The five South African National Parks in the Frontier Region experienced a boost in visitor numbers over the past festive season. The Addo Elephant, Camdeboo, Garden Route, Karoo and Mountain Zebra National Parks all gained in popularity compared to the same period over the last two years.

Cumulatively, they recorded a year-on-year increase in visitors of 4.9% from mid-December to the end of the first week in January. Numbers of visitors increased from 126 265 two years ago to 132 728 this past season. Accommodation occupancy also increased slightly, from 88% to 91%.

The biggest increase was observed at Karoo National Park just outside Beaufort West, which experienced a 47.4% jump in gate arrivals – from 5 246 to 7 734. Addo Elephant National Park (AENP) welcomed 35 563 visitors recently, compared to 30 011 two years ago – an increase of 18.4%.

AENP had the highest occupancy rate – up by 11% compared to the same period last year. Cradock’s Mountain Zebra National Park also had good gains – increasing their occupancy from 85% to almost 90%.

Regional General Manager, Dries Engelbrecht, said, “We are pleased with the overall tourism statistics we’ve achieved this past season, without any serious incidents. If it wasn’t for our staff members who were on duty forgoing time with friends and family over this period, we would not have been able to achieve these milestones. Their hard work and dedication, under extremely busy and trying conditions, does not go unnoticed. We are happy that we are still a destination of choice for so many people and we hope that they made wonderful memories while in the parks.”

“The growth we’ve seen at Karoo National Park, in particular, is astounding. We think the main reason for this spike in numbers is that we had many more day visitors over the extremely hot days in December, who came into the Park to enjoy the Bulkraal picnic site with its refreshing swimming pool. On busy days such as those, we had to cap the numbers at 100 people at a time so that the picnic site did not get too busy, and over the past festive season, we had to implement this more often than in previous years. It would also appear as if the fire which gutted the restaurant and shop at the Storms River Rest Camp did not significantly impact the tourism figures. We were fortunate to have erected temporary structures for both in time for the season,” Engelbrecht concluded.
The SANParks team in the Tsitsikamma section of the Garden Route National Park (GRNP) has put temporary measures in place to kick-start the registration of local anglers to access Three Coastal Controlled Zones (TCCZs). This follows the approval of the rezoning of Africa’s oldest Marine Protected Area (MPA). Regulations were published in the Government Gazette on Monday, 19 December 2016. Limited access of about 20% of the coastline is open and 80% of the MPA remains a no-take zone.

“We are introducing measures to allow responsible angling starting with the registration process which kick-started on 24 December,” said Bulelwa Msengi, Area Manager of Tsitsikamma. Only those local Tsitsikamma community residents living between Covie and the Bloukrans River or within the Koukamma Municipal area qualify as Tsitsikamma residents as specified in the regulations. A central registration point has been established at the SANParks Offices at Storms River Village and will be open for registration from 09h00-16h00 during weekdays and 09h00-15h00 over weekends.

The registration card enables access solely for registered Tsitsikamma anglers for recreational fishing within the TCCZs within the specifications of the regulations and Park rules as defined by the Protected Areas Act. Access to the Park for other recreational purposes and/or members of the community requires access through normal Park entry gates.

All internal rules governing access and use of the TCCZs, once established, must be followed by all persons accessing the Park.

Tsitsikamma MPA rezoned

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Park Rangers will be monitoring and patrolling the TCCZs referred to in the Gazette regulations. “All regulations as published in the Gazette must be adhered to. In addition, SANParks will erect signage and posters to guide and aid anglers,” concluded Msengi.
It seems the rain which fell over Addo Elephant National Park’s Zuurberg section at the beginning of the year did wonders for the cycads in that area of the Park. Section ranger, Zelna Breytenbach, says they received a total of 108mm of rainfall between 2 and 16 January. Of the replanted cycads confiscated, rescued and replanted after a poaching incident on a neighbouring farm over a year ago, there are currently five in the Zuurberg section which have pushed their leaves through. Unfortunately a fire in August damaged quite a number, while baboons have been responsible for damage to others. Given their history, it is good to see that at least some have survived.

A new beginning

2017 has taken off with a bang and Karoo would like to welcome the following staff members to the team!

Samkele Hinana - Section Ranger. Samkele was originally appointed as a Field Guard at Mountain Zebra National Park (Working for Water) in 2011 on a contract basis. In 2012 he was permanently appointed as a Field Ranger at Karoo, before moving to Mokala National Park in 2014 as a Ranger Corporal. Samkele is currently studying towards his Diploma in Conservation and we trust that his appointment will contribute towards achieving this goal.

Also joining the Park this year are Andre Laas and Siphiwo Lusizi, who are both doing their practical year so that they may obtain their Diploma’s in Conservation. Siphiwo and Andre are both originally from Cape Town, but we trust they will soon adapt to the harsh conditions of the Karoo, and that the “plattelandse” hospitality of the area will make up for this.

Long service awards

Karoo National Park ended 2016 with a staff imbizo during which the following staff members were recognised with awards for long service.

Lena van Wyk (5 years)

Marlene Brooks (5 years)

Isak Jacobs (25 years)

Ronel Lottering (5 years)

Riaan Nel (15 years)
Explore the Karoo on mountain bike

What better way to explore the remoteness of the Karoo than from your mountain bike? That’s exactly what awaits participants of the inaugural two-day Roof de Karoo Mountain Bike Traverse, happening on 24 and 25 March.

What’s more is that the start and end of the event takes place in national parks – starting at a picnic site in the Mountain Zebra National Park (MZNP) outside Cradock and ending the following day at the historical Winterhoek homestead at Caneebobo National Park (CNP), which surrounds the town of Graaff-Reinet. This is but one of the unique aspects of the traverse – riding through sections of two national parks, including a big game park like MZNP, which is not otherwise permitted.

The 175km route traverses parts of the 268 000 hectares of the newly proclaimed Mountain Zebra-Camdeboo Protected Environment (MZCPE), established to protect the biodiversity of the land which lies between the two South African National Parks (SANParks) locations. The race’s name, the Roof de Karoo, stems from the fact that participants will be riding mostly along the roof (mountains) of the Karoo, from where, on a clear day, one can see into the distance for miles.

Chairperson of the MZCPE’s Landowners Association and avid mountain biker, Ed Kingwill, says, “Participating teams of two will depart from the MZNP camp site early on the Friday morning in the crisp Karoo air and end under the shadow of the imposing 1 430m high Nardou mountain peak. After 85 kilometres and an elevation gain of 1 360m, the cyclists will be able to relax under the shade of the poplar trees and cool off in the stream at the source of the Great Fish River.”

Day 1 starts with a climb and descent over Nardou on the old ox-wagon track. Cyclists are rewarded with a downhill gradient criss-crossing the Sundays River through private game farms, finishing at the Winterhoek homestead about 90km later in view of the Valley of Desolation in the CNP. No less than 20 different properties will be crossed over the two days.

The purpose of the traverse is multi-fold: to celebrate the first anniversary of the declaration of the protected environment, open up the area to those who may otherwise never get the opportunity so they may enjoy its uniqueness and remoteness and create jobs in the form of trail maintenance and in the tourism sector.

Only 50 team slots are available for this very special event. A team entry fee of R4 200 includes three nights of tented accommodation and all meals - breakfast, supper, water and feeding stations along the route. With stunning views to marvel at while on the bike, an opportunity to camp out under the poplar trees and cool off in the stream at the source of the Great Fish River.

For more info and to enter, visit: http://www.mzcpe.co.za/Rdk.html

End of year festivities

Towards the end of 2016, Knysna and Wilderness’ People & Conservation and Human Capital Offices hosted a Family Day event at Leisure Isle in Knysna.

The day was packed with activities, as staff brought their children along for some fun in the sun. People & Conservation staff from both Knysna and Wilderness lined up games for all age groups, but it was the water and swimming that the kids loved the most, while parents played dominos while relaxing at the picnic spot.

Later they enjoyed a braai in the summer breeze while their kids swam and played games. This was a welcome break, as it allowed staff from the two areas of the Park to mingle, and also gave the parents an opportunity to spend some valuable time with their children.

And just when the youngsters thought the day had come to an end, they were surprised with a visit from Santa, who came bearing gifts for all of them.

Meanwhile, in Addo, two Honorary Rangers and a volunteer - Tarryn, Erin and Robyn Lovemore - hosted 43 staff children at the Park’s annual Christmas Party.

They had a day of fun-filled activities prepared for the youngsters, which of course, included jumping castles, games and cake, capped off with a visit from Mother Christmas, stocked to the brim with party packs made up of goodies generously donated by the Honorary Rangers.

At both events the organising staff made use of the opportunity to discuss the pertinent topic of 16 Days of Activism for No Violence Against Women and Children. In Knysna, the Department of Social Development and South African Police Service were roped in to talk to the group about women and child abuse, and who gave them tips on general safety. In Addo, the group focused on the high rates of abduction of women and children, with the staff and children educated about how to avoid becoming a target of human trafficking.