

Tourism's potential to fly south africa, clipped by greed



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Upon arrival in the St Lucia-Hluhluwe area (a prime tourism district) for research, I was certain that the beauty of the area had to be shared with family. I started mapping up the possibility of a future family trip back into this area; the accommodation, the feeding arrangements, and other activities offered by the tourist district. Just the basics added up to scaring figures, too big for my working class pocket - and certainly a fortune not any other working class and ordinary South African.

I was saddened to realize that tourism (as an intangible consumption) will for a long time remain a luxury, for which, the common man and woman is deliberately priced out (sounds like a conspiracy?) - for greed and I am not sure what else. Firstly, are the exorbitant prices called for by the operators in the tourist district really called for? Is this the best way to run and grow the tourism industry?

All the talk about the tourism industry being an economic sector that could spearhead rural development and reduce poverty in under-privileged communities will remain just that - a talk, until such a time when the pricing issue is resolved. As it stands, South Africa's tourism industry has it all wrong, suffocating its own potential for growth through the greed of a few operators. The pricing regimes of the prime tourism district are obviously meant for the international tourist coming from countries that enjoy a higher currency exchange rate.

The logic is to make a killer out of these visitors. In due course, local tourism is highly inhibited and discouraged. It is also very likely that the lower earners from the targeted countries are also denied entry into these high

price zones. By so doing, the tourist district creates a muzzle on its potential to grow. It is like clipping a bird's wings for it to fly faster. It is a pity that this kind of logic holds the tourist industry hostage to the whims of a few profiteering individuals and agencies. There is power in numbers.

The thousands if not millions of potential tourists who will not visit would calculate to much more profit, more jobs created, and even initiate the growth, vertically and horizontally of other sectors of the economies of the tourist district. At the moment, as a result of restrained demand - the potential for huge demand that necessitates local industrialization and a construction boom as well as expanding the service industry is limited. There are very few visitors, and more so, the numbers fluctuate seasonally.

All talks about developing a culture of touring among local people will remain but a pipe dream if the attitude of operators does not change. One operator tried to explain the logic to me; " lets face it, it is better to deal with smaller groups of people who pay good money and act in a civilized manner than groups of low paying, over-excited bunches who end up fighting and breaking property. As racist as it may sound, my experience with local black visitors - especially those coming in groups have been very rough.

When they go - a lot of things must be prepared. " I sympathise but obviously I am not convinced, as this behaviour might be a way of resistance. Probably it is too much to expect that the operators will regulate themselves and reform - the intervention of relevant authorities is therefore called for. The Consumer Council might need to investigate these issues.

Besides the denied access to the tourist district, the poor workers and

traders trying to earn a living in these areas suffer daily from these chronically high prices.

It is actually a blight - that should be remedied, otherwise these ridiculous pricing regimes hold the economy at ransom. Any item from a tooth pick, to whatever is sold gets infected with high prices when it enters this area. Poor people who earn very little to shield the profit margins of operators have to suffer financial erosion from this cancerous pricing regime. The alternative for the poor people trying make a living in this district is to take taxi rides to close towns such as Mtubatuba and Richards Bay, themselves not the cheapest around.

More money and time is spent on traveling to buy what one could buy in their own backyard. These people will never taste the cuisines that harass their nose and the children of these people will only but gaze at the children of the privileged riding in cycle tracks, enjoying boat rides and so forth. They are treated to the air, sound and environmental pollution from these activities. There is not need to restrain myself from pointing out that the riding children are white, and those pumping in the dirty dust are black kids.

It is a pity that the Black Economic Empowerment train is eluding many black people in the communities in these areas. Black people's involvement is still in the very margins of the industry, even the high sounding Protected Areas Act and Biodiversity Act, as well as the Integrated Management Plan recently promulgated to balance conservation and poverty reduction, will remain a pipe dream if black communities are not put in the mainstream.

The so-called community involvement in the sector is in the areas of cultural or ethnic tourism, as well as trekking. Really, the money in the tourism business is not in performing Zulu dancing and story telling. Where the money is in the cottage or accommodation provision, safari tourism, wildlife tourism, of this sector, I did not see any convincing community or individual black entrepreneur's involvement.