

Celebrating our national parks

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In June 2019, tour company SafariBookings.com analysed more than 2 300 visitor and industry expert reviews to determine the Top 50 parks in Africa. Of the 14 South African parks identified in the list, six were national parks – the Kruger National Park, Hluhluwe-Mfolozi Park, Addo Elephant National Park, Au-grabies Falls National Park, Mountain Zebra National Park and Karoo National Park.

The South African National Parks (SANParks) is responsible for managing South Africa's national parks, ensuring that both the environment and surrounding communities benefit.

"It's always welcomed when the industry recognises SANParks, and in this instance being compared with the Top 50 in Africa is indeed a great achievement, especially given that six of the Top 50 are within the SANParks stable," said SANParks chief communications officer Janine Raftopoulos.

The importance of national parks

National parks have, in the past, been seen mainly as spaces for conservation. But since the turn of democracy, these parks are increasingly being viewed as opportunities to create jobs and stimulate economic growth in rural areas.

"We have seen a shift in the role national parks are playing. They are becoming areas that are important for government to deliver its mandate and ensure that conservation is a viable contributor to social and economic development, of rural areas in particular," Raftopoulos explained.

SANParks' business operations are therefore based on three core pillars, namely



conservation; responsible tourism and socio-economic transformation.

Apart from providing full-time jobs to people working in conservation, tourism, hospitality, media and administration, national parks are also contributing strongly towards the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP).

"Almost 6 500 fulltime equivalent EPWP jobs were created in the last financial year, for which SANParks was the implementing agency," said.

Effective programmes for conservation and people

SANParks uses the Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool as adapted for South Africa (METT-SA 3) to measure the effectiveness of protected area management.

In 2017/18, 16 of South Africa's 23 national parks achieved a score of 67 percent or better, showing a significant improvement in how protected areas are being managed.

SANParks has a vast number of programmes being implemented in the spheres of conservation, tourism and socio-economic transforma-



tion. In addition to several flagship projects implemented over the past few years, two major infrastructure investment projects are currently underway which will

boost tourism numbers.

Due to be opened this year, the R270 million Skukuza Safari Lodge will be able to accommodate about 250 tourists per night at full capacity.

Meanwhile, in the Golden Gate Highlands National Park, an R83 million Dinosaur Interpretive Centre will add increased tourist appeal by illustrating the rich heritage of the region.

Raftopoulos said SANParks is aware of the socio-economic needs of rural communities in areas surrounding national parks.

"SANParks collaborates with local municipalities, provincial and national government departments to contribute towards the provision of much-needed facilities and services in communities bordering national parks."

Some of these efforts include the establishment of a Social Legacy Fund which supports and invests in the projects that have a high positive impact on communities.

"The fund is generated through the one percent income from bookings made on activities and accommodation in all national parks and five percent income from rhino sales. At present, the fund is used to provide facilities which support education," said Raftopoulos.

Since 2013, the fund has provided 14 science laboratories, four computer labs, a mobile library, an administration block, a kitchen facility and two playgrounds to schools bordering national parks in Mpumalanga, Limpopo, Northern Cape, Free State and the Western Cape. **V**

South African National Parks Week

South African National Parks (SANParks) will be presenting the 14th annual SA National Parks Week from 8 to 15 September 2019. SA National Parks Week grants free access to most of the 21 national parks for day visitors, especially people from the local communities. This is an initiative by SANParks which serves to encourage people to visit national parks and to promote domestic tourism.

Free entry excludes Namaqua National Park and Boulders Penguin Colony and the Table Mountain Cableway in Table Mountain National Park. It should be noted that free access to parks does not include free access to accommodation facilities and other tourist activities. This year SANParks also announced that it has extended SA National Parks Week to include weekends, heeding the request from South Africans who don't have time to visit national parks during the week.