



Barbara Thomson

Facing new frontiers in wildlife sector

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. The Department of Environmental Affairs has commenced with plans to transform 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 employs approximately 100 000 people across the value chain, which 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 drivers of this 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 structural inequalities characterising our economy have 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. Overcoming these challenges requires co-ordinated efforts from the government, private sector and communities.

We are working with other stakeholders to identify 10 million hectares of land for participation of previously disadvantaged individuals and communities as owners of sustainable wildlife-based business ventures.

Earlier this month, we 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 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 game reserve has made significant progress since R10m in funding was received from the 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 employed and a commercial “business for good” site has been refurbished, and wildlife introductions have been initiated.

In terms of employment, 76 temporary Expanded Public Works Programme 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 partnership was further cemented at the recent Third Biodiversity Economy Indaba in East London through pledges by stakeholders in the wildlife, bioprospecting/biotrade and eco-tourism sectors.

Among the outcomes of the Biodiversity Economy Lab in 2016 were 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 wildlife ranching activities 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 and created 125 000 jobs with an expansion of 10 million hectares.

The pledges included an undertaking by South African National Parks to donate 3000 head of game to emerging wildlife farmers in the next three years, donating 1200 head of game over four years by Ezemvelo KZN wildlife, and 1500 animals by the Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency, in support of transformation.

We are on course to change our rural landscapes from economically depressed and poverty stricken areas into prosperous communities.

● *Thomson is the Deputy Minister of Environmental Affairs*