Camdeboo – celebrating ten years as a national park

Camdeboo Municipal Manager, Rev Noel Pieterson, Acting Park Manager Anban Padayachee, Camdeboo Municipality Mayor, Hannah Makoba and SA National Parks Regional General Manager, Dries Engelbrecht celebrate the Park’s 10th anniversary under SANParks.

Camdeboo National Park, bordering the town of Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape, celebrated ten years under the management of SANParks on Friday 30 October.

Park staff gathered at its lapa to celebrate the momentous occasion with local stakeholders from the municipality, business, members from the tourism industry and other partners. Balloons, birthday cake, a good old South African poljaekos lunch and a short stroll down memory lane of the park’s history and what led up to its proclamation were the order of the day.

The 19 405ha Park is best known for being home of the world-renowned Valley of Desolation. Proclaimed a scenic national monument in 1939, the Valley is a popular drawcard for hikers, photographers and nature lovers alike. The original road leading up to the valley was constructed by labourers using picks, shovels and barrows. It was tarred in 1978, offering visitors easier access to a number of spectacular viewpoints along the way, culminating in a short walk to the Valley itself.

Here, visitors can enjoy what is also known as the Cathedral of Mountains – piled dolerite columns set against the backdrop of the plains of the Great Karoo. It is also along the valley road from where one can enjoy unique views of the historic town of Graaff-Reinet, set like a jewel within a horseshoe bend of the Sundays River. Black eagles are known to frequent the area, from where nature lovers have a chance of viewing them at close range.

Prior to its proclamation as a national park on 30 October 2005, the area was known as the Karoo Nature Reserve, which was established in 1979. Following an extensive process of negotiation and discussion between government, conservation groups, and concerned stakeholders, Marthinus van Schalkwyk, former Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, announced the intention to proclaim the park in the area surrounding Graaff-Reinet. This was made possible by the World Wildlife Fund in South Africa (WWF-SA), which donated the 14 00 hectare Karoo Nature Reserve to be the centrepiece of the project.

Over the past decade, Camdeboo has evolved significantly. A number of activities are on offer in the Park – self-drive game viewing, 4x4 trails, a number of walking trails which allows one to explore the Park on foot, picnic sites, bird viewing from the Khwalimanzi Hide as well as a selection of water sport activities on the Nqweba Dam.

As recently as April 2012, Camdeboo welcomed its first ever overnight guests to the Lakeview Tented Camp and Nqweba Campsite, situated on the floodplains of the Nqweba Dam. Since then the rest camp, small as it may be in comparison to most others in SANParks, has received exceptionally positive feedback from overnight guests. Perhaps it is the quaintness that makes it so special...
Compliments received

Addo Elephant National Park
- I would like to give feedback on excellent customer service received from one of your employees. Chad works at the reception desk at Camp Maryholewenti. During our recent stay, we were moved from one of the forest cabins to one of the lakeside camps at Camp Maryholewenti. In our haste I forgot a personal item at the forest cabin. It was a gift from my mother who passed away in 2011. Although it may seem like an insignificant item, it has a lot of sentimental value to me. Chad went out of his way to personally collect the item for me from the main camp and bring it back to me. I am so grateful. Thank you Chad.
- You were booked in at Spekboom tented camp. What an experience we had at this camp site. It is exclusive, the animals are around you and you experience nature right there. The toilets and showers were maintained well and we never had a problem with hot water. General cleanliness around the restrooms and pathways were also very good.
- The accommodation was more than I expected and the wildlife I filmed and photographed was more than I could ever have dreamt of.
- My stay at the Park was one of the highlights of my life. Please thank all your staff for making my stay so memorable.

Camdeboo National Park
- We admired the Nolobeka Camp Site - the second time we have been there. We will definitely come again as we enjoy your Park very much.
- Camdeboo will always be one of our favourite camp sites.

Karoo National Park
- We have just returned from Mountain Zebra and wanted to tell you just how impressed we were by the cleanliness and the services. The campsite and ablutions are spotless, the roads in the park are well-maintained and even the picnic sites are a pleasure. Although we did not get to see the lions, it was a pleasure to be there! Thank you and keep up the good work.
- Julie het 'n pragtige park, die personeel is vriendelik en fasiliteite skoon en veilig.
- We thoroughly enjoyed our visit to the Karoo National Park. I would particularly like to comment positively on the wonderful and well-explained Fossil Trail and the keepers good service and friendliness of the lady in charge of the meals and the waiter who served us.

Mountain Zebra National Park
- We have just spent a few days at Mountain Zebra and would like to commend Khanyisa Lamani for the excellent service. He went out of his way to assist us with an e-mail/scan we needed to send urgently. Such customer care is seldom seen today and we really appreciate his help.
- We have just returned from Mountain Zebra and wanted to tell you just how marvellous it was from the time we signed in at the gate, being greeted by a huge friendly smile to good accommodation, a well-kept park and some stunning sightsings in a beautiful landscape. All in all this contributed to a most enjoyable stay.

Rhino relief cocktail evening benefits Karoo

A R60 000 cheque handover to Karoo National Park from the SANParks Honorary Rangers of the Table Mountain Region, Diane Brooks and Chairperson of the Karoo region, SHRs, Josie Classen, for their donation to Karoo National Park. The SHRs hosted a very successful cocktail evening in support of SANParks' rhino anti-poaching efforts recently. The region had on previous occasions supported this project in the Kruger National Park, but decided - after they had a look at the Karoo’s wish list - to support the rhino in the north closer to their guests.

Thanks to the SANParks Honorary Rangers (SHRs) of the Table Mountain Region, Karoo National Park will soon start the construction of a new borehole for water for its rhino population.

The SHRs hosted a very successful cocktail evening in support of SANParks’ rhino anti-poaching efforts recently. The region had on previous occasions supported this project in the Kruger National Park, but decided - after they had a look at the Karoo’s wish list - to support the rhino in the north closer to their guests.

To this end, a total sum of R60 000 was handed over to Senior Section Ranger, Riaan Nel. Some of these funds will be used to purchase a lion collar for the Park.

The Rhino Relief Cocktail Evening was held at the Vineyard Hotel conference facility in Newlands, Cape Town, for which a total of 165 tickets were sold. Together with a very good venue hire and meal rate and - for one - complimentary champagne from the hotel, and with many substantial auction donations received in the form of artwork, glassware, jewellery, coffee table books and other smaller items, lead to a very financially successful event.

One lucky draw guest won a 4x4 weekend and stay for six people at Embizweni Cottage, kindly donated by the Karoo National Park.

The guest speaker and MC for the night, conservationist Braam Malherbe captivated the audience and got them thinking about the poaching onslaught on the country’s rhino. This definitely helped towards getting the guests to generously bid on the various auction items.

Three wins at annual Kudu Awards

Karoo National Park outside Beaufort West can proudly boast with having the Best Performing Rest Camp within South African National Parks.

They received the recognition at the 11th annual Kudu Awards ceremony in Pretoria on 16 October. SANParks, supported by First National Bank and Total South Africa, recognises deserving individuals, departments and parks at the Kudu Awards annually through awarding them with Chief Executive Awards. It is awarded based on performance during the previous financial year – 2014/15.

Two staff members from Addo Elephant National Park were also rewarded for their hard work and dedication. Receptionist Lee-Marque Jansen received the award for Best Customer Service, while Marine Senior Section Ranger, Roget Fox, walked away with the award for Excellent Performance in the Workplace.

- BEST PERFORMING REST CAMP: KAROO NATIONAL PARK
A number of factors led to the camp’s success, namely: Visitor numbers increased by 9.4%. Chalet occupancy saw an increase of 7.6% while camping occupancy increased by 7.3%. There was also an increase in game drive sales of a staggering 27.9%. The Park’s customer satisfaction index was better than in the previous year and it also posted an increase in revenue. The entire team’s recipe of friendly faces, warm welcomes and informal yet informative conversation may also have contributed to them receiving the award. The Park’s staff members are known to be efficient in whatever they do, garnering many compliments from guests along the way.

- BEST CUSTOMER SERVICE: LEE-MARQUE JANSEN
Based at Addo Elephant National Park’s Main Camp, Receptionist Lee-Marque Jansen is the subject of many compliments received from guests for his friendliness, helpfulness and willingness to assist whomever and wherever he can. Although he’s a newcomer to Addo (having only started there in May last year) he certainly has made his presence known and felt as he welcomes and interacts with guests upon arrival in the Park.

- EXCELLENT PERFORMANCE IN THE WORKPLACE: ROGET FOX
Addo’s Marine Senior Section Ranger, Roget Fox, leads from the front as he welcomes and interacts with guests upon arrival in the Park. He is bound to the Park’s marine section in Algoa Bay, but is also hands-on on the terrestrial side in the fields of anti-poaching and law enforcement. Roget also gladly assists outside the Park’s boundaries, and works closely not only with colleagues from other national parks, but also with conservation officials from provincial and private parks.

Kuzuko lions update

Staff at Addo’s Kuzuko concession have now stopped referring to Gina’s little ones as “cubs”, and are now calling them “young females”. Assistant General Manager, Catharina de Lange, says the two are not cubs in size anymore and are doing extremely well.

They have started ‘play/practice’ hunting and learning lessons regarding who to take on and who not. They were seen trying their luck with a pair of porcupines during October.

Catharina says the sisters have relaxed greatly with their game drive vehicles and afford guests great sightings.
Mountain Zebra is two lionesses richer

The two sisters were brought into the Park from the Kwandwe Private Game Reserve near Grahamstown. They are about two years old and are now sharing Mountain Zebra’s 28 000 hectares with the two five-year-old brothers.

The females were a donation from Kwandwe and they bring with them strong, healthy genes, and will add to the genetic variety in the Park. It is hoped that together, the four will form a pride structure in Mountain Zebra National Park. One of the lionesses is fitted with a satellite tracking collar, as they will most likely move together while exploring the Park. The collar will allow park management to monitor them so that rangers and researchers can observe what habitats they use, their proximity to the males and other predators and which species they prey on. Park Manager, Megan Taplin, says the collars will enable them to reach a fine balance of managing the lion population carefully in relation to the size of the Park and their impact on prey species. Their management forms part of a larger initiative to mimic the natural processes that regulate lion social behaviour and population growth, which includes swapping individuals between parks to ensure constant introduction of new genes, and administering cycles of contraception to lionesses to more closely approximate natural birthing intervals.

The males were introduced into the Park in April 2013 – becoming the first free-roaming lions in the area after an absence of over 130 years. They were from the Welgevonden Game Reserve in Limpopo. They are about two years old and are now sharing Mountain Zebra’s 28 000 hectares with the two five-year-old brothers.

The decision to introduce lions into Mountain Zebra was mainly for biodiversity reasons. Lions would have occurred in the area historically and it is SANParks’ policy to reintroduce the wildlife species which would have occurred in an area before hunting or habitat loss forced them to local extinction in earlier centuries. They are the third predator species in the park, after the introduction of cheetah in 2007 and brown hyena in 2008.

Chances of spotting lions in Mountain Zebra National Park have doubled! This is thanks to the introduction of two lionesses onto the property to join the two resident males.

A high speed chase in howling winds and rough seas on 13 October ended when three alleged abalone poachers were arrested and had their vessel and gear confiscated. The three, aged between 28 and 39, were found trespassing in the Addo Elephant National Park (AENP) Bird Island Marine Protected Area (MPA) in Algoa Bay.

AENP marine rangers stationed on Bird Island spotted the vessel in the MPA just after 7AM and launched an investigation. As they approached, the suspects’ vessel sped off with three passengers on board. During the pursuit, the suspects tried to douse the SANParks vessel with fuel and set it alight. The police’s assistance was called in, and during the chase, the suspects attempted to drive over an SAPS official on a jet ski. After a pursuit of about 50 kilometres, the suspects beached their vessel west of the Ngqura harbour and fled. One was arrested shortly thereafter.

South African National Parks (SANParks) meanwhile dispatched a second vessel to the MPA, where a further two suspects were arrested on Seal Island where they had hidden from the authorities to avoid arrest.

The three were taken to the Swartkops Police Station in Port Elizabeth, where they were charged with attempted murder, illegal diving within an MPA, entering a national park without a permit and not complying with the instructions of an Environmental Management Inspector. Their vessel as well as all their gear, valued at about R450 000, were confiscated. The two arrested on the island appeared in court and were released on bail of R10 000 each. The third one was denied bail. They will all appear in court again soon.

SANParks is grateful for the assistance of the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; the SAPS Air Wing, Organised Crime and Dog units; Nelson Mandela Bay conservation officials, Port of Ngqura security officials and members of the public.

Kids in Parks programme running in Camdeboo

Camdeboo National Park is winding down another Kids in Parks Programme, which started on 5 October.

A total of 473 learners and 23 educators participated in the programme. These schools were Naringstraat, Lingcom, Lettie de Klerk, Roodebloem, Bloemhof, De Hoop, Thembalesizwe, Isibane, Tyrende, Kroonvale, Graaff-Reinet and Aberdeen primary schools. The Park’s People and Conservation department staff headed up the programme, and they were assisted by conservation students from the Park and the nearby Bergplaas Nature Reserve.

Each group of learners participated in a fun-filled, hands-on programme over a two-and-a-half day period, learning about SANParks, Camdeboo National Park, wild animals and how to protect nature. The learners were also taken to the Valley of Desolation, for many of whom it was the first time.

Many of the youngsters said they would have liked to stay on for longer, but they unfortunately needed to return home and to school, where they would hopefully pass all the lessons they’d learnt on to their families and peers.
Getting to know one another

Karoo's Sylvester the lion and his two feline friends brought in from Marakele National Park are still bonding in the Park's boma.

Addo Elephant National Park's netball and soccer teams participated in and excelled at an annual sports tournament between organisations from the Sundays River Valley recently.

Some of their competitors were the Sundays River Valley Municipality, the SAPS, Luthando (a group of local citrus farms) and Life Care. The aims of the event are promoting wellness amongst employees, encouraging exercise and participation in sport, team building and networking to share ideas and experiences.

Addo’s soccer team finished in third place, while the netball team played to a draw against the municipality in the final. The two teams will battle this out in a follow-up match to decide a winner at a date yet to be determined.

Six primary schools, two crèches and an old age home in the communities surrounding Addo Elephant National Park (AENP) were the recent recipients of gardening materials during a greening programme.

The Department of Agriculture, Rural Development and Land Affairs in collaboration with AENP donated seedlings, water tanks and garden tools to four local eco-schools who had requested these last year. Many seedlings remained and were donated to two other local primary schools, two crèches and an old age home to boost their vegetable gardens. As October was Weedbuster month, the Park's Biodiversity Social Projects (BSP) staff joined in and raised awareness on weeds and alien plants and stressed the importance of a healthy garden and how it will contribute to their nutrition.

While at the institutions, People and Conservation and BSP staff assisted the learners in planting the seeds, cleaning the premises and buildings and even assisted with cooking lunches and doing dishes.

The primary schools targeted were La Trobe, Addo, Moses Mabida Bontrug, St Reginald's, Vusumzi and St Ignatius as well as the Langbos and Valencia Sisters of Mercy crèches and the Valencia Abethu Old Age Centre.

Success with Spanish reeds in Karoo

Degradation through previous agricultural land use practices and poor farming techniques have led to major vegetation transformation and erosion challenges in certain parts of Karoo National Park.

Aridified erosion systems with many dongas never recover. Reshaping is one of the methods employed in an attempt to address the problem. Reshaping these dongas with sloping provides a gentler slope, on which plants can grow. It also reduces the velocity of flow and improves water infiltration. Many plants removed before the shaping of eroded slopes can later be replanted on the new surface. The associated eroded areas are treated with a variety of innovative techniques to speed up the veld’s natural recovery process.

Due to the nature of the slow growing vegetation in the Nama Karoo biome, it is not always possible to extract indigenous vegetation to be used as mulch (Verchillia karoo) for rehabilitation purposes. The Karoo project is now using an alien species, Spanish reed (Arundo donax) as an innovative alternative to cover the sloping areas as well as to use inside the ponds, which will improve the micro-system for seed germination and promote water retention. Due to the arid climate of the Karoo and Spanish reed requiring a moist area for establishment there is limited risk of the alien species expanding into virgin areas.