been in existence for at least 40 years. There are a few in provincial parks too. In the North West Province, Pilanesberg Park has two hotels (KwaMaritane and Bakubung operated by Legacy Hotels Group), Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife has been running the Royal Drakensberg hotel in the Royal Natal Park for some time. The fact that the practice has been going on for over 100 years and has not led to any biological loss or change of the status

of the parks and the whole history of hotels in national parks, globally, vindicates SANParks' decision in my view.

The other misrepresentations being perpetuated about the impact of tourism on the Kruger National Park are that of "overcrowding" and expansion of development beyond the carrying abilities of the park. First of all it is important to note that Kruger National Park has visitor quotas for each and every gate, which are never exceeded. Obviously the area to the south of the park, because of its popularity, exhausts its quotas much quicker but visitors have come to understand that once quotas are reached the park closes the gates. Secondly, it is necessary to note that according to the World Conservation Union (IUCN) tourism guidelines in protected areas national parks can be developed up to 10% of their size which would amount to 200,000 ha of 2,000,000 ha in the case of the Kruger National Park. The current total development footprint is 6, 285 ha translating to 0.3%, made up of tourism infrastructure, management and tourist roads, staff accommodation and bulk infrastructure. . The two hotels, one on virgin bush and the other inside an existing camp, will have far less a footprint than the traditional rest camps. Where is this over-development that we are made to believe exists in Kruger?

SANParks Scientists, Tourism Development Planners and other specialists are making these decisions on the basis of expert knowledge. The management plans are under-pinned by extensive Conservation Development Plans, Scientific surveys of tourism trends and demands and financial feasibilities to decide on a product. In addition to these checks and balances we have legally and independently conducted Environmental Impact Assessment studies that involve public participation to eliminate possibilities of a tourism development "destroying" nature. . The framework is informed by the existence of 'water, waste, impacts and visitor management systems. With these rigorous checks and balances in place it is unlikely that development can be allowed to get out of hand. The success of any nature-based tourism model is the existence of a robust tourism plan framework and a rigorous visitor management plan and these did not exist previously at SANParks until 1997.

Our visitors are not a homogeneous group looking for the high-order wilderness qualities. Although we have improved the SANParks tourism product offering, there is a segment missing in the range. This is the hotel or fully serviced facilities in addition to the rustic fly camps, bush camps, rest camps and the five star luxury premium concession lodges. Our visitors who prefer solitude and high order wilderness experience will still have access to the rustic fly, bush and rest camps and wilderness trails. Those who prefer budget accommodation in rest camps will still be able to do so. None of the existing rest camp accommodation is planned for outsourcing. The four star hotel product will be a small additional option. We are not planning for casinos or Sun City type of hotel developments but something similar to the Protea Kruger Gate or Bakubung in the Pilanesberg. We have no intention to open flood gates, so where is the "road to ruin" there?

Good management of parks did not end with the change of guard in 1994 but continued with the new generation of protected area management that equally shares the ethos and respect for these special places. The innuendos and insinuations that are being created that the current management is selling the family's jewels for top dollar is misplaced, misleading and insulting. The national parks of this country are in the centre of economic transformation, growth and job creation for the benefit of society and not the bureaucracy that is managing them. Most national parks are situated in some of the poorest communities and therefore job creation is not a luxury but a real and unavoidable responsibility of the organization. Our national parks are a major

economic hub for these communities. Currently, 10 300 people work directly in a national park somewhere in our country. With these two projects we hope to take the numbers up to 11 000 or more. It is our intention to respond positively to President Zuma's call of creating decent work to reduce unemployment.

The quest to preserve the ecological integrity of parks, the imperative to make parks more accessible to the public in various ways and the necessity of financial viability will always be a tight balancing act to maintain. The right balance will forever be elusive but achievable. This is not the time for exchanging insults between disgruntled former colleagues and current management to settle past scores with the possibility of misleading the public. It is a time to collectively respond to the 21st Century emerging nation's needs in a responsible manner that takes on board some of the good work that was done in the past and new initiatives to improve past achievements. Creating an impression that the new leadership is like a rogue elephant breaking down hard-won conservation achievements is cheap politicking.

Keeping parks as a preserve of the "ecological elite" might widen the hiatus caused by past discriminatory conservation policies to the detriment of the very existence of the system. However, if we carefully plan tourism development in parks we can offer different rewarding and fulfilling experiences to different people and truly live up to our mission of making national parks "the pride and joy of all South Africans and the people of the world". .

Dr David Mabunda (PhD Tourism Development in Protected Areas – University of Pretoria)
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER: SANParks