

A-GRADE ecotourism

A healthy ecotourism sector is vital if we are to slow the rate of habitat degradation, says **Ian Michler** - and highlights a project that sorts the wheat from the chaff in the industry.

SIMPLY PUT, HABITAT DESTRUCTION occurs when functioning natural habitats or ecosystems are degraded to the extent that they can no longer support the biodiversity present. And as we know so well, various forms of human activity - agriculture, fishing, logging, mining and urban development being the principal ones - are the primary drivers of degradation. Taken over the past century and more, our record of degradation far outstrips that of conservation.

To counter the loss of habitats, the focus of global conservation initiatives is to establish Protected Areas (PAs), which encompass any category of land given some form of official protection. It's not the complete answer, as many PAs do not yet incorporate migration corridors and vital seasonal ranges. Nevertheless, the past decade has seen some success in terms of slowing the pace of destruction. According to the Protected Planet Report 2012, PAs have increased in number by 58 per cent and in their extent by 48 per cent since 1990, and there are now more than 177 000 nationally protected areas around the world.

So yes, this is good news. But in seeking reassurance let's not forget that in today's world, despite a designation that defines vastly different aims and objectives, PAs are still expected to compete with extractive activities and, what's more, under the same economic parameters.

This is an incongruity that is difficult to fathom, especially when it is one of the reasons why we still fail in our conservation efforts. Nonetheless, until such time as our thinking changes, a well-managed ecotourism industry - whether administered by government agencies, the private sector, communities or partnerships - is the central component in ensuring the success of PAs. To make it effective is an enormous task - and one that places significant levels of responsibility

on those involved, including the ecotourist who chooses to visit an establishment within a PA.

Given this scenario, the question then is: how well is the ecotourism industry doing in Africa? Colin Bell, an original founder of two of Africa's most highly regarded ecotourism operators, Wilderness Safaris and The Great Plains Company, believes that, at best, the record is mixed. 'The principal mandate of Africa's ecotourism industry should be to ensure that all tourism businesses operate within a framework that guarantees the long-term survival of Africa's wildlife and wilderness areas. And in some cases, outstanding efforts are being made. There are a number of innovative companies and individuals who are doing stellar work out there,' he says.

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But Bell also believes that much of what takes place needs to be reviewed, since the actions of many are undermining the long-term sustainability of the sector. 'Wildlife numbers throughout Africa are plummeting in spite of tourism being in its golden years,' he warns. 'Current practices and policies are simply not working and the industry needs a radical and complete overhaul. There are too many eco-pirates, money launderers and green-washers who talk the talk but are only in the business for what it can bring them financially and for the lifestyle. Many of these companies are contributing directly to the polluting, even the destruction, of the very resources on which ecotourism depends.'

For these reasons, Bell and co-author David Bristow teamed up with a host of contributors to produce *Africa's Finest*, a book spawned

Africa's Finest is a timeless and comprehensive assessment of the ecotourism industry in Africa.

from the first in-depth assessment of the most responsible and sustainable safari destinations in sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian Ocean islands. For anyone who has experienced the design excesses and wasteful practices of many so-called top lodges and hotels; the complete lack of etiquette or concern for animals' welfare on game drives in many national parks and reserves; and the failure of or disregard for community outreach, this project is timeless. It is also both bold and necessary, offering a comprehensive analysis of a large number of safari establishments by looking at every aspect of their operation, including their activity, community and environmental programmes. I cannot see why it should not become an integral part of forging a best-practice model across the continent.

For ecotourists who want to make their contribution, Bell has some sound advice. 'We are now at the critical high-road or low-road junction... Shortcomings will only be fixed when tourists and tour agents support only the good operators, resulting in declining occupancies for the pirate businesses. Nothing focuses a lodge owner's attention more acutely than a diminishing market share and empty beds!'

And ecotourism operators who haven't made it into the first edition of *Africa's Finest* needn't despair; the project is a work in progress and there will be future compilations. You can go to www.africasfinest.co.za to nominate properties or conservation agencies for a listing or to share your experiences. 

