The five parks making up the Frontier Region of South African National Parks saw a cumulative increase in visitors year-on-year over the holidays. The festive season from mid-December to the end of the first week of January this year saw 116 520 people flocking to these parks, up from 113 279 the previous year – an increase of 2.9%.

Addo Elephant and Camdeboo National Parks in particular registered more guests through its gates compared to the same three-week period over 2018/19. It would seem as if Addo’s popularity and proximity to Port Elizabeth remains a driving force when it comes to getting the numbers. A total of 30 608 visitors experienced the Park two seasons ago, and saw a 2% increase this festive season to 31 211, while Camdeboo registered a staggering 170% growth, from 1 698 to 4 598 – despite the drought conditions currently being experienced in the area.

The majority of guests remain those coming into the parks as day visitors – over 100 000. Of the 116 520 visitors this season, a total of 100 221 this year just visited for the day. The majority of these checked in across the different sections of Garden Route National Park. Some 65 906 of their total 72 851 visitors did not overnight.

On behalf of all our staff, we thank you for your continued support over the past year and look forward to what 2020 has in store. To those who were lucky enough to get out to one or more of our national parks over this time, we hope you had wonderful experiences enjoying the splendour of our natural heritage. Our social media feeds were abuzz with activity, so even those of us who were not fortunate enough to visit in person still got to experience the parks through the lenses of those who did.
New elephant calf in Darlington

A new elephant calf was born in December in the Darlington section of Addo Elephant National Park. This brings the total to three calves born in Darlington since their release in July 2018.

Exciting experience for American students in Mountain Zebra

A visiting group of American students from Furman University in South Carolina got more than they bargained for when they were fortunate enough to be involved in lion and cheetah collaring in December.

Their field trip was in collaboration with Rhodes University and the University of Mpumalanga. Their course, which incorporates an African Ecology section, sees them spending three weeks in South Africa visiting a number of national parks, namely Mountain Zebra, Table Mountain, Tankwa-Karoo, Garden Route, Golden Gate and Kruger National Parks. The group has been coming to Mountain Zebra every second year since 2003.

While in the Park they interacted well with the Environmental Monitors (EM’s) and passed on some of their own knowledge to them in the form of informal lectures.

Dr Nokubonga Mqatsa from the Department of Zoology and Entomology at Rhodes University and Prof Travis Perry from the Biology Department at Furman University, South Carolina, USA gave a presentation to the Park staff (EMs & Biotechs) about their individual routes through jobs and degrees to their current positions in each University. They all spoke about their individual research programmes. Furthermore, Dr Angela Bruns gave a presentation to the Wild Semester class on her role as a Vet in Veterinary Wildlife Services and a brief overview of SANParks’ management structure.
Addo’s December holiday programme a winner!

Addo’s People and Conservation Department staff hosted a holiday programme for children of all ages from 2 – 13 December, keeping the youngsters both entertained as educated as they had fun while learning about exciting things both inside and outside the Park.

Each day kicked off at 9AM with a game drive and was followed up with various daily activities in the afternoons. These included crafts, experiments, horse riding and dog and snake demonstrations. The children got to see and learn about all the Park’s wildlife during their morning game drives and had lots of fun conducting various experiments and learning about chemistry during “experimentation hour”. During “crafts hour” they got to create their favourite Big 7 animal as well as some Christmas decorations.

It would seem as if the highlights were the snake and dog demonstrations. Addo Wildlife presented a small snake demonstration and informed both children and adults alike on how to handle snakes should they ever come across them. They also explained how to determine whether a snake is venomous or not and the different types of venomous snakes typically found in the Eastern Cape. One of the Park’s dog handlers put on an anti-poaching display and showed the kids how the dogs are trained on their specialised obstacle course. He also explained to the youngsters what the K9 unit’s duties are and how they go about their daily routines.

During the horse ride time slot the children were taken to the stalls and given a chance to groom the horses and enjoy a short ride within the pen. Judging by the little people’s responses to the activities, it would appear as if the programme was a hit, especially for the children living within the Park’s staff village, who attended every day to learn and see more about the Park they live in and their parents work in.

Domestic Tourism Scheme reaches Addo

The National Department of Tourism’s Domestic Tourism Scheme is aimed at encouraging group travel amongst South Africans who do not necessarily have a travel culture. The unit for Domestic Tourism Facilitation is responsible for planning activations and has identified five national parks, among them Addo Elephant National Park (AENP), to be a part of the programme. The vision of the Domestic Tourism Scheme is to host 100 people at a time, consisting of a cross-section of the population from the youth to recently-retired individuals who are interested in undertaking tours. Preference is given to people belonging to organised groups such as stokvels.

The preparation for the first outing to Addo took place on 11 December at the Nomathamsanqa hall in a neighbouring community. It was a briefing session about the programme with community members who were mobilised by the local municipality. Thulane Sibeko from the National Department of Tourism explained the programme and its aims to them, while AENP’s Tourism Manager, Rosslee Wagenaar, and Nelly Ngcobo from the Sundays River Valley Municipality both shared their messages of support.

Community members came in their masses. However, only 100 participants, made up of youth, the elderly and persons living with disabilities, were chosen to visit the Park the next day. The group was transported from Nomathamsanqa in luxury busses on 12 December. Rosslee welcomed them when they arrived at the Park, after which they were taken on an interpretation tour around the Ulwazi Interpretive Centre by the People and Conservation Officer. This was followed by a guided game drive with hop-on-guides on the busses in which they came. They stopped over at Jack’s Picnic Site where they enjoyed a light breakfast before finishing up with their drive.

The day ended with lunch at the Hapoor Lapa, served by the Cattle Baron restaurant. All accounts are that the group was overjoyed by their visit to the Park – especially as it was the first time some of them, especially the elderly, had visited. They said they got to see the Park in a different light and felt motivated to urge others to visit if they could.
Cape vultures return to Mountain Zebra National Park

A special kettle (a term used by birders to describe a group of birds wheeling and circling in the air) sighting of about 11 Cape vultures could be seen above Mountain Zebra National Park during the first week of the year.

Cape vultures are known to have frequented the Karoo historically, but due to a number of factors such as farming practices and poisoning, systematically vanished from the area.

This recent activity follows the sighting of two Cape vultures over the Park last year. The two occurrences are great news, as the Endangered Wildlife Trust is spearheading a Karoo Vulture Safe Zone project aimed at returning these birds, which play a crucial role in the ecosystem, back to the Karoo.

New arrivals in Mountain Zebra

Angela, the only female cheetah in the Park, gave birth towards the end of November 2019. Rangers visited the den on 6 January and found her with two healthy cubs, the sex of which must still be confirmed.

Angela was born in 2007 to one of the original female cheetah that was introduced into the Park. Angela is the darling cheetah of the Park since she is easy to track and relaxed around people. In 2018 she also gave birth to two cubs. Only one cub survived and is currently still resident in the Park.

Rain, glorious rain!

Karoo parks in the region were graced with showers of blessing over the festive period and just after.

Karoo National Park’s veld was covered in Karoo gold (Granaat bos) in bloom after Beaufort West and surrounds got some very welcome rain.

Camdeboo National Park outside Graaff-Reinet experienced numerous bouts of rain over the past month, which did much for hydrating the parched earth. While it caused many a stream and river to start flowing again, unfortunately it was not enough to make any impact on the Park’s Nqweba Dam.

Meanwhile, some of the uniqueness and beauty of Mountain Zebra National Park has been restored after the recent rains. The fresh green grass, the sprouting trees, the annuals that are popping out and the current condition of the animals is evidence of this. What a transformation over the past three weeks! The drought has by no means been broken, though, as much more rain is still needed. Before and after pics below:
Members of the winning netball and soccer teams in a tournament at the Nomathamsanqa sports ground near Addo in December were hosted to a fun and informative afternoon at the Park.

The tournament for local U13 and U15 teams kicked off after the final exams on 25 November and ended on 10 December. It ended with a coaching clinic jointly organised by Iliwa Laphakade Community Development, Khulasande Sports Development and Grassroots Youth Development.

The tournament winners and those who participated in the coaching clinic visited Addo as an end to the activities. Here they got to enjoy a snake demonstration by a staff member from the local Addo Wildlife Centre and a game drive through the Park to see its majestic ellies and other animals.

Congratulations to Yoliswa Matwa (Marketing Officer) and Victor Mokoena (Tsitsikamma Park Manager) for completing the Digital Marketing short course last year, offered by the University of Cape Town and Get Smarter.

They were chosen alongside other mostly Marketing Department staff members to complete the online course. The 10 week programme entailed a modern and holistic approach to digital marketing strategies as well as the application thereof.

Karoo National Park would like to welcome two new conservation students to its fold. They are both from Cape Town and are studying towards a Conservation Diploma at Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

We hope they will enjoy their practical year and that they will be able to withstand the extreme temperatures of the Karoo.

Karoo welcomes new conservation students

Nosibulelo Magida

Nicole February