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International Tourism and Changes in the South African Tourism Product in the 1990s: Accomodation and tourist amenities in the Kruger National Park

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4. IN CONCLUSION

How Accommodation Matters

In 1994, the state put tourism at the forefront of economic regeneration and growth; in fact, tourism was seen as the 'engine for economic growth', contributing to employment creation, foreign exchange earnings, and to a significant chunk of the GDP. The Reconstruction and Development programme (RDP) became the reference point for all tourism and conservation policy, with Kruger a key beacon to measure that progress. This new responsibility lifted the park's internal development after 1994 to new levels of engagement between its internal space and the market it was now primed on serving, bringing in new actors and actions hitherto considered extreme for "proper" biodiversity conservation.

This research report was an attempt to capture this tourist destination development in its historical context, perhaps answering to Law's intonation that "tourism, like most social activities can be more fully understood by identifying the events which led up to contemporary situations" (Laws 1995:36). A different social/political/economic context helps explain the minutiae of infrastructural policy within the national park. As chapter one shows, national policy directions are communicating with the world outside South Africa, where a specific and crucial consumer constituency is. SATOUR has reached this constituency through marketing, but prior to 1994 there was always an inherent struggle between the political image and economic instability, on the one hand, and the energy of the publicity itself, on the other. The question can then be posited: how do you market a beautiful destination surrounded by a rather repulsive context? SATOUR's challenge was to convince a visitor that in spite of all the "bad press" politics was receiving, here was something worth coming to see far from the madding human

crowd – *nature*. It was this challenge of "trying to prevent a mountain from falling into the sea" (a regular television advert in South Africa) that the democratization process removed from 1990 onwards. In 1994, therefore, we see politics becoming a boost to tourism, and going further to assume a leading and facilitatory role to the hospitality industry. It was no longer about fighting a war to clean the bad image but rather building on the good image to explore – through greater emphasis on market research – new, more rewarding markets, to tap their preferences and spatialise them into a tourism product.

Is "destination image", or political context, a factor specific to the foreign tourism market, and if the tourism industry was domestic-market based, would political context *really* matter, therefore? This is a significant critique on *destination mix*, one that shows how critical the overseas market not only to Kruger but global tourism in general. In one sense there is a racial critique; the South African (and southern African) tourism industry has always been dominated by whites because of historical factors. To qualify that further, these are most *affluent* whites. A combination of race and affluence could be deployed to the pre- and post-1994 periods in different ways. While race might provide access to affluence before then, it does seem that affluence has now shut out the disadvantaged (racial) groups, in the process excluding them from greater participation in tourism development in Kruger. This explains the efforts taken to include these groups in ownership schemes, especially in the concessions. In this sense then, the connection between an overseas market that is predominantly white, and the question of "affluence" as a basis for travel, offers research challenges this paper is not empirically competent to answer. Suffice it to say that the tourism industry faces the challenge of dealing with the "island" position of nature reserves and resorts from most South Africans who have little or no access to it. In the move to privatise accommodation this racial dynamic was apparent

visually throughout the Kruger tour; there was sometimes few or no blacks wherever the author went except game scouts, tour guides or drivers, and catering staff. Affluence, then, is just one of several historically constructed "access" issues Kruger must confront: how problematic is the changed political context to SATOUR domestically, now that luring tourists on this "good political context" is no longer a problem? And how does this racial demographic matter to sustainable development?

A second veneer in the political context vs. overseas market conversation is the way SATOUR has primed its marketing on the international market more than the domestic one. The high noon of this selective approach was in the 1950s and 60s, during which SATB bombarded specific regions with special package tours designed for the wealthy social classes. The domestic market received much attention in the 1980s – owing to bad publicity abroad – but not before that responsibility was retrenched to the regional authorities. Since then SATOUR has gone back relentlessly to its wealthy overseas clients in the United States of America, Europe and Australia. That is not to say there is no domestic tourism; rather, there has been a deliberate assault on business which generates foreign currency. The move to privatised accommodation, especially in Kruger, has given new importance to this initiative. It is suggested here that worries that often emanate from the industry when the Rand firms suggests a shift in how we might think about the destination mix. As the potential tourist worries about spending more if they come to South Africa and not elsewhere, the local industry worries about the global "context", even as it keeps an eye on polishing its own local "context". This interpenetration of "context" might be implicit in the destination mix, but it makes more sense to see interlocking contexts in conversation with each other. This takes us to the power of the destination in manipulating the global context: how does a "perfect" destination deal with a "bad" global context? Today

it is possible to devalue so that the destination becomes cheaper, but that is not an everyday occurrence for an economy that is as varied as South Africa's, which also imports.

What this essay is dealing with are those fundamentals the destination has power to change, in this case through improving facilities and selling them to the market. The brochure has been a powerful tool in the promotion of image; in the period of political strife, it was deployed to "establish a meaningful position for the destination in the public's mind as being a place which is different from other destinations offering similar primary attractions" (Laws 1995: 112). This is applicable even where the destination is "safe" and the world tourism environment "bad" (as if to say, "things are bad, but have some fun here where you can afford it"). In a global context good or bad for tourism business, attraction can be maximized through a promise of the "temptingly unique"; this study has shown how wildlife was a central feature on the brochures and exhibitions (Rasool and Witz 1996). In the last few years SATOUR has gone further than just the wildlife; they now offer "wildlife in style". This philosophy, arising from tourism taste and the policy-drive to get the "fat cats" who can afford the luxury, spatialises in Kruger's specialized accommodation. At one level is a park management system striving to keep nature in its pristine state; at another is a vastly transforming service industry to see that nature, to capture the imagination, and sell. Who best to handle this expensive investment than private capital! Its efficient and flexible business brain and capacity churns out continuous market research, adjusting the service in tune with a changing and diverse market.

The privatization is not total, however. Fixed period concessions ensure the state has long-term propriety, while on a day to day level the centrality of tourism to RDP means the government plays a facilitative and regulatory role, as well as forging synergic partnerships with the private sector. So when SATOUR advertises,

the private sector provides the goods to be sold and delivers once the orders are secured. Even then, there are often clear lines of demarcation; with respect to Kruger privatization has resulted in two pricing regimes, namely the National Parks 'low cost' and the private lodges 'high cost' accommodation. The Parks accommodation is subsidized, but the private lodges are market priced. The private accommodation's pricing structure is designed mainly for the wealthy overseas and local tourists, perhaps consistent with the policy of increasing international arrivals and foreign currency earnings; National Parks pricing is no doubt intended to give more access to those with "smaller pockets", to make national parks the 'pride and joy of all South Africans'. When talking about Jock Safari Lodge for example, Fox (2004) says such "high-priced" lodges are meant for a "species" who appreciate value for money, who do not blink when paying the R1 350 per person per night. In the words of Schutte (1999: 56) in Kruger "the *right* price must satisfy both the tourists and meet the profit objectives of the tourism business".

The cost factor, therefore, depends on the "pockets" from which one is judging; the affluence factor returns to ask questions about the segmentation of tourism accommodation. The tourist with lots of money, the one with just enough to see the animals, the person who has no money to send children to school, the entrepreneur, all have different positionalities from which they view "affordable" or "expensive" accommodation. Standing in the middle, at the intersection of all these arrows, is the government, whose challenge, then, is to prevent any tensions between the role-players. Staying with the private developer, the concern is with designing a product that satisfies specific clients with the *goal* of realizing enough profits to stay in business. Quality is the key, a distinct first class service the main draw-card. The discussion on Lukimbi Lodge's wedding facilities is one example.

To argue for the multiply -positioned view of accommodation cost is not to negate it as a problem: that citizens might have no access to such facilities and yet overseas tourists (foreigners) should have it is in itself an anomaly the tourism industry has tried to address. As we have seen, the Three Cities Travel special package "for South African and SADC residents only" at Hamilton's Tented Camp in Kruger for R1 930 per person per night sharing is a good example (Three Cities 2004:8). And the big question remains: *which* South African will afford it revolves around affluence. The dilemma facing National Parks Board is illustrated by a study conducted just prior to the advent of these private concessions, in which many South Africans found them unaffordable. How would the tourism industry raise foreign currency earnings and make national parks accessible to all citizens in the same breath? From that point of view, a 2-tier pricing structure for "exquisite" and "affordable" accommodation – while criticized for discriminating between domestic and foreign, and allowing in affording domestics – may have been a logical policy decision.

For all the talk about affordability, the post-privatization balance sheet has been very positive, and government is meeting its RDP goals (Perlmann 1996: 23). Kruger National Park's private concessions are working successfully to economically empower surrounding communities, while in the private lodges, schemes are being initiated for employees from surrounding communities to own or "buy in" to the concessions. If the apartheid government used privatization as a mechanism to racially distribute tourism wealth, the ANC government is using privatization to empower particularly, but not only, those formerly disadvantaged groups. A neutral would conclude that both policies appeal to what the state defines as its strategic electoral/power base. A less political view is that to secure business against hostility within the immediate park environs, the tourism industry is using privatization to "insure" its assets against social upheaval.

Departing from this social vs. profit analysis, one could also draw interesting conclusions about the tourism vs. conservation dynamic that in the earlier period tended to restrict the expansion of rest camps. If this period was of resentment against "destroying" nature, the post-1994 period brought to the fore a synergy between tourism and conservation. So instead of an exploitative industry at odds with nature, accommodation/infrastructure and biodiversity conservation has moved towards being an integrated project. With this marriage, planning and zonation become key management stratagems. By 1996, the era of "Responsible Tourism" had really taken root (WPT 1996:19).

How responsible? Can business, by its very nature as a profit-seeking activity really be socially or environmentally responsible? These questions rest on the possibility that the good financial rewards are "quick profits". This is a bit short-sighted. The strict conservation guidelines for Kruger bind the private concessionaires to strictly adhere to contractual terms of reference or forfeit their contracts altogether. This is the key; decentralization keeps stakeholders accountable because the state has retained the main control functions and codified them into a set of operational rules, and has the power to cancel the agreements in the event of violation. As Prosser has illustrated (1994: 33) the state's role in setting "the direction and scale of tourism within sustainable limits" has stamped out any overcrowding (thereby protecting the environment) and in typical socially responsible tourism mode, the accommodation sector has responded with "the adoption of local architectural styles and scales, (giving economic opportunities to) local designers and workers at all levels and the use of local materials" (Prosser 1994: 34). It is nevertheless unlikely that the longer term effects of apartheid will be erased in the short-term; if anything, the steady pace at which RDP has proceeded is a lesson beyond as well as an alternative to delayed or failed transformations in countries like Zimbabwe soon after independence. This

procrastination created a complex social and political accumulation of frustrations that boiled over into hostile seizures and invasions of national park estates. South Africa did not have to wait for two decades to transform; rather, transformation was built into the democratic negotiation and transition process.

Some fundamental lessons also emerge for eco-tourism and environmental management models, with respect to forms of decentralization. As has been seen, the decentralization of Kruger is not total: the national tourism policy has been given the responsibility of ensuring that the goals of the RDP are achieved. So rather than government being a player in tourism, it becomes the referee. This represents a vertical relationship. The national tourism policy, a game plan setting boundaries (the duration of the match, the rules, the playing field, and the instruments to control the game) is given to the National Parks Board while the marketing of the game is the responsibility of SATOUR, and so on. These bodies then delegate specific guideline-defined responsibilities and obligations to affiliated bodies for implementation.

At this last level, the picture becomes less clear. While vertical hierarchies persist, many more horizontal delegations persist that are already evident with the separation of park space management (which falls under the NPB) and marketing this park space (given to SATOUR). Further down at the park space level, the most obvious horizontal (and vertical) relation is between tourism and conservation. Because such local functions are too specific for national authorities to manage, the implementation of national policies is delegated to specific management structures. It is at this stage that an intimate knowledge of the park dovetails with broader, non-specific guidelines. As shown earlier, where the Board had said Kruger had nearly reached carrying capacity in terms of tourism infrastructural development, park management argued there was still too much space for further developments without upsetting conservation principles.

At the marketing level, SATOUR takes up targets set in GEAR and develops its own growth strategy that focuses on selective marketing, targeting high spending tourists. It then responds to market research and that is where privatization becomes important in providing what the market demands.

Looking at the historical development of tourism facilities in Kruger, what then can be said about existing theories? First, with respect to Butler (1980), Kruger does not seem to have followed a clear and prescribed path to its present state. It seems as though the "interjections" of politics and global markets were key conditioning contexts that charted internal responses. It is clear that a more robust market research drive associated with the changing national tourism policy context acted to revamp some established traits, thereby making tourism less cyclical and predictable. Some principles of Butler's 6 stages were present before 1994; thereafter however they seem to go up in smoke or intermingle. For example, *rejuvenation* is probably happening at the fourth stage when the park responds to market demands and remains attractive through vigorous continuous development and innovation in the type of accommodation and activities offered. In Butler we do not quite see much internal and external context, making his case an "ideal situation" rather than a "real life" situation where the national park is spatiotemporally located. From that point of view, Agarwal's (1997: 66-7) consideration of "supply factors, such as rate of development, access, government policy, competing destinations, and … demand, which include the changing nature of clientele as the destination evolves" are worth taking home. Because this essay took a deliberate step to stay within the park, an "internal" context might be seen in the role of the game warden in dictating park development policy. This is in conversation with Agarwal's point that "decisions made by resort planners and managers at different stages of resort evolution are critically important in shaping

its life path" (Agarwal 1997: 67). Needless to say, this "strong handed" and personalised approach to protected area management fizzled out as the park became more nationalised.

Bennett's (2000: 12) five components of the tourism product conceive facilities as factors that "in themselves, do not generate tourism flows, but the absence of which discourages people from visiting a destination". Here is an implicit understanding of accommodation as a support service to tourism, but not as an attraction. The evidence from Kruger points in a different direction: the accommodation has not only become an attraction (taking just the case of Lukimbi), and is not only inseparable from "the destination" or package; in fact, without it the destination is doomed. What we are witnessing in Kruger is the birth of a new integrated package that has accommodation as the core attraction with wildlife as ancillary. People might just as well come to Kruger to wed *at Lukimbi* and see game before or afterwards, the game visiting them so that rather than people going out to see animals they play host to the primates. Without the accommodation no one might bother to go to Lukimbi. The other problem with Bennett's five components explanation is that although all of them find expression simultaneously or at alternating times in Kruger, he does not mention how policies may affect these components.

To get around this problem, this report has tried to spatialise Keyser's discussion of the management of supply and demand to see how tourism has been problematic and emblematic of developments within Kruger. Unlike Bennett, Keyser allows us to see how accommodation itself can be sold as a product on its own terms; so rather than being ancillary to the attraction, it can be an attraction. Rather than the individualized model of 'components' followed by Bennett, Keyser (2002: 25) prefers to dwell on how managers of destinations balance the "nature and quantity of resources" with sound knowledge of the client's expectations. This

process of matching the tourism product (supply) and the market (demand) is what she terms destination and product development, which deflects attention from the supply-led tourism models of the 20th century to customer-driven, demand-led tourism. It is precisely this model that has been shown in the development of accommodation Kruger National Park, which prior to 1994 followed the supply model, after which date it adopted a more vigorous market-driven strategy with the help of the private sector and SATOUR.