

“CAN HOTELS IN NATIONAL PARKS CAUSE BIODIVERSITY LOSS OR DESTROY A PARK?” – MEDIA PRESENTATION ON THE PROPOSED SKUKUZA AND MALELANE SAFARI LODGES, 07 MARCH 2011, SKUKUZA, KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

SANParks would like to set the record straight in response to the article on the front page of the Beeld 04th March about the proposed Malelane Safari Lodge and the Skukuza Conference Lodge. Utterances that *“hotels will spell the end of the Kruger National Park or similar conservation areas”* are reckless, irresponsible and unfortunate. They cast aspersions on the good name of both the South African hotel industry and conservation agencies, denting their impeccable track record of upholding best environmental ethics. It would therefore be an unforgivable oversight if the “hotel myth” would be allowed to mislead our society.

Yes, it is not a secret that we are in the process of establishing the Malelane Safari Lodge. The process is at an Environmental Impact Assessment stage conducted by an independent service-provider. The Skukuza Conference Lodge is at its infancy or planning stage. Both projects are sanctioned by our Board and the Department of Environmental Affairs. Now let us clear the confusion.

For starters, what is our understanding of the meaning of the word *“hotel”*? The international definition of a hotel is *“any establishment that provides paid lodging on a short term basis”*. The provision of basic accommodation, in times past, consisting of only a room with a bed, a cupboard, a small table and a wash-basin has largely been replaced by rooms with modern facilities including *en suite* bathrooms, air-conditioning or climate control, television, swimming pools etc. Is this not the product we are offering in our so-called “rest camps”? What is the difference? Whether it is called a lodge, rest camp, bush camp, log cabin, house boat, motel or any other fancy label, it is still a hotel - “providing paid lodging for a short-term period”.

Product differentiation by hotels is by choice and is based on the type of demand, target market and the value proposition on offer. The pitching of any product will be largely influenced by location, character and sense of place where the hotel is built. For example, hotels in parks or ecologically sensitive areas have high environmental ethics, subdued lighting, no telephones in the rooms and very little luxuries. It is called “Responsible Tourism”. In Sandton or downtown Manhattan (New York) the hotels there will be multi-storied with bright lights offering a five star experience commensurate with top-end market expectations (fitness/gym centres, Jacuzzi bathtubs, business centre, childcare etc). There is a vast difference between the two hotel types that have been alluded to. We certainly don’t want a Sandton or Manhattan-style hotel in national parks.

The advent of hotels inside proclaimed national parks is not new in the world or in South Africa itself. We have a hotel inside the Kruger National Park, the Protea Kruger Gate, and another at Golden Gate Highlands National Park. There are a few in provincial parks too. There is no scientific or empirical evidence that hotels built and operated in ecologically sensitive areas cause biodiversity loss. The history of hotels in national parks, globally, vindicates our view.

The national park movement was born in the United States of America, leading to the establishment of hotels to provide boarding and lodging for visitors in parks like Yellowstone, Yosemite, Glacier, Grand Canyon, Death Valley, Everglades and many of the over 400 national parks. Notable among park-based hotels are the Stage Coach Inn at Old Faithful (Yellowstone), Lake MacDonald and Glacier Park Lodge (Glacier National Park) to mention but a few. The same is happening in Banff and Jasper National Parks in Canada with hotels inside and on the periphery. Kakadu National Park in Australia is another park with hotels such as Kakadu Lodge and Gagugiu Crocodile Inn. Many national parks in European countries have hotels viz. Spain, Italy, France, Poland, the Alps Mountains in Switzerland. South American parks are no exception in countries like Brazil, Costa Rica, Mexico, Argentina and Chile. In the Serengeti National Park (Tanzania) there is Bilila Lodge, in Kenya the Serena Group is running hotels in various parks including Tsavo East and Tsavo West. In Malawi there is a Protea Hotel in Kasungu National Park on the Zambian border and in Uganda the Muchisson Falls National Park has a hotel. Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe has had a hotel for many decades. Closer to home in the North-West Province Pilanesberg Park has two hotels viz KwaMaritane and Bakubung operated by Legacy Hotels Group. Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife has been running the Royal Drakensberg hotel in the Royal Natal Park for a very long time. The practice has been ongoing for over 100 years without eroding the parks' wilderness qualities.

The "hotel allergy" is an antiquated "school of thought" crafted, shaped and advocated by the "purist" ideology to conservation. Since the 1930s there's been resistance in our sector to the introduction of amenities like hot water, showers, tarred roads, telephones, swimming pools, restaurants, electricity, air-conditioners, cell phone network, use of safari open vehicles, modernization of accommodation and other demand-driven modern innovations. Amenities that today are considered to be part and parcel of the "eco-tourism" offering. It is the same lobby that was fiercely opposed to the introduction of commercialization of non-core functions and services in order to attract investment, offer better products to tourists and allow conservationists to focus on the core-business of environmental protection. Needless to say, the implementation of Public Private Partnerships has been internationally recognized as tremendously successful. Apart from providing a more diverse product range, it is providing close to 10% of the income required from tourism operations to conserve our precious biodiversity. That such a project will create a precedent that will threaten the "whole

character, ethos, original characteristics and goal” of parks, is an ideology stuck in time and place in the limbo of a past forgotten era and has no relevance in our evolving new society in 21st Century.

For the record SANParks is by no means dependent on “survival mechanisms”. We have the strongest balance sheet, cash in the bank and order book among our peers on the African continent. Indeed times are tough but SANParks is very much “alive” and due to its diverse product offering, relevance and focus on the domestic market has fared better than many others during these tough economic times. In fact, the global economic situation has forced governments around the world to put pressure on Conservation agencies to find ways to become more self-sufficient. Some of these agencies are now looking at the SANParks model in order to supplement dwindling government funding sources. SANParks too faces this situation and as a responsible custodian, must look at all possible funding opportunities. Over 80% of the SANParks operational budget is self-generated through Responsible Tourism. The Kruger National Park operates at very high occupancies (2009/10 - 79, 4%). In particular, Skukuza Rest Camp operated at 85% occupancy for the same period (2009/10). Revenue generated from the Kruger National Park and the 4 other “profitable” National Parks supplements the 16 remaining, equally important National Parks and as such SANParks must **responsibly** yield all of its assets. SANParks has a few options, practice ruthless yield management (push prices up when the demand is high) or expand and diversify its product offering in order to meet its mandate of providing equitable access.

The knowledge base on which tourism development decisions are taken is much improved than 20 years ago or the era when “sprawling township like” rest camps, with a massive technical support service network, were established. The Mopani Rest Camp, with its 102 chalets and family cottages plus four bedroomed guest houses, is nothing more than a hotel, sprawled out **over 70 hectares** of hilly terrain along the Tsendze River and so are all rest camps in our parks. They fit the definition of a hotel. Hotels are no longer high rise buildings. Modern architecture and environmental technology allows for hotels to be built and blended into the environment with a distinct sense of place. The planned Skukuza Conference lodge that will have 120 units (a similar size to Mopani) will have a footprint of **less than 1, 5 hectares!** Only 5% of the total area of the Kruger National Park is developed (roads infrastructure, rest camps, offices, gates, housing etc) and 95% is left to nature. There is no danger of over-development.

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 EIA studies also involve a component of human impact modeling to ensure that the flow of tourists will be properly regulated. The success of any nature-based tourism system 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. We have come a long way in improving the SANParks tourism product offering. The SANParks Tourism and Marketing Strategy is built around three key focus areas; firstly, to maintain and grow our current, predominantly white market, secondly, to grow the emerging black domestic market and lastly, to grow key international markets. Each of these markets have different needs and through research and face to face discussions at various forums, we have gained a clearer understanding of these needs, and are then able to ensure that product development is addressing real needs in a responsible manner. None of the current rest camps passed muster of such feasibility studies, needs analysis and financial modeling.

It is important to note that a Hotel style development such as is proposed in Malelane and at Skukuza will have a far smaller footprint than that of a traditional rest camp. (Skukuza is a town in the bush!). Bulk services are less costly and have less impact and with the use of new technologies are far more energy efficient. This development will enable SANParks to attract a new market that will not only help to grow revenue but will expose delegates/guests to conservation which will hopefully lead to them becoming future supporters of the National Parks. This facility will be within the existing Rest camp and will in fact enhance the area that has been designated for this development, which is currently occupied by staff housing and 6 chalets that will be demolished. It will utilize the same bulk service supplies and there is no significant additional impact. SANParks has a strategic business plan that continues to support government priorities in addition to revenue generation. The impression and notion that is being created that the current leadership is selling the family’s jewels is misplaced. 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.

It is our intention to respond positively to President Zuma’s call of creating decent work through tourism development of this nature and contribute to the national effort to reduce unemployment. Our national parks are a major economic activity especially in economically and socially depressed areas. 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. Our compatriots who live in areas adjacent to our national parks need decent jobs in order to sustain livelihoods. We will not allow our selfish narrow interests stand on the way of job creation and economic stimulation.

Contrary to popular belief, this government has done a lot for conservation in the short period of its existence. Sustainable use of natural resources, underpinned by Section 24 of the constitution, is the cornerstone on which conservation legislation is based. Nature-based tourism falls within this ambit and does not exclude any sector of the tourism industry including hotels. The government has funded land acquisition to expand the park system by over 1 million hectares since 1994. Cabinet went out of its way and took a decision to settle all land restitution claims in Kruger National Park through alternative compensation than restoration of title. The future survival of conservation icons like Kruger NP does not depend on vitriolic attacks on hotels and false accusations but in the collective wisdom of the citizens of this country and their government in harnessing responsible investment and the management of such in a manner that benefits nature and people alike. We subscribe to the UN-backed Ecotourism Society and its articles of association inform our model. We will continue to work with the hotel industry as and when our needs point to the relevance of such an investment in a manner that is ecologically sustainable and defensible.

From Tongarero in New Zealand, Uluru in Australia, the Royal Chitwan in Nepal, Mlulutsha in Swaziland, Cape Vidal in KZN, the Lake District in the UK and Yukon in Canada, there is no empirical evidence that supports the thesis that establishing a hotel inside or on the periphery of a national park or conservation area destroys biodiversity. Where is that written in the “Conservation Bible?”

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