Responsible tourism in SANParks

The journey to 2022

SANPARKS connecting to society
Tourism and our National Parks go right back to the inception of the Parks. It can even be said that one of the reasons that the National Parks still exist is because of tourism. How could that be, you may ask.

Well, there are two key reasons. Firstly, if people were not part of the National Park ecosystem, they would not have formed the strong bonds that they have with our National Parks – emotional bonds that echo those between parents and children.

Like bringing up children, managing the Parks is a long and unpredictable process that does not come with a fail-safe manual. You make mistakes. You learn lessons. You adapt. And so you make progress on your journey through life ... one step at a time.

This adaptive process has, over the lifetime of the National Parks, shaped the decisions taken by those entrusted with the running of the Parks. Some decisions have been good. Others, with the benefit of hindsight, not so good.

However, in the main, our National Parks have become an international success story, an example of how a system can adapt to changes in society and its demands.

Remaining relevant and evolving with society is the key to the Parks’ future success. That means we as the current custodians need to keep adapting in order to ensure the survival of our precious National Parks.

Secondly it all boils down to funding. Conservation is an expensive business, and if it were not for tourists like us paying for the privilege to visit the National Parks and taking part in the various activities on offer, there would not be enough money to run and maintain the integrity of the National Parks system.

Currently it costs over a billion rand annually to run the National Parks effectively, and over 80% of the funding is self-generated. Land under the management of South African National Parks (SANParks) continues to grow and with that growth comes significant costs. It is estimated that by 2022, tourism profits will exceed R800 million, but the expected cost of operations will exceed R1,4 billion. A massive gap indeed.

It is with this in mind that SANParks has adopted the 2022 Responsible Tourism Strategy that lays a sustainable foundation for the next part of the National Parks Tourism Journey – one which seeks to connect with a broader South African society in order to grow the number of citizens who will not only support, but protect our natural heritage.
Way, way back

Tourism has been an intrinsic part of our National Parks right from the beginning. Almost a century ago it already became clear that visitors were critical to the continued existence of our natural heritage. A visionary 1918 report concluded that wildlife conservation was as important to animals as to people's experience of it. Finding the balance had its rocky patches. Over the decades visitors' expectations have also changed dramatically. Even as late as the 1950s management (and visitors) thought a bed, clean ablution blocks and a campfire were enough to fulfill everyone's cultural and spiritual needs. In fact, management hoped that "simple facilities would discourage tourists who were not genuine nature lovers". In the early days of Kruger visitors had to be completely self-reliant, to the extent of taking their own rifle, and they had a limited variety of 4x4: oxen, horses and pack donkeys.

Enter the motor car and the scene changed dramatically: visitors started arriving in droves, 'rubbernecking', demanding better roads, better facilities, putting ever more pressure on infrastructure. In 1927, three cars a day were recorded; in 1933, no fewer than 5,000 visitors stayed in the camps at night during the short open season (due to the threat of malaria) between June and October. Then, as now, the pull of the wild proved just too strong for people to resist.

Conflicting views about tourism and amenities are nothing new. In the first few decades of Kruger's history, issues now regarded as beneficial to conservation and essential for visitors often triggered heated debate.

Debates

TARRED ROADS. Proposals to tar the roads were resisted till the 1960s when management finally accepted that upkeep of the roads was becoming expensive, while the dust was detrimental to plants and wildlife. The first road was tarred in 1961 - a stretch of one mile from Skukuza rest camp.

HOTELS. The first request for hotels in Kruger was rejected in 1927. Then in 1930 and again in 1934. The Kruger National Park would not realise its potential with the embargo on hotels, wrote The Star in a leading article during this time. Seven decades later, in 2001, the first private lodge, Jock Safari Lodge, opened in Kruger.

ELECTRICITY. Even this was rejected as a bad idea for some time, "in the Park people must sit outside and chat or sit at a fire and dream rather than lie in bed and read." (Knobel, 1961)

ESKOM. Eskom power first came to Pretoriuskop and Numbi in 1963.

BATHS WITH HOT WATER IN ABLUTION BLOCKS. These were another "unnecessary luxury", according to management reports. Punda Maria and Letaba grudgingly got four baths each in 1939 - and only because visitors had to travel far on dusty roads.

CYCLES IN PARADISE

"Our object should be to create an atmosphere wherein the people will feel that the KNP [Kruger National Park] is not only a sanctuary for wildlife, but also a sanctuary for them." COL. JAP SANDBERG, KNP WARDEN, REPORT TO THE BOARD, 1947

Like nature, tourism also moves in cycles. There are times of drought and times of abundance. Economic ups and downs, wars, terrorism and political changes all influence the number of visitors and the attitudes of society. After decades of virtual exclusion from our National Parks, black visitors are now slowly discovering the joy of being welcomed into the Parks. Where previously only the barest amenities, mostly tents, were provided for them, black tourists can now enjoy the kind of experience that most appeals to them, black tourists can now enjoy the kind of experience that most appeals to them. From being told in the sixties that Balule was "reserved exclusively for Non-Europeans", the preferences of the emerging market are now actively taken into account when planning new accommodation in the Parks. And among all segments of society there is increased acceptance of the Parks as part of the entire nation's heritage.

On top of political, societal and economical changes, there is also the inbuilt lifecycle of any paradise found ... and lost. This is how it happens: A little-known destination is "discovered". The first eager explorers go there, brave the lack of facilities and rave about the unspoilt natural beauty. Word spreads and more and more people start going there. To cope with this wave, amenities are increased and improved. Then busloads of visitors start arriving and if tourism activities aren't managed, paradise soon begins to fade. The cycle from exploration to development, to maintaining capacity and then to stagnation can be surprisingly short.

The question for those Parks which may have reached capacity is: decline or rejuvenation? SANParks has decided to rejuvenate and to thrive with the aid of responsible tourism, becoming the first country to adopt that as a national strategy, "Responsible Tourism - based on sustainability and the integration of tourism with the environment, the economy and the local population - is destined to take us into a new era of growth," says Glenn Phillips, SANParks managing executive of tourism development and marketing.
South Africa's National Parks are internationally regarded as irreplaceable treasures, luring tourists from near and far. But even success comes with a price tag. The fact is, the National Parks face a challenging road. Expansion of facilities has been impressive, but has brought significant costs in its wake. Also, tougher economic conditions have seen a decline in the number of international visitors over the past two years. Natural disasters like fire and floods have wreaked havoc and contributed to the bleak overall picture of escalating costs.

The scope of SANParks' responsibilities is staggering. Apart from the conservation aspect and ongoing research, there are, for instance, 4,223 kilometres of tourist roads that have to be maintained. SANParks already generates 85% of its own revenue. As changing national priorities keep shrinking what the State contributes, Parks will increasingly have to be self-reliant. In 2000, the tourism division was formally established as one of the core functions of SANParks and revenue from tourism has been contributing greatly to the sustainability of our National Parks and the upliftment of local communities. The Parks currently have 10,400 people coming to work every day. Of these 3,658 are permanent, the rest employed in government supported projects, often providing a livelihood to communities in remote rural areas.

In a ground-breaking move the SANParks board adopted the Principles and Minimum Standards of Nature-based Responsible Tourism in October 2011 as the foundation for how tourism in National Parks will be run, measured and developed. The 2022 SANParks Responsible Tourism Strategy also incorporates the aims of the National Tourism Sector Strategy (launched in March 2012) that aims to position South Africa as one of the top 20 tourism destinations globally.

## Steep inclines ahead

**Tourism revenue** has grown by **235%** over the past 10 years

**Operational costs increased by an estimated** **229%** over the past 10 years

### A GRAND TOTAL OF 1,378,356 bed nights were occupied in Kruger (2009/2010)

### LAND PLACED UNDER THE CUSTODIANSHIP OF SANPARKS SINCE THE YEAR 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>National Park</th>
<th>Land Placed Under Custodianship of SANParks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1,378,356 hectares</td>
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### 22 NATIONAL PARKS UNDER SANPARKS MANAGEMENT

### ONLY 5 NATIONAL PARKS MAKE A PROFIT

### 558,000 ACRES LAND CLAIMS

### Land claims on significant parts of various National Parks are challenging SANParks management to find ways of redress to communities that were removed when the Parks were created.

**Proclamation dates**

- **1926** Kruger National Park (first proclaimed in 1899, as Sabi and Sinwitsi Game Reserves)
- **1931** Kalahari Gemsbok National Park, now Kgala Game Transfrontier Park
- **1931** Addo Elephant National Park
- **1937** Mountain Zebra National Park
- **1961** Bontebok National Park
- **1963** Golden Gate Highlands National Park
- **1964** Tslitsikama National Park
- **1966** Augrabies Waterfall National Park
- **1968** Groenkloof National Park
- **1977** Wilderness National Lake Area
- **1979** Karoo National Park
- **1985** West Coast National Park
- **1985** Knysna National Lake Area
- **1987** Vaalbos National Park (replaced by Mokala)
- **1987** Tankwa Karoo National Park
- **1987** Wilderness National Park
- **1991** Richtersveld National Park, now Ai-Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park
- **1991** Suurberg National Park (now part of Addo)
- **1991** Marakele National Park (previously Kransberg)
- **1998** Mapungubwe National Park (Vhembe/Dongola)
- **1999** Cape Peninsula National Park (now Table Mountain National Park)
- **1999** Agulhas National Park
- **2001** Namakwa National Park
- **2005** Addo Elephant National Park
- **2005** Bird Island
- **2008** Mokala National Park (replaced Vaalbos)
- **2009** Garden Route National Park (consolidated Tslitsikama, Wilderness, Knysna Lakes and Forest Areas)

### Kruger under claim

This map from 2008 shows the disputed land claim areas in green. Five more Parks face similar claims.
The change strategy will be well researched with the help of universities, and implemented in a way that will still make visitors with a long tradition of coming to parks feel at home, and without compromising conservation.

- Glenn Phillips

**THE FOCUS FOR THE FUTURE**

This is how responsible tourism will show the way forward, with SANParks saying:

WE’RE LISTENING TO YOU Visitors to the National Parks want to connect with nature in an even more meaningful way. SANParks is going to expand the experiential offering to create new possibilities for visitors to enjoy themselves. Each Park has its own attributes that appeal to different people, enabling SANParks to offer a variety of experiences and broaden the demographics of visitors to the Parks.

WE’RE CONNECTING TO COMMUNITIES SANParks wants our natural heritage to provide real and tangible benefits to communities around our Parks, ensuring that these communities also share in the benefits of growth and socio-economic development.

WE’RE TRYING HARDER SANParks is aware that it doesn’t always deliver the kind of service visitors expect and is determined to change that. All visitors receive feedback forms and management take recommendations and criticisms seriously. Staff are trained at the customer-care training facility and SANParks adheres to the standards of responsible tourism through formal participation in an accredited and effective rating system.

WE’RE BECOMING ALL ‘ECO-NOMIC’ SANParks is starting to exploit the eco-advantages and inherent commercial opportunities to generate income for the Parks. This can include branding and merchandising - whole new ways of generating income.

**WHAT DOES RESPONSIBLE TOURISM MEAN?**

Responsible tourism respects the natural and cultural environment and contributes to local economic development in an ethical manner. It helps conserve fragile cultures, habitats and species by maximising the benefits to local communities and minimising negative social or environmental impacts.

In addition to its core mandate which is conservation, SANParks also has an obligation to create destinations for nature-based tourism. According to the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act (Act 57 of 2003), this includes educational, recreational, spiritual and scientific opportunities that aren’t harmful to the environment.

**HELPING TOURISM WORK HARDER** Some of the notable achievements of the tourism division during the last decade include the implementation of:

- A new daily conservation fee structure
- The Wild Card access and loyalty programme
- A real-time web reservation system with RoomSeeker
- A web-based customer feedback mechanism
- Successful private lodges in Parks
- Differential pricing for different Parks, and local and international visitors.

**EXPLORING NEW HORIZONS**

Scanning the landscape for a glimpse of the future: service excellence teamed with a broad range of services and price options will develop our National Parks into ever more welcoming destinations for everyone, catering for many different tastes and preferences.

The next 10 years will see SANParks doing things differently. Not only have visitors’ needs and expectations changed, but government funding for the Parks has also changed.

Government is moving away from day-to-day operational funding into once-off, project-based grant funding. This means that the government invests in projects that then have to be self-sustaining in terms of operational costs, and long-term maintenance and upgrading. This brings with it very real challenges that require responsible, sound, business-minded and long-term decision-making.

The green bottom line still remains conservation, and thanks to SANParks’ clever management it is still possible to do research and protect threatened species. This will always differentiate our National Parks from game lodges and holiday resorts.

Using responsible tourism as a compass, new cultural, spiritual and recreational connections will be created and visitors will be able to experience the National Parks as never before.

SANParks is paying close attention to what visitors say they want, while making sure that new developments stay in line with the tried-and-trusted values of the National Parks.

There will still be the silent contemplation and spiritual renewal in the prevailing silence of the more remote Parks, as well as the conviviality of Kruger’s main camps or the adrenaline-fuelled activities of the Garden Route. There’s a Park for every season, every reason. Yes, some camps will have more popular appeal – but others will retain their wild identity.

Sanparks has also changed. The change strategy will be well researched with the help of universities, and implemented in a way that will still make visitors with a long tradition of coming to parks feel at home, and without compromising conservation.

-Glen Phillips
The visitors of the future to our National Parks will be different to those of yesteryear. They will still respond to the lure of the wilderness, but they want to do more than drive around in their car, hoping for a glimpse of the Big Five. They want to be out in the veld, hiking, biking, swimming, canoeing, beachcombing, mountaineering, dining under the stars. They expect more than a rondavel, a clean ablution block and a communal fire. They don’t necessarily want to rough it; the quality of the facilities should equal the beauty of the surroundings. There’s still magic in listening to the howling of a jackal under a full moon, but they want to do it while enjoying good food and wine on the deck of a great restaurant. Of course, there will always be visitors who yearn for the simple life: a tent, a fire, the great silence of the bush.

The beauty of the National Parks is that there is room for every yearning: the strength of responsible tourism is that it balances the needs of visitors to the parks with the need for conservation and the aspirations of local communities, making sure that all are sustainable.

In a comprehensive 10-year plan for responsible tourism, SANParks is embarking on the next phase of the journey that started at the beginning of the 20th century when the first visitors turned up at the National Parks.

The next pages offer you a glimpse of all the special experiences our National Parks have in store for you now and in the future.

Tourism is a lifeline for conservation in South Africa. It’s also known as doing good while having the time of your life. Enjoy these snapshots from the future!

**BUSINESS-MINDED**
Business tourism brings a whole range of opportunities for meetings, incentives, conventions, exhibitions, product launches, scientific conferences and team building. Conference facilities are a valuable revenue stream (R12 million in 2011). Such facilities are being built and upgraded, offering time for creative thinking as well as for just being. It’s also a way for the Parks to host corporate and government participants, getting them to fall under the spell of the bush, and be inspired to return later with their families.

**MORE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCES**
Music to the ears of nature lovers! SANParks will be developing more walking trails and overnight camps, even in parks like Addo (away from the areas with lions and elephants), and bush braais under the stars. Special routes for history and art have been created, allowing you to walk in ancient footsteps at Thulamela in Kruger or climb to the site of the lost kingdom of Mapungubwe.

**TASTE**
Better - much better! - food is on the menu. Owner-run branded franchises known for their high standards will be replacing the existing restaurants in the Parks. The menus will have a local flavour and reflect regional specialities.

**GOOD NEIGHBOURS**
Creative thinking is helping SANParks to connect to local communities, allowing them to benefit from the Parks instead of regarding them as detracting from their livelihood. Some examples include the harvesting of medicinal plants in various Parks, of timber in the Garden Route National Park, the collection of sour figs in Agulhas National Park and mopane worms and thatching grass in Kruger.

The creation of buffer and peripheral zones just outside and inside the National Parks will also aid biodiversity conservation and the socio-economic upliftment of communities in the regions.

**Beneficial Partnerships**
Partnering with public concerns is already bearing fruit in the form of successful private lodges such as Singita Lebombo in Kruger, Marataba Safari Company in Marakele, and the exclusive !Xaus Lodge in the Kgalagadi. These partnerships also give diverse members of the community effective participation and a stake in the Parks.

**Greener than ever**
New facilities will be subject to stringent environmental impact assessment, while existing amenities will be switched to greener technologies like solar power and heat pumps.

**Less Congestion**
More widespread use of game-viewing vehicles, especially by visitors staying at the new lodges, will lead to fewer cars on the roads.

**Wilder at Heart**
Adventure enthusiasts can expect more thrills. How much more exhilarating can it get than paragliding in the wilderness section of the Garden Route National Park, river rafting in the Ai-Ais/Richtersveld Transfrontier Park, climbing Table Mountain, canoeing, mountain biking, tackling a demanding eco-route in your 4x4?

**TOWARDS 2022: a road map**

The visitors of the future to our National Parks will be different to those of yesteryear.
Our Parks are a rich resource for man and beast. This is where we go to find ourselves and to recharge. This is where we study our treasured natural kingdom and ensure the survival of all species through the knowledge gained. This is where we conserve our cultural heritage and make it relevant for everyone.

But to do this, funds are needed. To manage the financial shortfall without compromising conservation, the focus will increasingly be on responsible tourism.

While SANParks will therefore encourage and develop facilities for tourism, the concepts of ‘responsible’ and ‘sustainable’ are not negotiable. Yet you can start counting and know there’s more to come: currently the menu of activities offered by SANParks amounts to no fewer than 1,780 options each day. If it’s not mainstream tourism that tickles your fancy, how about adventure tourism. Or the novelty of fringe activities?

**Mainstream Tourism**

These visitors are the lifeblood of our Parks. South Africans are outdoor enthusiasts, and with some effort a recreational culture (a way of life that includes holidays) can be fostered across the board among the middle class.

**Adventure Tourism**

South Africa’s varied natural environments create excellent adventure opportunities in our Parks year-round, and adventure tourism is growing even in difficult economic times as more and more people are looking for a rare experience. Where these adventurers go, the rest of us will soon follow.

Our wildlife adventurers crave interaction with nature or with culture, linked to a physical activity. An example of an adventure trip is to combine hiking, bird-watching and a visit to cultural history sites.

**Fringe Activities**

The vitality of this sector stems from people and businesses who want to try new activities. It means taking people to new places, and implementing new technologies. This is cutting edge tourism! You will find these visitors on top of mountains, white-water rafting, rock climbing, caving, paragliding ...

**Globally Competitive**

Where else in the world will you find this combination of forests, dunes and wetlands, mountains with a variety of cliffs, the breakers from two massive oceans, rivers ...

The list of activities envisaged is both exciting and challenging. Some of these prospective special interest activities (several will be privately operated) are bound to appeal to you.

But after all the activity, rest assured: all new activities will comply with any necessary planning requirements and stringent zoning.

The zones (see below) determine the kind of activities that will be allowed in the Parks in a particular zone. This means that you won’t find rest camps in wilderness or remote areas while other zones will offer modern amenities.

**Looking with fresh eyes**

More visitors are central to the Parks’ survival, as are more and varied attractions. It’s time to think out of the box.

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**Tiny Tourism Footprints**

2 million hectares

Size of the Kruger National Park (roughly the size of Israel)

6,285 hectares used for ecotourism

0.3% of Kruger used for ecotourism

The international guideline for ecotourism is 10%.

**Zoning**

**Wilderness/Remote**

These areas are essentially undeveloped and without roads. Controlled access: only visitors on foot. Could have footpaths where erosion is a problem.

**Primitive**

An almost completely natural state to be maintained; development footprints an absolute minimum. Controlled access: 4x4s, horseriding. Small basic overnight facilities.

**Quiet**

General natural state to be maintained. Only non-motorised access, but access not specifically controlled. Ablution facilities can be allowed.

**Low-Intensity Leasure**

Small to medium-sized camps with basic facilities. Infrastructure should be minimised in order to maintain natural state. Motorised self-drive access.

**High-Intensity Leasure**

High-density tourism development node with concentrated human activities. High-volume roads, high-density camps with modern amenities.

**Buffer**

Land adjacent to national-/contractual Parks. Activities with which SANParks is comfortable to be associated with and will promote.

**Work of Nature**

**South African National Parks**

Currently receive 4.5 million visitors per annum

78% coming from South Africa.

The occupancy of rest camps is 69.2% and campsites 46% – excellent figures by industry standards.
To the sky and beyond!

Helping to fund our Parks by visiting them is an investment in our past and our future, our culture and our knowledge base. Your support is central to the Parks’ survival and that of our rich wildlife. SANParks is offering you more and varied attractions. What fun to explore them all!

**ADRENALIN RUSH**
Adrenalin junkies may be tempted to participate in bungee jumping, base jumping, abseiling and bouldering.

**ROMANTIC SOULS**
What could be more romantic than floating over a pristine landscape in a hot-air balloon? The bush also makes an unforgettable venue for marriage vows.

**A DELECTABLE (NIGHT) OWLS**
Self-drive night drives are definitely on the cards at selected Parks.

“Any nation with wildlife sanctuaries should realise that it is an absolute sacred trust given to them...”

– Dr Tg Nel, biologist, recommendation to the Board, 1956

A touch of class

For a touch of glamour, retro style, how about arriving in a Park on an overnight train ride?

**THE WHOLE OF THE MOON**
For a holistic mind-body-soul approach to your holiday, imagine wellness centres, gymnasiums, health spas and courses on bush homopathy. None of these activities is inappropriate for a holiday in a National Park.

**OUR HERITAGE**
Tailor-made specialist tours will cater for just about everyone, from birding cruises to botanical sightseeing, with tours for tree lovers or those fascinated by medicinal plants. If culture is your thing, you’ll be able to book a rock art tour, or watch a cultural dancing performance.

**Learn & live**
Training courses will cover topics like nature photography, birding, game capture, botany, bush/tracking skills, guide/ranger training, first aid, astronomy, nature-based hospitality training, off-road driving skills, survival skills, even scuba diving in coastal Parks.
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