

The Mpumalanga Parks Board has adopted wide-ranging new policies to reap the benefits of ecotourism in the province. But if these advantages are not visibly demonstrated to local communities, writes Gillian Handley, this strategy will fail

GET THE MOST OUT OF NATURE

Ecotourism is now a provincial responsibility, and the various provincial parks boards have been organising and reorganising themselves in their efforts to be relevant for the future. The Mpumalanga Parks Board is further down the road in this respect than most.

But how relevant is conservation to the people of Mpumalanga, many of whom live in dire poverty and some of whom have been forced to make way for conservation?

Well-managed ecotourism is considered by many to be one of the most appropriate rural development activities when it comes to increasing the quality of rural community life and stabilising regional economies.

Dr Mathews Phosa, Mpumalanga's premier, has said his government recognises its responsibility both to maintain biological diversity and address social issues. He believes tourism could contribute significantly to developing the region. Phosa supports the Mpumalanga Parks Board's development of ecotourism, recognising that while it is an institutional structure responsible for conservation, it must at the same time be compatible with partners in the private sector. Success he says, depends on investor confidence in the provincial and national government.

To Bundile Mkhize, director of tourism in Mpumalanga, ecotourism is the key to its economic development. Ecotourism's worth has not yet been quantified in rand terms, but Mkhize says his department is at an advanced stage in gathering data and should have figures by the end of the year.

The MPB is an amalgamation of three nature conservation agencies based in the former Transvaal, KwaNdebele and KaNgwane. The board describes itself as a business-orientated conservation organisation, working towards a profit-based conserva-



Sunset heralds the crackle of campfire, flickering glow-worms and a chorus of nocturnal birds

tion and tourism industry.

The MPB's philosophy hinges on local and regional community development partnerships using conservation initiatives to drive development. The idea is that the MPB will provide conservation management expertise, and the private sector investor the capital, skills and infrastructure, with communities – often the landowners – benefiting from the whole.

The MPB's Care (conservation and rural empowerment) programmes embrace a number of initiatives, such as:

- partnerships in cattle/game projects in which cattle are grazed in an ecologically controlled manner;
- water supply to rural areas;
- adult training in a range of life skills, including literacy;
- adult training in skills with economic potential; and
- construction of training centres and schools.

The idea, board spokespersons say, is to bring new hope to people – particularly

the disadvantaged – and to conservation. The conservation programmes are aimed at encouraging true ecotourism, rather than the tokenist versions often touted as the real thing.

Alan Gray, CEO of MPB, believes ecotourism can have huge economic benefits. At the grass roots, the perception varies. Where the board has managed to get its message across to communities, and where they have actually benefited from conservation, the perception is positive. So far, though, only three out of 15 reserves have been converted to the new approach, so there is still a long way to go. The PPA reserves had a completely different philosophy, so there is a lot of ground to cover.

Gray points out that the community must benefit. There is not, he says, much use in explaining the principles of the food chain to someone who does not have enough to eat. Therefore, the MPB starts with programmes that help to generate an income for the community concerned, and then starts teaching conservation.

D S Mkhwanazi, the province's MEC for environmental affairs, wants to see conservation develop a more humane face. He says the province is internationally recognised as a focus of conservation in southern Africa, and the MPB has an obligation to make the natural resources of Mpumalanga accessible to the people of the province.

Innovative partnerships with conservationists, communities, funding agencies and investors are his solutions to the sometimes conflicting needs of conservation and society.

Mkhize endorses the community approach, adding that most of Mpumalanga's development projects have come from communities themselves. His department's biggest challenge, he says, is to create an awareness of the potential of tourism in disadvantaged communities. A



With its vast tracts of open land, wildlife is in abundance

tourism awareness campaign has been started with this end in mind.

Commercialisation

Although it is a parastatal, the MPB is trying to become self-sufficient – hopefully within a decade, and has developed a macro-economic business plan towards this end. "Basically," says Gray, "we are at the end of year one and entering year two of a 10-year plan. The first five years will be taken up by transformation, followed by a reconstruction and development process, with an income stream starting from year five onwards."

Dr P M H Maduna, who chairs the MPB, says conservation programmes have to begin showing a return as soon as possible. Capital is needed to function effectively, and, given the burdens of the government, partnerships with devel-

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opers and industry are the most likely source.

Gray regards finding the right private sector partners, with the right philosophy, to develop game and nature reserves as the board's biggest challenge. He recognises that without this injection of capital the MPB will not reach its objectives, but believes it has found the right recipe.

Other challenges? From a conservation point of view, Gray says the MPB must convince certain communities that conservation is the best way to use their land. It must also prove that conservation can achieve more than ranching, for example. Another challenge facing the board is to train enough staff, and develop a fast-track system for advancement so that it could become truly representative of the new SA. Equal opportunity programmes are doing well, he says, but there is still a long way to go.

Because it is a parastatal, the MPB may engage in commercial ventures. Its various divisions function as business units, offering their expertise at competitive commercial rates – for example, it is useful for local industry to draw on the board's expertise in developing integrated environmental management strategies.

Asked about the units' success, Gray says it is early days yet, but even so they are generating 25%–30% of their own budgets.

Gray is enthusiastic about the huge opportunities in ecotourism for the private sector. He says the MPB's main responsi-

bility is conservation, but the only way to achieve this effectively is through commercialisation.

Board representatives recently went on an investment drive in Malaysia, and Gray is more than satisfied with the results. According to him, three potential investor groups responded very positively: the board sent a memorandum to one group within a week of the visit, and a delegation accepted an invitation to visit the province immediately. Gray attributes the success of the visit to the board having done its homework first, and to its ability to present detailed plans and prospectuses – almost a shopping list of what is available.

On the table are four developments worth R550m; some 2 300 tourist beds are planned for the province. Gray says a partner is needed who can put heads in those beds. The Malaysian company the MPB is talking to is involved in investment, hotel management and construction, and is one of the world's biggest tour operators.

Gray adds that the construction and development phase can be broken down into core projects, which will happen in phase one, and non-core, which will be phase two. Operators and financiers are currently being sought for the core projects.

These include Songimvelo, the Blyde River Canyon (including Pilgrim's Rest, although which authority the town falls under is currently not clear), the Leskop Dam, and Barberton Valley, including the Noordkaap Reserve.

Gray adds that there are opportunities for investors and entrepreneurs at all levels, right down to that of the micro enterprise. Areas of opportunity are construction, tour guiding, consumables, support services, transport, manufacturing, entertainment and retail trading.

Could the government do more to help? Gray believes so.



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"More incentives are needed to stimulate investment in tourism, particularly in large projects," he declares. "We are not getting our slice of the cake in terms of international investors."

Songimvelo Game Reserve

The development of Songimvelo Game Reserve, the province's flagship reserve, represents MPB's first foray into the commercial arena. The reserve will be developed by Somalanga, a new company formed in terms of an agreement between the MPB and Footsteps, a grouping of professionals specialising in the development of nature based tourism in southern Africa. Shares are to be held by a broad spectrum of SA businesses.

Under the agreement, areas of Songimvelo zoned for commercial activity will be leased to Somalanga, which will have the right to develop facilities, grant concessionary rights, and facilitate and develop entrepreneurial activities. The MPB will continue to manage the reserve itself.

The MPB and Somalanga intend to make sure that communities are involved in the project, and that businesses are developed around it. Gray acknowledges that unless ecotourism soon delivers benefits to communities, Songimvelo's future as a conservation area could be threatened.

Job creation, maximising land yield, economic and social benefits to communities, the attraction of private sector funding, management expertise, and the attraction of foreign currency were all motivating factors for developing the reserve.

Apart from the direct jobs, Somalanga's management believes Songimvelo has the potential to spin off other entrepreneurial opportunities and jobs. Tourism was chosen over ranching, because of the potential to diversify the local economic base into commerce, local handicrafts, transport and so on.

Songimvelo will be developed as a theme reserve. All lodges, safari camps and hotels will be designed on a 1920s/1930s theme, to recreate the "African safari" as it used to be – or perhaps to meet foreign tourists' fantasies of what it used to be.

Sites have been identified for facilities ranging from 40- to 50-bed luxury lodges, a luxury tented safari camp, a 300-bed resort lodge and a 120 bed mountain village, simpler 10-bed special interest camps, and – in a 17 300 ha wilderness area – trail camps to support adventure sport opportunities. A number of stands will be offered for purchase by corporations or syndications. There will be a traditional African market located alongside a 1930s-style railway station, craft stalls, and a Swazi village. A mining town saloon will be recreated at a railway siding close to the main lodge; the route will be plied by a steam train.

The MPB, in consultation with local communities and Somalanga, has established community forums and communication systems to help implement its new policies. The investor group included in the private sector component provides a vehicle for black business participation, both as shareholders in Somalanga and investors in the various commercial opportunities.

Mkhize stresses the many entrepreneurial opportunities in ecotourism, but adds that established businesses are not really keen to get previously disadvantaged communities on board – possibly due to fear of competition. It all seems fairly simple, though – if those communities don't benefit, and entrepreneurial opportunities are not extended to the previously disadvantaged as well, ecotourism could be in jeopardy. ♦

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