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TOURISM

Bad weather a dampener for visitor numbers at wetland park

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INCLEMENT weather over KwaZulu-Natal has led to a dramatic decline in the number of visitors to the iSimangaliso Wetland Park in 2024.

It's first and second quarter reports for the 2024/25 financial year were presented to the Portfolio Committee on Environment, Forestry and Fisheries in the National Assembly yesterday.

Last week, the committee conducted an oversight visit to the park to inspect the infrastructure upgrades at Charters Creek. It needed to ascertain progress towards the R4-billion commercialisation strategy, designed to drive the park's financial independence and observe the completed and ongoing infrastructure projects.

The committee viewed the park's water reservoir tanks and went on a boat cruise at St Lucia. The upgrades included significant renovations and maintenance. From 2019 to 2024, over R500 million was invested in capital projects, including refurbishing iSimangaliso's headquarters, upgrading the park's road network and fencing (improving visitor access), and constructing and renovating lodging units, resorts, campsites, staff housing, and water infrastructure.

In the report, the number of paying visitor entry annual target was 215 000, and the target for the first quarter was set at 44 300 visitors. However, there were only 34 437 paying visitor entries. The entity's chief financial officer, Qhamkile Mntambo, said the target was not achieved due to the severity of weather conditions in March 2024.

The park's annual revenue target was R27.5m, and the first quarter target was R5.3m. Only R5m was generated.

"Severe weather conditions in March affected the tourism industry in KwaZulu-Natal and damaged infrastructure in the park," Mntambo said.

In the second quarter, 76 568 paying visitor entries were recorded. This brought in R7.1m.

The park reported that more than 300km of park boundary fences were maintained.

Mntambo said investments to attract local and domestic tourists were the construction of Charters Creek Resort's pavilion and entertainment project. The refurbishments of the Field Ranger camps at Nine Mile and Kosi Mouth were also among them.

Mntambo said the refurbishment of the Sodwana Bay Craft Market and maintenance of staff accommodation were in progress.

Another challenge was the Groen Sebenza Internship Programme, where only 78 people were employed. The programme fell under the Expanded Public Works Programme. This programme has been put on hold by the department while awaiting the approval of the Appropriation Bill by the National Treasury in Parliament in July 31, 2024.

Due to a lack of funds, the Anti-poaching and Ranger Services Strategy was not conducted.

Mntambo said a service provider will be appointed to provide a draft strategy and undertake a workshop on the strategy. This included Workplace Skills Plan training interventions. Both could be implemented in the third quarter, depending on the allocation of the budget.

She said an unauthorised land encroachment strategy has been implemented for Mnyayiza illegal plantations near Lake Shengesa Complexities.

"We have an increase of R10.7m as a result of staff accommodation that has been capitalised in the current period and additional furniture for Dredger Harbour Offices," she said.

"The actual park revenue for the first quarter is R4.3m against R6.8m budgeted for. More international visitors are expected due to seasonal changes," she said.

Narendh Singh, Deputy Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, said he was proud of the park's achievements and acknowledged that there were challenges and that they would be addressed.

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