



Conservation NGOs welcome the reopening of Intra-Provincial Nature-based Tourism in the No Touch Economy

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The COVID-19 global pandemic has affected almost every aspect of life as we know it. In South Africa alone, the economic effects are devastating with the GDP expected to decline by between 8% and 10% in 2020. Job losses are estimated at over a million and more than 160 000 businesses are expected to close their doors. Under Lockdown Level 3, many sectors have been allowed to trade or operate to some degree, which may have salvaged some businesses and prevented the further loss of jobs. However, the tourism and leisure sectors have remained closed for months, impacting on thousands of jobs and with concomitant impacts on the fiscus and the wellbeing of millions of South Africans.

Despite concerns over job losses in major South African industries in recent years, the tourism sector has demonstrated resilience and, in 2017, the sector created 31 752 new jobs which was the most number of net new jobs generated by tourism within a year in at least the previous eight years.

There were 705 871 persons (or 4.5% of total employment) directly engaged in producing goods and services purchased by visitors in 2016, 681 619 persons (or 4.2% of total employment) in 2017 and 739 657 (or 4.5% of total employment) in 2018 (*Tourism Satellite Account for South Africa, final 2016 and provisional 2017 and 2018/ Statistics South Africa*). Over 60% of employed people in the sector are women (mostly in the areas of catering and accommodation) with a younger mean average age than all other sectors. Furthermore, data published by Stats SA in 2018 show that one in every 22 working South Africans and more than 2 892 303 people are employed in the tourism sector.

Nature-based tourism refers to all forms of tourism where relatively undisturbed natural environments form the primary attraction or setting. The wildlife- and nature-based tourism sectors specifically support a wide number of associated industries and sectors, such as the conservation sector, through income generation for park management, wildlife protection, anti-poaching and to some degree border control through the management of human movement in transfrontier parks. For years, national and provincial conservation agencies have been generating significant revenue through nature-based tourism that contributes substantially to conservation management.

Game reserves in South Africa also generate significant benefits to the surrounding communities who contribute to goods and services consumed by visitors. In the absence of economic activity in these parks, there is increased risk of poaching, illegal resource extraction and park invasion. Years of

engaging communities to share in the benefits arising from conservation and nature-based tourism equitably will be undone if our protected areas lose their economic value to the communities who depend on them, and should illegal resource use become their only means of survival. It must be noted that many people employed in the nature-based tourism sector are unskilled/semi-skilled and are usually breadwinners in their families. Reopening local tourism may not contribute to securing employment for many, and to securing livelihoods in the most vulnerable households and regions.

SANParks, as the custodian of approximately 70% of South Africa's state-owned protected area network, derives 80% of its income from nature-based tourism activities. A significant component of this revenue funds park management, anti-poaching, management of marine protected areas, ranger patrol and protection services including the aircraft and associated rhino security technologies as well as management of wildlife. There are many community-owned reserves that generate income for clinics, schools, community recreation facilities as well many jobs linked to goods and services associated with these reserves, including catering and accommodation. Several of these community-owned reserves are linked to national and provincial parks and benefit from visitors to parks or their own concessionaire managed lodges. Nature-based tourism is also a major outlet for people who have been confined in urban areas. Many studies have shown the close link between human wellbeing and nature-based tourism. Approximately 70% of visitors to our national parks are local tourists and thus the tourism sector can continue to support thousands of livelihoods even before our borders reopen. The consequences of any extended lockdown for the wildlife and nature-based tourism sector, and by extension to the entire tourism industry, will be dire and potentially devastating as a result of:

1. Significant job losses (in particular for those with a low skill base and less likelihood of finding alternative employment);
2. revenue losses for the park agencies, communities, NGOs, conservation authorities and government (through taxes);
3. eroded protection of South Africa's biodiversity and protected areas;
4. eroded infrastructure (fences, road networks, camp maintenance, etc.);
5. an increase in poaching, wildlife crime and illicit wildlife trade;
6. reduced benefits to communities whose land has been returned to them in the land restitution process;
7. over-reliance on the unsustainable use of natural resources by rural communities;
8. potential negative sentiment towards the protected area network should communities lose all the benefits derived from them; and
9. reduced income for conservation NGOs who play a significant role in biodiversity conservation and community conservation in South Africa and are major employers in the sector.

The conservation NGOs listed below, therefore welcome the announcement today by the Minister for Tourism that intra-provincial leisure travel may soon open up, under strict conditions, to ease the economic impact of COVID-19.

The NGOs fully support the introduction of **intra-provincial** nature-based tourism into the economic recovery under strong conditions and SOPs. This is based on our belief that:

1. **Intra-provincial tourism** can immediately be opened up, allowing for overnight stays, without incurring the risks associated with national or international travel. The tourism sector has committed to implementing stringent sanitizing and social distancing / low density measures.
2. Standard Operating Procedures have been developed for game reserves and parks that determine how many people can travel on an open game viewer, or which support self-driving; which limit

the number of patrons in restaurants, or change restaurant models to supply braai packs and take outs in parks; how reception areas and visitor centres are managed; and so on.

3. Guests can participate in almost all nature-based tourism activities in semi-isolation and applying physical distancing principles.
4. Guests can limit visits to the parks and reserves within their own provinces and limited numbers can be accommodated at any given time.
5. Wildlife and nature-based tourism offers guests the chance to self-drive or go on game drives in open air vehicles with reduced numbers of guests or family members only.
6. Adventure tourism offers guests the opportunity to undertake outdoor activities such as hiking, trail running, mountain biking, canoeing / paddling, birdwatching and more, in semi-isolation states and with expert guides, thus reducing social interactions and in low numbers.

The NGOs signed below believe that nature-based tourism not only offers guests the opportunities to have enjoyable, safe and healthy leisure time, but is one of the few sectors that stands to revitalise our economy and bring much needed income back into South African households in the short term.

Allowing an early, phased and safe reopening of the local Nature-based Tourism sector offers the opportunity to increase the economic, mental and physical wellbeing of millions of people and sustain the conservation of South Africa's natural resources for future generations.

The NGOs welcome the phased reopening of the **local nature-based tourism sector** and encourage South Africans to support their local nature-based tourism enterprises in the new No Touch Economy.

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