

Educational needs of South African national parks' tour guides

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Introduction

Parks under the authority of South African National Parks (SANParks) are distributed across many South African provinces. SANParks constitute almost 62% of South Africa's formal protected areas (Castley et al., 2009: 403). The Protected areas, including national parks are one of the major attractions to tourists visiting South Africa (Saayman and Saayman 2010). In 2008/2009 for example, 4, 374 739 people visited South Africa's national parks (SANParks) protected areas which resulted in the generation of ZAR 664.14 million in revenues (Strickland-Munro, Moore and Freitag-Ronaldson, 2010: 664). Tourism in SANParks provides nature-based tourism. Communication competency is essential for the interaction of guides and tourists in nature-based tourism in national parks in particular because it enables tour guides to fulfil the purpose of persuasion, education, resource protection strategies and entertainment (Goh, 2008; Hu, 2007).

The South African Tourist Guide Bill stipulates that people are allowed to use indigenous knowledge rather than formal education as the basis for becoming a tour guide and any gaps in professional knowledge should be filled by access to training opportunities (Spenceley, 2003). This is based on the recognition that under apartheid regime many black South Africans were denied access to formal, accredited training, and that development and training opportunities should be availed to them to gain competencies and experience.

Literature has shown that guides in protected areas lack the professional communication skills which enhance the conveying of scientific messages in a simple and interesting way that matches the educational and interest level of visitors (Carbone, 2006). In South Africa, tour guides join the industry from diverse educational backgrounds and this has resulted in a concern that guides in South African protected areas need to improve their communication skills (Paton, 2007). This raises concern on the educational background and guiding competencies of tour guides in South Africa. The aim of the study therefore was to identify SANParks' guides' continuing education and training needs.

Interpretation and tourist satisfaction

It is generally accepted that interpretation is concerned with providing information to tourists in an educative, stimulating and entertaining manner about the places they visit, in order to promote the economic development, environmental quality and conservation and socio-cultural sustenance of such places (Moscardo, 2000; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006; Powell & Han, 2008;). In SANParks one of the key tourism objectives is to develop and grow a sustainable nature-based tourism business (SANParks, 2008:13).

The role of tour guides in enhancing interpretation has been of interest to researchers for a long time (Ham and Weiler, 2005; Ballantyne & Hughes, 2001; Cohen, 1985). Training is an effective mechanism for enhancing a wide range of guides' roles to ensure professionalism and competence (Hu, 2007:45). In the past, the standard training format was "front-end loaded" meaning that people were trained at the beginning of their working lives for a particular job and rarely received any further training. Nowadays education is recognised as a continuous process which equips employees with skills in a dynamic work environment (Eagles et al., 2002). It is therefore important to determine the type of skills needed for interpretation in order to cater for relevant interpretive training as well as continuing education and training (Chou et al., 2002).

Research method

This was a descriptive study which used a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Five telephonic interviews and one direct interview with six park officials were held. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants of the study. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and categorised into themes.

A survey of SANParks' tour guides was also undertaken. Twelve of the 24 SANParks provide interpretive guiding activities. Six parks which offer interpretive guiding were selected (see Figure 1). A convenience sampling was used to identify respondents. 98 questionnaires were distributed to tour guides, and 46 were completed and returned representing 47% response rate. SPSS version 18.0 was used to analyse data. Descriptive statistics were used to present data.

Results

Qualitative data

Most SANParks tour guides were qualified. SANParks also run in-house training for unqualified tour guides. Interviewees identified areas where tour guides needed further training to include research skills, communication with the visitors especially in other languages other than English, legislative requirements and general knowledge of the tourism industry.

Survey results

SANParks tour guides were mainly black South Africans who had acquired academic qualifications and substantial guiding experience. The majority of guides (65.5%) had also received formal training in interpretation accredited by the South African accreditation body (THETA). SANParks also hired tour guides who had no formal guide training.

The majority of the tour guides (50% emphasised custo-

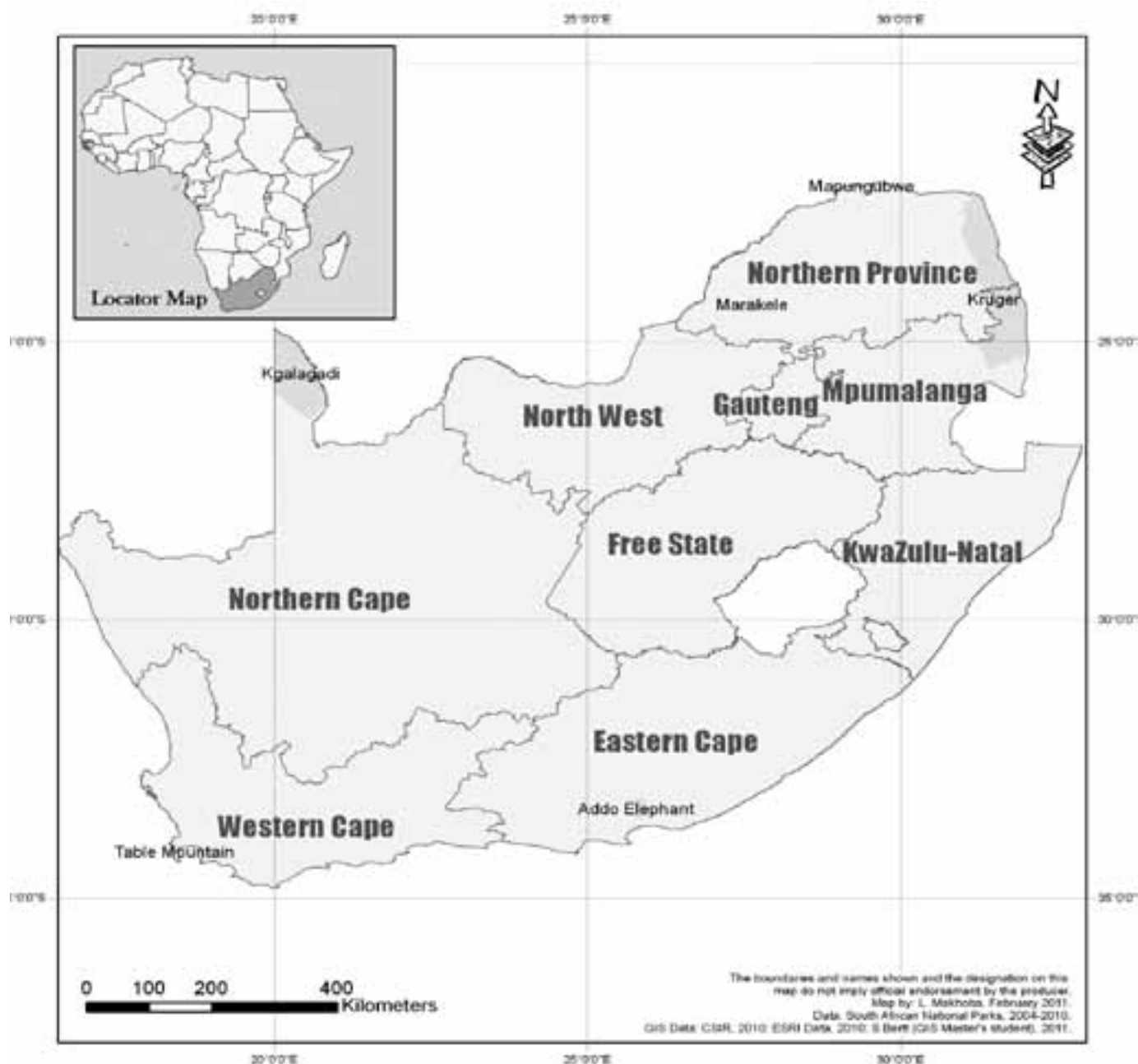


Figure 1. Map showing the six selected national parks (Source: SANParks 2008)

mer, followed by guiding (23.0%), and nature conservation (19.6%) as priority areas for training. Unlike the park officers tour guides ranked communication very low (N=3, 6.5%). Language was also not mentioned.

Conclusions

There is recognition of the need for continuing education and training for tour guides in SANParks. This is in line with the literature where continuous education and training is emphasised as a way of keeping abreast with developments in the field (Pereira, 2009). The study also confirms that the right sort of training prepares guides to satisfy customers' basic needs and influence behavioural change (Mason & Christie, 2003). Other training gaps identified in this study included accurately understanding the sites,

hence the need for nature conservation training (Yamada, 2011:148).

The study makes significant contribution to published research on interpretation. The study shows indigenous knowledge system can enhance interpretation if complimented by on-the-job training. Indigenous knowledge system is an area that has been underplayed in guides further education and training. In a number of cases local people have developed valuable indigenous knowledge systems most of which is undocumented. Involvement of such indigenous people in the on-the-job training of tour guides can help transfer such knowledge to younger generations.