

# Wildlife sector transformation key to growth

**Barbara Thomson**

DEVELOPING and transforming the wildlife economy can contribute significantly to economic development and the upliftment of rural communities through job creation in new employment sectors.

Biodiversity is globally recognised as a basis for economic growth and sustainable development.

With South Africa being the third most mega-diverse country, the economic opportunities are endless. To exploit these economic opportunities the Department of Environmental Affairs has commenced with plans to transform two sub-sectors of the biodiversity economy – the wildlife and bio-prospecting sectors within the ambit of the National Biodiversity Economy Strategy and implementation plan.

This will be done through creating opportunities, ensuring a conducive environment for business to operate, developing and implementing support mechanisms that will see meaningful participation of previously disadvantaged individuals, including communities in the mainstream economy.

The South African wildlife sector has enormous potential. This sector currently employs approximately 100 000 people across the value chain. Its value chain is centred on game and wildlife farming or ranching activities that relate to the stocking, trading, breeding, and hunting of game, and all the services and goods

required to support this value chain. The key drivers of this value chain include domestic hunters, international hunters and a growing retail market demand for wildlife products.

The domestic hunting market is estimated to be worth R6.4 billion, while the international hunting market was valued at approximately R1.4bn in 2013.

As more people enter the wildlife sector, they will be able to generate income not only from hunting, but also from the sale of game meat, wildlife products and live game. The retail and export game meat market was estimated at R230 million in 2013.

The sector presently has little domestic and international market multiplier effects, while the job creation potential of the tourism industry is open to enhancement. The sale of game meat, live game and wildlife products is, therefore, an area with a large economic transformation potential.

Unfortunately, the structural inequalities characterising our economy has placed several barriers in the path of black South Africans, including insufficient access, ownership and inefficient utilisation of land and lack of infrastructure development support for entrepreneurs. In particular, high capital costs for acquiring land, fencing and game species are major barriers to entry and transformation. Overcoming these barriers to entry or challenges requires co-ordinated

efforts from the government, private sector and communities.

We are currently working together with other stakeholders within the sector to identify 10 million hectares of suitable land for participation of previously disadvantaged individuals and communities as owners of sustainable wildlife-based business ventures. Support programmes such as infrastructural development (game fence, ecotourism facilities etc), game donation/loaning, skills development and training, access to markets and funding will be facilitated to ensure sustainable businesses.

## Commitment

Earlier this month, we officially launched the Mayibuye Game Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal. The local community, the Ximba people, were awarded a land restitution claim in terms of a settlement agreement in April 2007. The Mayibuye Community Trust formed by the community entered into a 99-year lease agreement with the developer and the strategic development partner, whereby the land would be developed into a game reserve with a component of residential property, commercial sites and hotels.

The Mayibuye Game Reserve has made significant progress since R10m in funding was received from our department. A 35km wildlife fence has been erected, a gate house and offices are being built,

two houses have been refurbished, 15 field rangers have been trained and employed while a commercial “Business for Good” site has been refurbished and wildlife introductions (zebra and wildebeest) have been initiated. In terms of employment, 76 temporary Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) jobs have been created through erection of the fence. This has unlocked a further R100m in private investment for the development of the eco-estate.

This game reserve is a success story in the making. It will fundamentally transform the rural economic landscape in the area.

It is a consequence of the commitment by government and stakeholders in the wildlife or game sectors working together to ensure a thriving, inclusive and sustainable wildlife economy for the well-being of all South Africans.

This partnership between government and key stakeholders was further cemented at the recently concluded 3rd Biodiversity Economy Indaba in East London through pledges by key stakeholders in the wildlife, bioprospecting/biotrade and eco-tourism sectors to ensure greater inclusivity and transformation.

Among the outcomes of the Biodiversity Economy Lab held in 2016 were 15 key initiatives in the wildlife sector aimed at delivering a thriving and inclusive wildlife economy.

This included the identification and

prioritisation of land for transformation, operationalisation of biodiversity economy nodes, capacity building for community structures, and unlocking the economic potential of protected areas.

We plan to deliver at the nodes wildlife ranching activities that relate to the stocking, trading, breeding, and hunting of game, and all the services and goods required to support its value chain. The commitment is that the wildlife economy should have contributed R5.7bn to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and created 125 000 jobs with an expansion of 10 million hectares.

The pledges had included an undertaking by SA National Parks to donate 3 000 head of game to emerging wildlife farmers in the next three years, a pledge to donate 1 200 head of game over four years by Ezemvelo KZN wildlife, and the promise to donate 1 500 animals by the Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency in support of transformation and mobilisation of rural previously disadvantaged communities over five years.

I have no doubt the commitments made will materialise. We are on course to effect fundamental change through this initiative that will irrevocably change our rural landscapes from economically depressed and poverty stricken areas into prosperous communities.

● **Thomson is the Deputy Minister of Environmental Affairs**