

## **Wildlife reserves: sanctuaries, commons or commodities?**

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### **Abstract**

Nature does not know itself as nature. We perceive it as such. And in that perception we project our images of nature. Such images are social constructs that vary in time and between cultures: nature as the enemy, nature as a resource, nature as an uncorrupted domain.....

In western society, nature conservation emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the aftermath of the Romantic period. In those days, wildlife reserves constituted primarily sanctuaries of hallowed ground of interest primarily to the happy few: the economically privileged and the scientific community.

From the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, with increasing mobility and leisure time, wildlife reserves started to serve a recreational function for the general public. For decades, however, the management of these 'commons' remained the responsibility of the professionals: the scientists and the conservation organisations.

Since the '90s of the last century, nature reserves are increasingly seen as a commodity which needs to serve the varied and changeable needs of society. This creates a dilemma for the wildlife manager: he is constantly torn between a role as a guardian of a heritage which needs a certain constancy in management and a role as a public servant whose survival is dependant on the satisfaction of the needs of an 'electorate'. His understanding of wildlife management is no longer his professional legitimization. He now needs to balance nature's requirements with the requirements of a myriad of user groups. He needs to understand and to anticipate the social constructs in a post-modern and multicultural society and constantly needs to ask himself whether to follow suit or to try and influence these constructs and in the latter case: how to do this?