

84 Researching, attracting and catering for 'non-traditional' visitors in South African National Parks

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Introduction

The South African National Parks (SANParks) is a significant player in ecotourism in Africa with a vision of being a connector between societies. Yet, it has been reliant on a largely homogenous market base of loyal visitors, the majority being Caucasian middle-aged or older. Future sustainability depends on finding a balance between attracting new feasible markets and connecting to younger generations, while retaining current loyal markets. Attracting non-white and younger tourists to national parks should not just represent an opportunity for greater economic stability, "...but should transmit a stronger message that national parks remain – and will always be – a domain for all..." (Butler & Richardson, 2015). Diverse visitor experiences play an essential role in cultivating greater societal support for national parks (Weiler *et al.*, 2013). However, little research is available to inform parks' tourism development and marketing initiatives to attract more diverse tourism markets. With financial barriers removed, what are 'non-traditional' tourists' reasons for not visiting? What are their tourism-related preferences, and how do they perceive a stay in a national park? How can they be persuaded to include a national park visit in their travel choice set?

This presentation provides a synopsis of the results of two research projects commissioned to address these research questions, followed by practical examples of how national parks in South Africa is transforming their tourism and experiential offerings and integrating new insights into marketing initiatives.

Methods

In 2016, a private research consortium conducted twenty focus group discussions with domestic tourists from African, Coloured and Indian populations. The 128 participants, aged between 21 and 55 years, were all in the habit of taking at least one holiday per year, but had never visited a national park before. Discussions were conducted at neutral venues and by trained moderators who matched the

profile of the group participants. Another study, conducted in 2018/19 by the University of Pretoria focused on domestic Millennial travellers from African, Coloured, Indian and White populations. The first phase entailed collecting data through focus group discussions to facilitate in-depth understanding of this cohort's behaviour and decision-making. In the second phase, a sample of 4 600 Millennials living in four major metropolitan areas participated in an online survey. These studies broadly measured the following aspects of 'non-traditional' tourists: current travel behaviour and preferences; awareness and perceptions of national parks in South Africa; and expectations of nature-based tourism experiences.

Results

The results from the 2016 study suggested the overall mandate of SANParks is not clearly understood and that a general lack of awareness exists of the organisation's tourism brand and offerings. Various misperceptions about what a national park experience entails led to some participants not being open to the idea of visiting, indicating they would be reluctant to switch annual holiday destinations as they risk disappointment. However, most were willing to test it on a weekend breakaway basis. The findings further indicated that convenience and comfort were important to this market, and that some segments of the market expected luxurious accommodation where meals are provided or easily accessible. Interestingly, the holiday stokvel group seemed more open to experimenting with new destinations and would be a good platform for raising awareness about SANParks tourism offerings to the broader public. A stokvel travel club uses group buying power to bargain for discounted accommodation and activities while helping individuals save and plan for a holiday.

The 2018/19 Millennial study findings indicate that South African Millennials enjoy various destinations, accommodation types, and activities,

with considerable levels of interest in nature-based activities. Price is a significant influencer of destination choice, and special offers and competitions can be used to persuade them to visit a specific destination. Preferred marketing channels were also identified (Douglas *et al.*, 2019). By showcasing the different experiences and accommodation types available in national parks and coupling this with discounted offers, SANParks could likely attract more Millennials to its destinations.

Discussion

Both studies were highly exploratory but filled an important gap in academic and practitioner understanding of non-visitors to nature-based tourism destinations. The results offer insights into how this market views national parks; reasons for non-visitation and likelihood to visit in future; and preferences and expectations of nature-based tourism destinations. Such understanding improves national parks' ability to attract and cater to new markets, leading to greater societal support (Weiler *et al.*, 2013) and improved financial sustainability, securing the future of national parks.

In recent years, many significant tourism developments have been effected in South Africa's national parks to attract and cater to the 'non-traditional' tourist. These include outsourcing several camp restaurants to well-known franchises;

introducing spa's; and installing Muslim prayer facilities and ablutions. One of the most significant developments is a 128-bed hotel in the Kruger National Park offering various facilities that enhance guests' comfort and convenience. SANParks' digital marketing messages abound with photos of young people from different races enjoying adventure activities in various parks. Specials are offered regularly for off-peak visitation, and the 2020 Black Friday sale received considerable uptake. The latest initiative is a stokvel and travel club offer with special payment terms and discounted rates for accommodation in selected parks. SANParks recently launched a reality TV series in 2021 to expose African viewers and participants to its parks. Lastly, throughout parks, interpretation sites and material are reviewed and enhanced to include more culturally inclusive messages.

The diversification of visitor demographics in South African national parks is happening steadily but slowly. Opportunities for future research include more in-depth studies measuring the efficacy of brand improvement initiatives; gaps between 'non-traditional' tourists' expectations and experiences, and resultant return rates and loyalty towards national parks.

References

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