

Focus on the Rhino & Elephant Foundation



Tourists, locals, and rhinos

The Waterberg Conservancy, comprising 10 privately-owned reserves, is an area of some 80 000ha in the Waterberg Mountains of the Northern Province. Here, landowners are actively encouraged to see beyond the desire to simply be involved with wildlife.

The question being most frequently asked by environmentalists is how the conservancy's landowners go about playing a meaningful role in developing ecotourism, linking it to benefits for the local communities. One of the main reasons for this probing question is that less than 30km away people are living in abject despair. Members of the conservancy suggest that it is imperative for the locals to believe in the conservation of their environment, and to take responsibility for it.

Right at the inception of the idea for a conservancy, emphasis was placed on direct involvement as a core issue. Over 200 people are now employed within the conservancy in a range of activities that include reserve management, construction of luxury lodges and tented camps, planning horse-trails and providing guides for hiking and hunting excursions.

Additionally, clinics, shops, housing, schools and low-interest loans have been

offered by the conservancy. With assistance from the Wilderness Trust and a large insurance company, three schools were built with a capacity for educating 100 pupils.

Business partnerships directed at bush-clearing and sustainable harvesting of firewood for the settlement at Mokoreng have prospered. All parties benefit from these ventures; developing reserves for efficient land-use at no cost to owners and providing lucrative employment for locals.

Aside from formal education programmes, the Wilderness Trust operates the Lapalala Wilderness Environmental School which, in conjunction with the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, has recently begun offering courses for teachers from the Northern Province and specific tourism-related tuition to high-school students from the region. With the burgeoning tourism industry in South Africa the Wilderness Trust is convinced that by allowing access for the students to the Conservancy's private reserves and lodges, interest in following careers within tourism will be encouraged.

Discussions are currently underway between the Wilderness Trust, Waterberg

communities and the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism over a joint venture involving a 42-bed self-catering camp within a nearby tribal area which could lead to the development of craft-based industries and vegetable gardens.

Adjacent to this indigenous reserve is a 27 000ha spread of land that has the potential to become a biosphere reserve carrying the Big 5, which would be an ideal opportunity for the private sector and Waterberg community to work together on ecotourism-related projects.

Landowners in the Waterberg Conservancy firmly believe that by forming partnerships and involving the community, a real commitment will ensue that recognises the vital importance of preserving and propagating the so-called flagship species: rhino and elephant.

The holistic view being taken by the Waterberg Conservancy is commendable, attainable and an enormous step forward in the new direction which ecotourism is taking in South Africa.