

Grassroots leaders

Bulungula: how tourism drives rural development

He is a BBusSci graduate from the University of Cape Town; she is one of South Africa's top economists. Therefore Dave Martin and Réjane Woodroffe could have lived a cushy lifestyle in Houghton, Constantia, or any other posh suburb. They decided differently. Their home is Nqileni, a tiny village in the Eastern Cape. While she attends to the world of international business via satellite phone and laptop, he manages Bulungula Lodge – one of South Africa's prime examples of how tourism can be used as a vehicle for rural development.

Elliotdale is a region of extremes. On the one hand, this Eastern Cape district – with its rugged coastlines, rondavel-dotted hills and silvery beaches – is spectacularly beautiful. The scenic splendour's flip side, however, is the daily lives of its people. Most South Africans living in Elliotdale are simply too busy surviving to notice the natural beauty of their surroundings.

Here, poverty is rife and joblessness rates vary from 65% to 87%. Most residents of Elliotdale, in order to make ends meet, rely heavily on subsistence farming and government grants.

In addition, accessing basic and specialised healthcare, schools and other services is a chronic struggle – with taps and clean drinking water being an absolute luxury.

The latter has severe health consequences: Due to the lack of sanitary facilities, many streams and surface water sources are contaminated with human waste. As a result, diarrhoea and other preventable water-related diseases

are rife, and a common cause of death among babies and young children.

Infrastructure is another problem. In this part of South Africa, roads are often in terrible shape and overrun with tree-wide dongas.

Therefore, getting from A to B – for instance, from home to the hospital or school – is a difficult if not impossible task.

In Nqileni, a tiny speck on the Wild Coast, the situation is better. Although the majority of the approximately 850 inhabitants live below the poverty line of \$1.25 a day, it is the preschool, a primary school, and particularly the clinic that make a difference.

Before the small medical facility opened its doors a few years ago, residents had no option but to walk two and a half hours to the nearest clinic for pains, aches, antiretrovirals and other health concerns.

The facilities and services mentioned above are not part of a governmental rural development strategy. They are private initiatives and the brainchild of Martin and his wife, Réjane – both in their 30s.

“We also provide ambulance rides to the Madwaleni Hospital,” says Martin, who started Bulungula Lodge in 2004 with no prior experience in tourism. “The drive takes approximately one hour and a half in a 4x4 vehicle, depending on the road.

“Our rides are vitally important to locals who are in need of medical care. Over the past years, I have driven various pregnant women and mothers with sick babies to the hospital.”

Apart from basic and much-needed services, Bulungula is the region's main source of sustainable work opportunities. The overall

When it comes to rural development, the government could do more, Martin says. “Now there is even a plan of opening shopping malls in rural areas. That not rural development – that is retail development and will not work: you need high population density to make a mall profitable. A thousand people living in an area of 20 square kilometres, of which half are children, is not enough. A mall won't work here as people don't earn enough to shop.”

“Rural development is about not turning villages into cities but about improving agriculture, stimulating local micro-enterprises and basic services. Tourism, if practiced well, can realise this.”

majority of the lodge's employees, a little more than a dozen people, are from the village.

“They work in the kitchen, behind the bar, as cleaning staff, and are otherwise responsible to attend to guests' needs,” Martin explains.

“Because 40% of the lodge is owned by the community, nothing is done without their consent. This includes making decisions with regard to who works at the lodge. I have no say in who gets hired. This has been our strategy from the start and is to ensure that the benefits are spread among the community members, instead of going to a few families.”

Not only does Bulungula provide steady jobs, the lodge also serves as a platform for entrepreneurial villagers who would like to explore the world of tourism.

"The activities and tours we offer are run and 100% owned by community members from Nqileni," says Martin, who takes a monthly salary of approximately R2 500. The rest is spent on the lodge, the community and various projects, such as the clinic and the preschool.

"The activities include horse riding, fishing, canoeing, hiking trails, village walks, and visits to a local sangoma. In addition, we have trained two women as masseuses.

"The activities are 100% community-owned, which means that Bulungula does not take any of the fees. The only thing we do, is give locals the opportunity to earn a living and help them improve their business," he adds.

Staff members included, Bulungula provides an income to 30 to 40 households, Martin estimates. "You should take into consideration that one person here supports on average between eight to 10 people."

This number excludes people who benefit from various job-creation projects such as a small-scale eatery in the village, the people who provide the vegetables used in the lodge's kitchen, and a lemon grass farm. "We decided to embark on this project this year. Lemon grass is a labour-intensive crop, for which there seems to be a great demand. So this is another way we try to contribute to poverty alleviation in the area," Martin explains.

A couple of years ago, 27-year-old Khululwa took the bull by the horns and started her own tourism micro-business.

Since then, she has been taking groups of holidaymakers over the hills, across valleys and through the village while giving them an idea of how women in this part of South Africa spend

their days. With the money she earns with her Woman Power Tours – R70 per person – she supports herself, her siblings and their children, and her parents.

Her half-day tour includes activities such as collecting wood, fetching water from a nearby spring, making mud bricks, building a fire, grinding dried mielie kernels by hand, and preparing lunch – which the tourists share with Khululwa and her family.

To Khululwa, the tours are not a pastime because she has nothing better to do. Like most people, she has no high-school diploma.

Even if she had one, jobs in this part of the country are as scarce as clean drinking water.

Khululwa could have been married, she explains, but that is something she refuses for now. "I like to earn my own money and I do not want to rely on a man. Well, not a man from this village," she clarifies while wrapping a scarf around the head of one of her guests. The procedure makes it easier for him to carry water on his head and to stabilise the wood he will be carrying afterward.

"Most men from here are lazy. It is women who are in charge of raising the children, working the land, fetching firewood and water, repairing the home, making mud bricks, and preparing lunch and dinner. Men just sit around. I do not want that. I want a man who wants to work with me, side by side – someone who sees me as his equal. That is why I am not married yet," she says.

"I don't think I ever will. I do not have the money to leave."

Poverty has been the defining force behind Bulungula's set-up. The lodge comprises a main building with a lounge, communal kitchen and bar, and a dozen thatched rondavels as guest rooms. Equipped with single wooden beds, blankets, candles and an energy-saving light bulb dangling from the ceiling, accommodation

is basic but comfortable. The same counts for the rest of the lodge: there is no room service, no sauna, no plasma televisions, and no turn-downs with chocolates.

The mosaicked bathrooms, toilets and kitchen are shared with other guests and staff.

Says Martin: "We wanted to integrate the lodge into the village without imposing and changing the community. Of course, we could have built a luxury lodge for people driving flashy cars, but we did not want locals to feel inferior to our guests, who are obviously richer than they are.

"That is why our visitors stay in the same type of huts and eat the same food, for instance," adds Martin who, like his wife, is fluent in Xhosa. "Due to this approach, locals from the village like to hang out at the lodge's bar and communal areas.

"They simply feel comfortable to do so. And it works – for both our guests and residents."

The environmentally friendly nature of the lodge is another reason Bulungula – one of the first Fair Trade Tourism of South Africa accredited businesses – has been rated as one of the country's most ethical travel experiences.

"We get our electricity from the wind and the sun. The rain is collected in big drums and used for drinking water. We do not have a sewage system, as we use composting toilets," Martin notes.

The lodge is renowned for its showers. The so-called "rocket showers", of which the name is derived from their shape and roaring sound, comprise a long, vertical pipe with a shower head.

The bottom features a small cavity and reservoir at the bottom, which prior to showering should be filled with paraffin. A piece of toilet paper serves as the fuse. After lighting the fuse, the tap should be opened and voilà: warm water.

"A hot shower session lasts eight minutes," Martin says. "It saves water, as it prevents people from showering for hours on end."

Asking Martin about the differences the lodge has made to the community, apart from providing jobs, he replies: "For a period of six years people, relatively rich people I must add, from all over the world have been coming here, telling locals how beautiful the area is and that they live in paradise. This has changed local perception of this place. They have become prouder of where they live. That is important. Another thing: we have had no single baby dying of dirty water in years." ▲

Miriam Mannak

The Eastern Cape Education Department has cancelled all school feeding schemes for the remainder of this financial year. This is a devastating blow to children who depend on this one daily meal, which serves as an inducement to attend school.

In addition, the department has cancelled all temporary teachers' posts. Bulungula's 240 pupils in seven grades therefore lose two of their eight teachers.

The lodge is determined to continue feeding its pupils and is in need of financial assistance. For more information, contact Réjane Woodroffe: rejane@bulungulaincubator.org.