It's all systems go for the Zipline Project, a new tourism product to be introduced this financial year in Kranshoek in the Knysna section of the Garden Route National Park (GRNP) by the successful bidder, SA Forest Adventures (Pty) Ltd.

The Kranshoek zipline project is set to boost tourism for Knysna and the Garden Route. This after travel trends indicated South Africa would be among the most visited countries by adventure travellers in 2017 (www.travelstart.co.za), along with the Galapagos Islands, Costa Rica, New Zealand and Peru. These travellers are seeking what SA already offers - 'affordable, unique and memorable experiences with nature'.

The SANParks procurement process started with a call for suitable service providers to submit proposals. Public advertisements were published in local and regional media and a due diligence site visit was conducted in November last year. Only one bid was received by the cut-off date of mid-January, despite the use of multiple communication platforms used to relay the information regarding the tender process.

All activities in the Garden Route National Park, including the zipline, must comply with the Park’s zoning plan. The zoning of an area indicates which activities may take place in different sections and the conservation objectives of those sections. The bid indicated strict adherence to an Operational Environmental Management Plan for working within the forest location to ensure that there will be limited or low impact on the natural environment. Prior to the installation of the zipline, site visits with SANParks Environmental Impact Assessment specialists and scientists will take place to discuss the technical details of the construction of the zipline.

GRNP Manager, Paddy Gordon, says last year’s site visit was arranged with representatives from the Department of Environmental Affairs to ensure compliance with environmental legislation. “This was to ensure that what is on paper translates to appropriate actions on the ground which is environmentally sensitive. Our products must live our brand and our business is to protect nature at all costs and ensure minimum impact to it,” says Paddy.

Harkerville is home to popular cycling trails, a Green Flag hiking trail (Perdekop) and other day trails (the Flora trail and others), a multi-day hike (the Harkerville Coastal hiking trail with newly-installed geocaches), ample picnic spots as well as photographic opportunities (Harkerville Viewpoint) and a one-of-its-kind luxury treetop chalet.
Message from Dries Engelbrecht, Regional General Manager

As I type this, Knysna and surrounds are engulfed in flames as wildfires burn out of control in gusting winds. Please keep the people and animals of the area in your thoughts and prayers, and even more so, those battling to extinguish the flames during this difficult time. It certainly is going to take a lot to get this fire under control, and while we know that there’s already been loss of life and property, we hope and pray that this will be kept to a minimum.

And while we deal with fires in the Garden Route, please also spare a thought for those in the Western Cape as they recover from a storm unlike which they’ve seen in many years. Many lives and families have been torn apart in that area of the country as well, and while we may never be able to fully understand the magnitude of how they’ve been affected, we surely can empathise and send prayers their way too.

In the meantime, we hope all the good news stories in this edition of Frontier Times brings some light into what is possibly a rather gloomy period in South Africa’s history.

Biodiversity in the Garden Route National Park

Biodiversity refers to the variety of significant plant and animal life in a specific habitat.

SANParks Scientists have recorded and documented in the State of Knowledge report (2015) the presence of more than 30 terrestrial habitat types, representing more than 50 forest and fynbos communities within the boundaries of the Garden Route National Park (GRNP).

The forest is a haven for 465 species, over 22 species of amphibians, 24 reptile species, 305 species of birds and some 42% of South Africa’s 290 mammal species. At least 7.1% of the Park’s mammals are listed as Endangered and 14% as Vulnerable.

The Tsitsikamma section of the GRNP was declared in 1964 to protect the ‘coastal forest vegetation and marine world’. A total of 202 species of fish, sharks and rays from 84 families were recorded in the Tsitsikamma Marine Protected Area (MPA) alone. Fifteen of these species can be found on the International Union for Conservation of Nature red data list as either vulnerable or near threatened whilst many other fish species protected by the MPA are classified as over-exploited or collapsed in South Africa. Approximately 20% of the coastline is now open for fishing to local communities only in three controlled zones. The rest of the coastline is a no-take zone.

The picturesque Garden Route is often visited for its estuaries, lakes, beaches and mystical forests.

Caught in the act!

In the April edition of Frontier Times we told you about Karoo National Park’s campsite thief – a pesky porcupine known for stealing coolerbags and food left out overnight.

Well, Die Burger’s Jackie Plenaar-Brink got word of the prickly bandit on her way to camp in the Park, and had to see it to believe it. Mr Porcupine didn’t fail to deliver – all three nights of her visit in a row, shortly after midnight, he made his appearance at her tent to snack on some treats she’d purposefully left out. On the third night he was even brave enough to drag one of her coolerbags away and out of the campground, until it got stuck in the fence.

These are two of the many pictures she managed to snap of him – well and truly caught in the act!

Compliments received

Compliment of the month: Karoo National Park
Aan al die wonderlikste, gasvryste, vriendelikste en hulpvaardigste mense in die land!!!

Eers wil ek vreeeeslik baie omverskoning vra dat ek die sleutel in my handsak gesit het en VERGET het. Laat my tog asseblief weet wanneer julle dit kry!! Dis nou ‘n bewys van hoe lekker ons gekuier het!! Ons wou nie terug kom nie.

Gee asseblief aan almal ons diepste dank en ons seen julle almal met die rykste seen van onse Hemelse Vader!!!

Ons het nog nook so lekker gerus en ontspan nie. Ons het die natuur, die diere en die leeuus so geniet. Net om in so ‘n asmrowende ongewone te kon wees was genoeg om ‘n mens se siel skoon te was. Ek het ook heerlik geswem en die swembad was altyd blinkskoon!!

Al ons dank aan een en almal wat bygedra het tot ons heerlike vakansie!! Julle is die Beste in die Weste!!

Liefde groete Cecile (ouma) Dirk (oupa) Visagie.
(Ons kom weer!!)
This year’s event took place on Friday 26 May. A number of our national parks participated in the programme, which is aimed at exposing girl learners to the “world of work”, which will hopefully then enable them to make informed career decisions based on real work experience.

**Addo Elephant**

Addo Elephant National Park hosted 28 girls this year, giving them a unique insight into some of the career opportunities presented by South African National Parks. Their day kicked off with a presentation by acting People and Conservation Officer, Zimkhita Zungula and conservation student, Ayabonga Bikitsha, on the various careers on offer throughout the organisation. They were then treated to a game drive through the Park, where they got to learn more about the Park and the work of a professional field guide by Ncediso Nogaya. The girls then spent the rest of the day visiting various departments in Addo and learning exactly what it is that gets done behind the scenes and in the very busy Addo offices.

**Mountain Zebra**

Fifteen girls from four high schools in Cradock got to spend an informative day with Mountain Zebra National Park staff on 25 May.

The JA Calata, Matthew Goniwe, Michaudal High schools learners did job shadowing in a number of different departments, namely Conservation, Human Resources, Tourism, the Restaurant, Biodiversity Social Projects and People & Conservation.

The day’s programme also included a motivational talk by the Park Manager, Megan Taplin, who informed the learners about how she started her career and how hard work pays off.

The Park would like to thank the Principals of the schools for releasing the learners to participate on the day as well as the staff members of MZNP for transferring their knowledge to the learners.

**Camdeboo**

The 12 Grade 11 girls from four high schools in Graaff-Reinet had a jam-packed programme waiting for them when they arrived at Camdeboo National Park’s Environmental Education Centre.

A brief induction about SANParks was followed with an overview of the different careers within the organisation. This was followed by an informative talk on conservation by student Mikeala Slier, followed by People and Conservation Officer, Rosemary Scheepers, chatting to the girls about her portfolio.

After a fun activity where they had to come up with an Environmental Programme for a day, they went up to the famous Valley of Desolation where they were awarded with certificates of participation and branded bags, notebooks and sanitary ware from Cell C.

**Fruitful discussions on invasive alien species in the Garden Route**

A team from the Garden Route National Park (GRNP) met recently to discuss the Park’s number one threat to biodiversity - invasive alien species. Section rangers, Senior section rangers, Area Managers from the three sections of the GRNP, Park Manager, Planning division, BSP Project managers, Assistant and Cluster managers as well as Scientists attended the two-day workshop.

Those present committed to work as one team to achieve and even exceed this year’s annual clearing targets efficiently and effectively. Areas needing urgent attention are the need to communicate internally by BSP teams and management; capacity, constant training of staff to clearly understand the project phases, managing capacity within BSP, constantly identifying ways to increase contractor performance and chasing targets aggressively.

As you can imagine, it’s now all hands on deck and eyes on the ball for the team!

**Plett Panters take to the Dolphin Trail**

The Plett Panters (Plettenberg Bay influential hiking group) walked the 17km Dolphin Trail in Tsitsikamma recently. The scenic, luxury trail has Green Flag status accreditation from the Hiking Organisation of Southern Africa (HOSA). The trail traverses three properties - SANParks, the Forestry and Nysy Mountain.
Elephants face unprecedented persecution from international wildlife criminals, from human-wildlife conflict pressures, habitat loss and from trophy hunters that persist in their strategy to remove the remaining large-tusked individuals. This magnificent photo speaks of the plight of elephants across Africa, and of their resilience – if only humans would change their ways. Many photographers this year have told wonderful stories with their images, but none as powerfully as John.

In wrapping up, they said, “We felt that the overall winner’s photo would be the one that told the most engaging story – the one that spoke to all of us on a deep, emotional level. And the one that we hope will convey its underlying message to all our community spread far and wide across the world.”

The 2017 Africa Geographic Photographer of the Year Competition was made possible by Land Rover and Canon.

A photograph taken in Addo Elephant National Park by local photographer, John Vosloo, won him the sought-after title of the 2017 Africa Geographic Photographer of the Year, as well as the Wildlife category winner. His image, entitled “Circle of protection” got the following comments from the judges: “John Vosloo’s image is not only technically sound, but there is also a rich and complex visual story. It is the story of matriarchal and herd protection, of the African elephants’ dignified dedication to protecting their young and their species.”

Put on your tekkies and come and enjoy the best 10 days of your life in Knysna! Diarise 7 - 16 July for the annual Knysna Oyster Festival: https://www.oysterfestival.co.za/

Twenty years and still going strong

Mountain Zebra National Park
Ranger Corporal, Surprise Mlambo, recently celebrated two decades with the organisation! Congratulations on 20 years of service to conservation, Surprise. May you continue to give of your best going forward.

Addo Elephants conquer the GZT

Addo Elephants’ cycling team, the “Addo Elephants” – made up of Finance and Admin Manager Esther Truter and her husband Duane, participated for their third time in the 4th PwC Great Zuurberg Trek three-day mountain bike race which took place from 26th to 28th May 2017.

The team started Day 1 full of smiles and very enthusiastic, cycled well and still felt strong after finishing the day’s 70km in just under five hours, an improvement of their time last year.

They went into Day 2 knowing that it wouldn’t be easy, but they took up the challenge and started well-motivated and positive that they could do it. Esther says it is at went well until they reached the top of the mountain. “There was a terribly cold wind blowing and it was a very bumpy ride over a grassy jeep track section.”

They finished the day well before the cut-off time. It took a lot of willpower on both of their sides to tackle Day 3, but they got up, got dressed and showed up. They finished the day in three and a half hours, and received their well-deserved medals at the finish line for successfully completing the race before the cut-off times on all three days.

Well done Addo Elephants, Esther & Duane, we’re mighty proud of you…
A controlled burn to revive Knysna fynbos in Brenton finally took off on 15 May. This after the exercise was postponed at least twice in the last two years due to complexities associated with the process. Approximately 71 hectares on the Southern slopes along Brenton-on-sea including Portions 39 and 40 of Uitzigt Farm were burnt. The farms are located right next to the Knysna section of the Garden Route National Park (GRNP). A large portion of the fynbos in that area (approximately 85%) had not burnt in the last 30 years.

GRNP Environmental Planner, Maretha Alant, says “The National Environmental Management Biodiversity Act 10 of 2004 identified a number of Critically Endangered ecosystems and one of the most endangered of all is the Knysna Sand Fynbos. This vegetation type hosts threatened plant species and five threatened butterfly species. In addition, there are only 1 478 hectares of the Knysna fynbos left in Knysna, which falls short of the conservation target of 3 331 hectares.

Why burn? Maretha says many fynbos species only recruit after a fire as fire stimulates seed release and germination. In a landscape where fire is kept indefinitely, fynbos often reverts to thicket vegetation or forest. Without fire, fynbos will lose its true character and species.

According to specialists on fire and fynbos, Tineke Kraaij of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, coastal fynbos comprises a mix of fynbos and thicket vegetation which needs to burn every 10-20 years in order to prevent the thicket from replacing too much fynbos. When fynbos get converted to thicket, it becomes fire-resistant and impossible to burn under all but very extreme weather conditions.

Brenton’s controlled burn is but one initiative to protect not only the Park but neighbouring land as well. “Our work in the buffer zone is to protect and create corridors with adjacent areas close to the Park by encouraging the use of land that would benefit both nature and people. This would include clearing invasive alien species, providing comment for consideration regarding any developments that could threaten the Park or its buffer,” explains Alant. She further adds that “functional connectivity” best describes their efforts for the benefit of both the Park and neighbouring landowners.

Fire close to urban areas is risky business. However, there are trade-offs that have to happen to preserve a system that has not had fire for so long. Fynbos is a vegetation type which is adapted to fire and more so, dependent on fire. Without fire, there would be no fynbos.

Well done!