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Tourism-led development in South Africa: a case study of the Makuleke partnership with Wilderness Safaris

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Abstract

Through a case study of the relationship between the rural Makuleke community and the regional tourism operator Wilderness Safaris, this thesis examines the impact of tourism partnerships on community development in post-apartheid South Africa. The study considers the tourism component of the 'Makuleke model', a concept used frequently in academic and popular literature to refer to the community's landmark land restitution case involving the Kruger National Park (KNP).

Thirty years after experiencing a forced removal by the apartheid regime, the Makuleke community in 1998 was able to regain their lost land (the Pafuri area of Kruger National Park) and benefit from it through conservation and tourism. The Makuleke have partnered with three tourism operators, their main concessionaire being Wilderness Safaris. Their contractual agreement obliges the tourism company to pay lease fees to the Makuleke Communal Property Association (CPA) and to employ Makuleke residents. To further community development, Wilderness Safaris established a joint venture with the Makuleke CPA, and also runs an environmental education programme for children.

Evidence for this thesis was collected over a two and a half year period (from May 2007 to December 2009) using three methodological approaches: archival research, participant observation and semi-structured, open-ended interviews. In analysing the Makuleke CPA-Wilderness Safaris partnership, findings reveal that ten years after the land claim, the commended 'Makuleke model' is neither as conceptually coherent nor as practically successful as is commonly supposed. I argue that although the model denotes success, a closer scrutiny of its foundations, assumptions and context expose inherent forces and practices that hinder its long-term effective implementation.

Influenced by post-development theory, I question perceptions of equality in benefit distribution, critique the juxtaposition of traditional with modern values, and examine contestations over power within the Makuleke community. I demonstrate how these features undermine the potential for the genuine transformation and broad-based social upliftment that tourism-led development purposes to achieve at Makuleke. My research findings confirm post-development theoretical propositions that criticise the contradictions in orthodox development procedures and call for a rethinking of the premises upon which approaches to community upliftment through tourism are generally founded.

KEYWORDS: Tourism, South Africa, Kruger National Park, Makuleke, Wilderness Safaris, traditional leadership, land claims, rural development, post-development theory.