

New hotels will bring relief to communities

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Thabo Godfrey Leswifi, Thabo T Dlamini, Siphon E Mahlangu, Africa M Maseko, Matthews R Mnisi and Solly Themba of KNP forum and as KNP community facilitators, write:

This is an open letter to the minister of water and environmental affairs and the chairman of SANParks Board.

We, the communities living around the Kruger National Park (KNP) with a population of over three million people, have noted the unconstructive debate that has been ongoing in the media and feel once again left out and marginalised in important decisions that affect our lives. We have been ignored in these talks and we are saying today we want to be heard. We ask the minister and the board of SANParks to give us a chance to make our point on this issue. As chairmen of the Kruger Park Forums we want to draw your attention to our views. Our forefathers settled in this area a long time ago. At the start, life held much promise, there was space for a hardworking person to build a life of prosperity. Then the history of South Africa, everyone in this country and many in the world, interfered with these opportunities. A park that is now known all over the world was created and we were not consulted. No one asked what we wanted or needed. But that is history. Our experience until the start of democracy was that we were only good enough to be servants and slaves in the park, not even good enough to visit or stay there.

Since 1994 we have seen many changes in the park that have made us feel hopeful again. For the first time SANParks made an effort to include us in the decisions. We now have seven forums that represent all the surrounding communities, so we have an opportunity for meaningful engagement. The park has affected our lives since time immemorial but it has always been others, from afar, who are not affected in anyway, who have influenced the park's policies. The time has come for this to stop. We accept that KNP is the pride of the nation but what we do not accept is that the interests of certain members are above ours. We do not need others to talk on our behalf as we are people of sound reasoning and intellect and can talk for ourselves.

We support SANParks' decision to build two safari hotels. We and our children will have an opportunity to get jobs. Our communities are some of the poorest in the country with many able-bodied people sitting at home unemployed. Any opportunity for us to be employed in a meaningful way, is something that should not be taken away, especially by people who have never gone to bed hungry, not even for just one night. SANParks has reported that when these hotels are finished there will be at least 200 jobs. This is very important to us because it means that at least 200 families will be assisted. In his State of the Nation Address, the president Mr Jacob Zuma, said that this year the government would focus on creating jobs for the unemployed. We are the unemployed. Our children are the unemployed.

The talks about environmental impact and loss of animals and biodiversity are smokescreens used by those who have other motives. We have been encouraged by the attitude of the authorities who have managed our parks since the dawn of democracy. They have shown sensitivity to the needs of our communities, and we can now work with our government to improve our lives. The recent breakthrough in the restitution cases in Kruger is an excellent example of community participation and respect. We believe that the decision to develop the hotels is sound and well informed as it will contribute positively to our regional economy. We have confidence in the way our parks are managed, and the consultation and communication between us and the park authorities. We also have confidence in the EIA process that is currently being conducted and it is our belief that the outcome will give a clear direction on issues of environmental impact on the area.

We also note the racist tendencies of the people who are against the building of the hotels. What we know is that science can be used by people with an agenda to prove that they are correct. We want to ask the honourable minister and the board of SANParks to exercise caution when hearing these submissions. We place our faith in you to put a stop to these attacks on the democratisation of the national parks system by a vociferous small clique that is bent on frustrating transformation.

We want to also ask what is wrong with building hotels in the Kruger National Park or any other park for that matter? Kruger already have so many hotels starting from the big Skukuza camp to all those other smaller camps. Why has there been no objection to them? KNP has assured us that the construction will not in any way harm the park and they will be built according to the required standards. We believe them. We have worked with them on a number of projects and we believe they can make a difference. These hotels will mean that many people can enjoy the beauty of the park while having a comfortable stay there. This will attract many more to the park which will mean more opportunities for our people. These safari hotels will bring much needed relief to our communities.

The Father of the Nation, President Nelson Mandela, once said South Africa belonged to all who live in it. Why is it then that there are a few who want to make us believe and feel that the Kruger National Park belong to them and not to us? All these things that are being said about negative human impact affecting the park have not been expressed before. Why must they be said when it is the turn of black communities to enjoy their natural heritage?

We do not accept or support the objection of a group of people who call themselves "Aikona" (a derogatory fanakalo expression).
They are not being constructive and want to keep Kruger Park the way it was before 1994. Their views and their tendencies are racist and should not be allowed in a democratic South Africa.
We cannot have people like these pretending to speak on our behalf. They do not speak for us.

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