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The Roles of Interpretation in the Management of National Parks in South Africa

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Abstract

National parks and protected areas are under dichotomy of pressures. On the one hand, they are faced with increasing economic burdens to become independent from state and donor grants, and on the other hand, they need to fulfill their mandate of conserving the environment for future generations. The South African National Parks (SANParks) is no different. Operating costs for managing 19 national parks are roughly 1 billion rand and requires management to generate 80% thereof in order to meet their primary mandate, i.e., conservation. The question thus arises how to balance these important yet opposing priorities. Interpretation is mooted as a possible solution to strive toward this balance. Through interpretation knowledge is instilled in visitors, attitudes and behaviors are changed, and tourists are encouraged to take care of the national parks and to become more responsible citizens. Added to this, interpretation services add to the visitors' enjoyment, create loyalty, extend stays, and increase expenditure and revenue for the park. Interpretation is therefore no longer seen as a 'luxury' but an essential management function of national parks worldwide and this is also the case in SANParks. This chapter reviews recent developments relating to the renewal or redevelopment of interpretation programs within SANParks.

Keywords: interpretation, Kruger National Park, Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, Addo Elephant National Park, responsible tourism

1. Introduction

Internationally, governments are under tremendous pressure to balance social, economic and environmental expenditure this often results in national parks and conservation areas to often receiving reduced government allocations and subsidies. National parks are under extensive financial pressure to become self-sustaining in terms of their operational expenditure. Tourism is seen as an important means to bolster revenue generation within national parks and conservation

areas in an attempted to achieve long-term economic sustainability [1]. Incredible increases in tourist visitation to natural and cultural protected areas has been observed and in fact encouraged. This increase has created the notion of tourists 'loving national parks to death' and if not managed carefully tourism is in danger of becoming a self-destructive process leading to the destruction of the resources upon which it is based. As far back as 1992 the World Tourism Organization (WTO), realized that growing tourism numbers would become an important problem that conservation areas would need to cope with [2]. Park managers are becoming concerned about increased visitation to fragile conservation areas and national parks as they may severely affect the natural and cultural heritage [3]. Interpretation is proposed as an important solution to mitigate some of the undesirable consequences of tourism in national parks [4, 5]. Not only does interpretation potentially reduce the environmental and social impacts associated with high-levels of tourism it also leads to more satisfied visitors, increase knowledge gains and pro-environmental attitudes and behavior amongst tourists [6–10]. A study conducted in the Canyonlands National Park (Utah) found that interpretation foster intellectual, emotional and stewardship connections [11]. Interpretation may be seen as a form of entertainment or enlightenment that encourages visitors to visit a site, to stay for longer or even to return to a site multiple times [12]. Moreover, interpretation services (depending on their quality) directly affect the psychological experience of visitors. An even more astounding result is the fact that interpretation seemed to have a net positive impact on satisfaction whereas other facilities and infrastructure can only break even or even lead to dissatisfaction [13].

Interpretation has been defined by various authors, however the most widely accepted definition of interpretation is that of Tilden often considered to be the father of interpretation, as 'an educational activity which aims to reveal meaning and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information' [14]. Tilden's definition emphasizes that interpretation is about communicating meaning and relationships rather than just the transfer of scientific facts. Since Tilden's definition of interpretation, various organizations have embraced their own understanding and definition of interpretation. There is, however, consensus that interpretation is a process of communicating the significance of a place so that visitors will enjoy it more, understand its importance and develop a positive attitude toward conservation. Many national parks historically focused on environmental education over interpretation this is specifically the case in South Africa. Environmental education generally focusses on formalized learning and environmental awareness creation amongst primarily scholars [15]. Interpretation however is aimed at providing visitors first-hand enlightening experiences that lead toward greater understanding, appreciation and protection of park while contributing to greater visitor satisfaction and fulfilled expectations.

Interpretation can be both a program and an activity. 'As a program, it establishes a set of objectives for the things a visitor should understand, and as an activity, it requires skills and techniques to create understanding' [8]. Two types of interpretation exist guided and non-guided or otherwise stated, attended or unattended interpretation [14, 16]. Guided interpretation included guided walks, lectures, discussions and living interpretation, while non-guided interpretation includes self, guided trails, signboards, displays, exhibits and visitor centers.

High quality interpretation has been found to greatly enhance visitor's enjoyment and experience of national parks (experiential outcomes), leading to satisfied visitors returning and

recommending national parks to other potential visitors (economic outcomes) and can enhance understanding and lead to pro-conservation behavior (environmental outcome) [17]. Strong criticism of many interpretation programs has been raised indicating that interpretation programs have predominantly western Eurocentric approach and focus primarily on ecological aspects [18]. Greater sensitivity to culture, a wider range of historical western and nonwestern contexts as well as a focus on sociocultural and ecological heritage in interpretation programs has been proposed [18]. While the basic principles of interpretation are applicable to most circumstances and setting, the cultural appropriateness and inclusivity of interpretation needs to be considered in the implementation of interpretation initiatives.

Interpretation is seen as an important link between the conservation and tourism priorities of national parks (**Figure 1**). Based on the numerous examples provided earlier, this link can be explained as follows: the most important aim of national parks is to conserve the natural and cultural heritage. Interpretation helps the tourists to learn about the park's conservation efforts and in turn creates pro-conservation behavior. The other part of the link is that interpretation satisfies the visitor's need to learn through various innovative mediums and enhances the visit to the park.

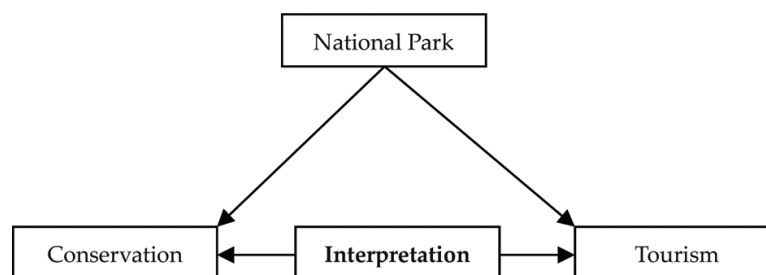


Figure 1. Interpretations link between the tourism and conservation functions of a national park [19].

2. Interpretation and South African national parks

Within South Africa, national parks, along with (special) nature reserves and protected environments fall within the scope of the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act (NEM:PAA) (no. 57 of 2003) [20] since these protected areas are organs of state. The South African National Parks Board (SANParks) which is a public entity under the jurisdiction of the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) manages national parks. In total, SANParks manages 19 national parks within seven of the nine provinces of South Africa (**Figure 2**). This totals to over 4 million hectares or 67% of protected areas under state management [21].

Due to declining state funding, SANParks is primarily a self-funding entity that has three operational core pillars, namely, conservation, responsible tourism, and socio-economic development [21]. It costs approximately 1 billion rand (i.e., approximately 60 million euros) to run these parks of which 80% of these funds are self-generated through primarily tourism activities offered in the national parks [22]. If the 14% increase in tourist numbers over the 2016/2017 financial year [23] is any indication to go by the need for sustainable practices is desperately needed for the future.

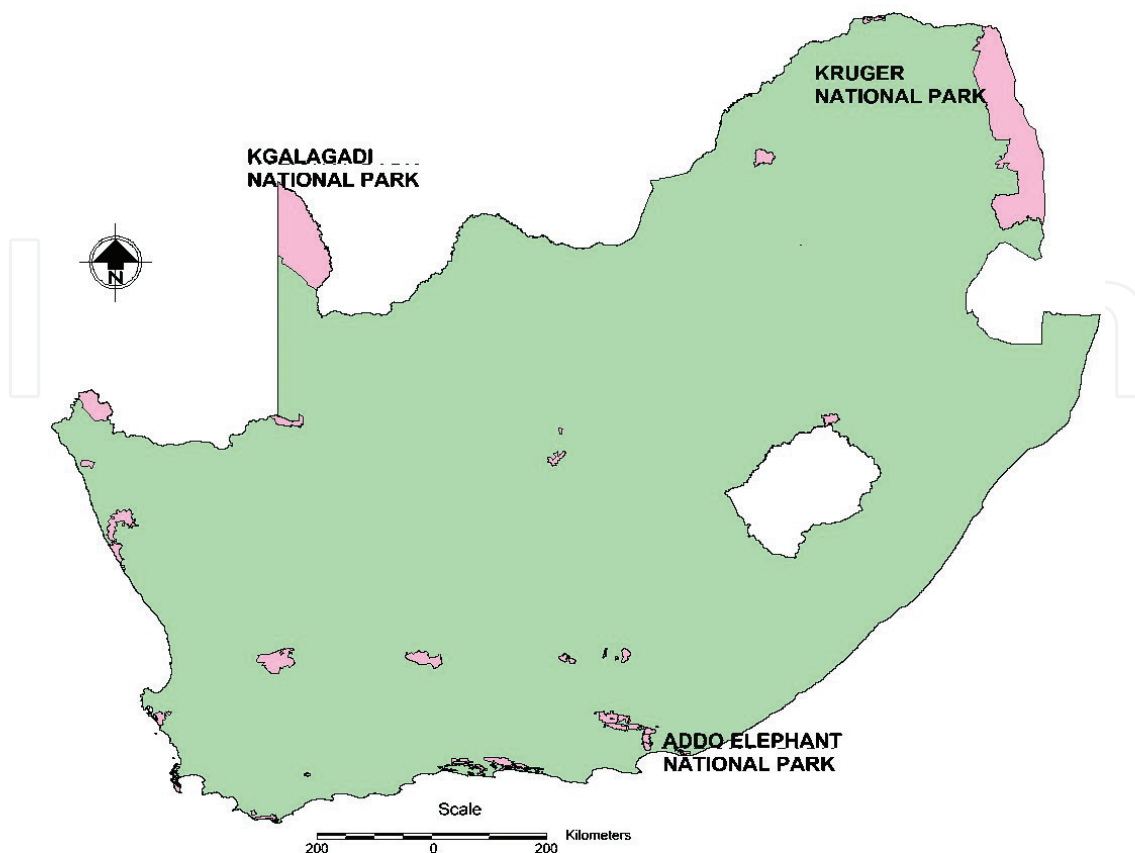


Figure 2. Location of national parks in South Africa, three national parks that will be further discussed are labeled (namely, Kruger National Park, Kgalagadi National Park, and Addo Elephant National Park).

Although the importance and benefits of interpretation for national parks are well reported, SANParks realized that interpretation initiatives were undertaken on an ad hoc basis in the past and not clearly understood by site managers and planners [24]. Since SANParks are mandated to produce park management plans (NEM:PAA, 57 of 2003) [20], it was decided to incorporate visitor interpretation plans into park management plans, in order to address these issues [24].

SANParks has adopted Responsible tourism as a strategy for the rejuvenation and future development is tourism within the national parks. As far back as 1996, the *White Paper on Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa* identified Responsible Tourism as the key guiding principle for tourism development. 'Responsible tourism respects the natural and cultural environment and contributes to local economic development in an ethical manner. It helps conserve fragile cultures, habitats and species by maximising the benefits to local communities and minimising negative social or environmental impacts' [22]. The National Minimum Standard for Responsible Tourism (NMSRT) (SANS 1162) will be used to guide the implementation of the Responsible Tourism Strategy. The NMSRT is based on the three cornerstones of sustainable tourism, namely social-cultural, environmental and economic responsibility [25]. Besides SANParks' core mandate of conservation, it has an added responsibility to implement and manage nature-based tourism in national parks. According to the NEM: PAA (no. 57 of 2003), this includes educational, recreational, spiritual and scientific opportunities that are not harmful to the environment [20]. The implementation of the

Responsible Tourism Strategy is destined to take SANParks into a new era of sustainable and responsible tourism growth.

For the purpose of this chapter, three case studies within SANParks will be discussed. When one considers the area they occupy, the Kruger National Park, Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park and the Addo Elephant National Park are the three largest national parks in South Africa. Interpretation services within SANParks have recently received attention and is being developed and in some cases redevelopment in several parks. Within the three largest parks, interpretation services are at different levels the details of the development and/or redevelopment are discussed in the next sections.

2.1. Kruger National Park

The Kruger National Park (KNP) is considered to be SANParks' flagship park. This park, covers approximately 2 million hectares of land, the largest park in South Africa [26] and attracted 1,817,724 million guests during 2016/2017 [23]. As the oldest and largest park, it is not surprising that this park has a great deal of interpretation services. The question should be asked whether these interpretation services are a true reflection of the park. Bunn and Auslander critique the history of the park and state that it was predominately subject to a Eurocentric approach and that a local Afrocentric approach to the conservation of the natural and cultural heritage of the Park should be followed [27]. This criticism also needs to filter through to the interpretation activities and services offered in the KNP. In a review of existing interpretation facilities in KNP in 2014 it became clear that there was no clear comprehensive interpretation program and that many of the pre-1994 (better known as the apartheid regime) interpretation initiatives were in need of renewal and redevelopment [15, 28]. As research progresses and more evidence emerges about the rich history of the ordinary people living in and around the park, there is a need that these stories should be told. While better historical accounts of events add to the completeness and comprehensiveness of the history of the park, the complexity of portraying the information is increased. It is against this background that the interpretation services of the park need to be redeveloped and upgraded to be more representative of the past and contemporary history [29].

Planning for interpretation in such a large park may be complex especially if one considers the planning process suggested by Ham, Housego and Weiler [13]. This process is set out as follows: (1) interpretive inventory, (2) interpretive goals, (3) identify visitors, (4) determine outcomes of goals, (5) develop themes, (6) develop media matrices, (7) implementation plan, and (8) evaluation process. Although the information is not captured in line with this process, SANParks' planning seems to be on par in the interpretation documentation. For clarity purposes, these elements will be discussed in the order of Ham et al. planning process [13].

1. As part of the inventory process, SANParks evaluated the status of the current and potential interpretation sites and services against a set of criteria. Interpretation sites and services range from several centers to booklets, maps, personal interpretation (fire camp stories, game rangers), exhibits, historical sites, hides, lookout points, signage and activities. The criteria that these sites and services were evaluated against relate to one internal criterion and four international criteria [30]. The park's first criteria relates to the *placement and condition* of the

current interpretation: is it meaningful to the visitor's experience, is the placement sufficient for a connection to the experience, and are the information outdated or readable? Ham's criteria, or better known as the EROT model which the park used to evaluate the interpretation on the value of *entertainment* (does it hold attention, the use of the visitor's senses activated?); *relevance* (the use of analogies, comparisons or metaphors to make connections); *organized* (is it easy to follow and limited ideas); and *topics and themes communicated* (are the subject matter organized in themes with a beginning and ending) [30]. Some of the outcomes of the audit/inventory indicated that the interpretation in Letaba, Skukuza, and Berg-en-Dal is outdated; no communication of conservation; although some information is available there was no interpretation; stories are missing; and there is too much information on some themes [28]. Based on the criteria explained above, each camp's interpretation has recommendations, allocated periods for improvement, relevant responsible staff/sections and budgets.

2. Authors like Engelbrecht, Kruger and Saayman [31] and Botha et al. [32] reported that visitors to the Kruger National Park expect interpretation services to be delivered in the park and that there is a need to improve on these services. In response to this gap, the Kruger National Park's interpretation plan aims to deliver interpretation services that enhance visitor experience. As such the following visitor experience objectives are set out: (a) learning (protecting the under-conserved; role of KNP as a bank of rare species; inform about animal behavior); (b) emotional (improve emotional enhancement between visitor and park; encourage to care about threats; instill an appreciation of different cultures); (c) behavioral (encourage responsible tourists; acceptable behavior); and (d) promotional (to become involved in volunteer programs; to be ambassadors of the park) [24].
3. Even though visitors to national parks are in majority leisure tourists, other visitors like staff, services providers, community groups, conference groups, schools, concession partners, suppliers (goods and services) and media, to name but a few, also frequent the park. It is within this context that the park also identified these audiences as target audiences [24]. It is perhaps the overnight visitors to the park that contribute financially the most and could therefore be regarded as the main target audience. Botha et al. [19], however, found four interpretation market segments for overnight visitors to the park and suggested to focus interpretation developments on the two largest segments (i.e., Inquisitive and Eager seekers). The issue with these two markets, however, is that these two markets require a variety of interpretation services to add to their park experiences.
4. The outcomes of targeting the above-mentioned audiences are not precisely specified within the interpretation plans. Mention was, however, made to 'balancing conservation and visitor satisfaction,' 'growing the tourism market which in turns generates the revenue support the organization's biodiversity and conservation objectives,' and 'enhancing the visitor experience' [24].
5. Due to the size of the park, differences in biodiversity, rainfall [33], forage [34], animal distribution and consequently tourist numbers and expectations [35] are evident in the park. It is therefore not surprising that over 50 themes are identified in the new interpretation plan of the park. These themes range from history (San Bushmen, development of the park to the Anglo-Boer war), heritage, geology, fauna (land and water), flora, conservation, research, stargazing, code of conduct, and careers in the park [24].

As a following phase, several timeframes (2017–2020) were set out in the inventory phase to indicate by when these interpretation services should be implemented (steps 6 to 7). The Elephant Hall in Letaba, has recently been renovated and launched in March 2017 (**Figure 3a–c**) [23]. This project was a collaborative project between SANParks, Honorary Rangers and the University of Sunshine Coast in Australia.

New interpretation panels will also be erected in December 2017 for the Phabeni Interpretation site (**Figure 4**) [23]. This project took place over several years in collaboration with numerous interpretation, cultural and heritage specialists, external archeologists and SANParks' Honorary Rangers.

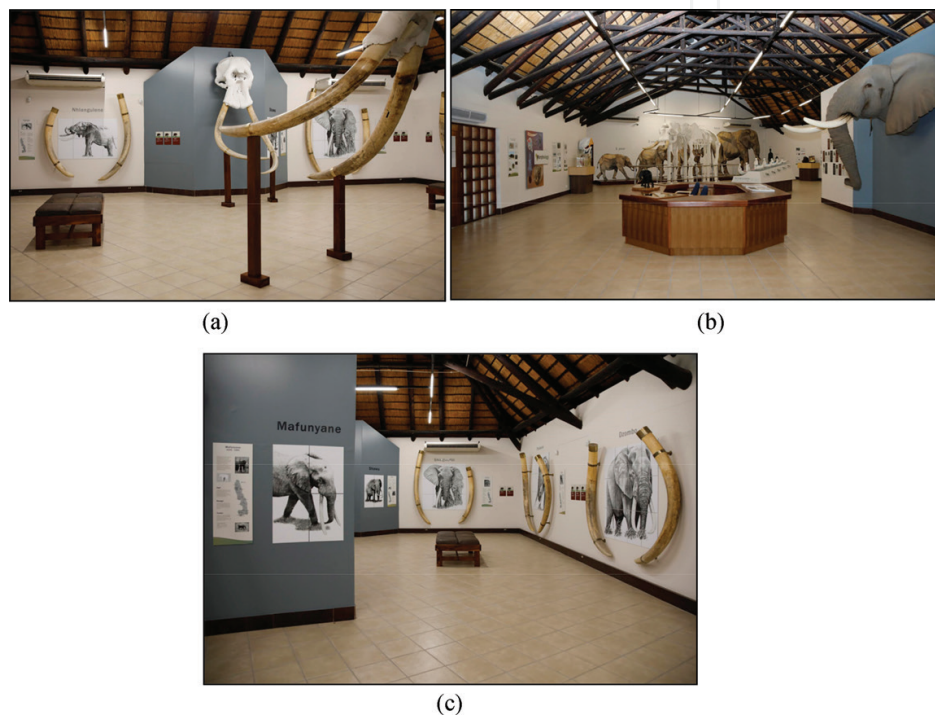


Figure 3. a, b and c. Interior of the Elephant Hall (Letaba) [36].



Figure 4. Interpretation panels at Phabeni [36].

2.2. Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park

The Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park was the first transfrontier conservation area (TFCA) proclaimed in South Africa [37]. Transfrontier conservation areas are relatively large areas, with large-scale natural systems between two or more countries [37]. As such, the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park borders Namibia to the west and shares the area with Botswana to the east. The uniqueness of this park is also evident in the recent world heritage site status bestowed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). This status was granted to the park due to the cultural landscape of the Khomani San which dates back to the Stone Age and who still lives in the area [38]. Although the park only attracted 48,221 visitors during 2016/2017 the newly bestowed title will create an increased awareness about the park, leading to more traffic and a need for relevant interpretation services [23].

Due to the smaller size of the park (38,000 km²), the inventory of interpretation services in the Kgalagadi is less when compared to the KNP. Only one of the three interpretation centers (**Figure 5a and b**) is still functional and the other two are used as a storeroom (**Figure 6a and b**) or converted for housekeeping (Twee Rivieren). Even though the Nossob center is considered as functional, it needs an upgrade along with Mata Mata. Further to this, the park would like to create a living museum at the South African border gate as well as a new interpretation center at the Twee Rivieren rest camp [39]. The Twee Rivieren interpretation center will be cost intensive and as a result research with external stakeholders currently underway to inform the development process [29]. This research will shed some light on the visitor expectations with regards to themes, media and extent of information required. The park has similar goals and objectives as the KNP but have different themes for interpretation. These themes relate to the UNESCO status (i.e., the Khomani San), the history (Stone Age, wars and transfrontier status), myths and legends, fauna and flora adaptive to the arid conditions, and transfrontier aspects [39]. Many of the interpretation services are planned to be developed in 2018.

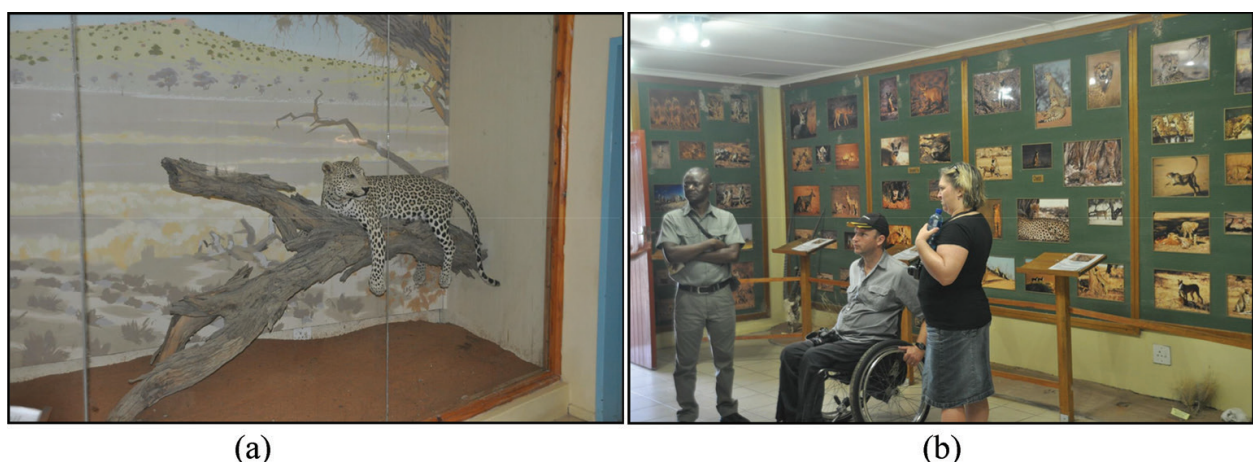


Figure 5. a and b. Interpretation at Nossob rest camp [36].



Figure 6. a and b. Interpretation in Mata Mata rest camp [36].

2.3. Addo Elephant National Park

One of the few national parks to include a marine protected area, the Addo Elephant National Park is the only national park to include the big 7 (including the marine animals namely the southern right whale and great white shark). Although this is the case, the park was originally proclaimed to protect the last 11 elephants in the then 2000 hectares area [40]. Today, however, many other species are also being conserved in the 1640 km² area. During 2016/2017 the park attracted 265,585 guests to the park [23].

Although this park's management plans indicate that interpretation plans should still be drafted [41], this park already has an impressive interpretation center called the Ulwazi Interpretive Center. The main theme in this center, and not surprising so, revolve around elephants. Information ranges from the evolution of elephants (Figure 7), background of the legendary dominant elephant Hapoor that roamed the park (Figure 8), and a family tree of all the elephants in the park (below Hapoor on Figure 8). Other interesting activities include two parabolic dishes to illustrate how elephants communicate and a jungle gym in the form of an elephant to illustrate how big an elephant can be (Figure 9).

Other information is also provided on the surrounding cultures in the park, the environment and other smaller animals like insects and birds.

According to the management plans, future considerations for interpretation services are a historic house in the Kabouga section, Chief Chungwa's gravesite in the Woody Cape section and a number of shipwrecks that are not easily visible from the current visitor access sites [41].

It is clear from the current initiatives in the three largest parks of SANParks that they are in the process to improve their interpretation services. If these initiatives are any indication of the future, the other 16 national parks' interpretation plans will soon also follow and hopefully improve the balance between conservation and the decreased financial support that forces initiatives to increase funding.

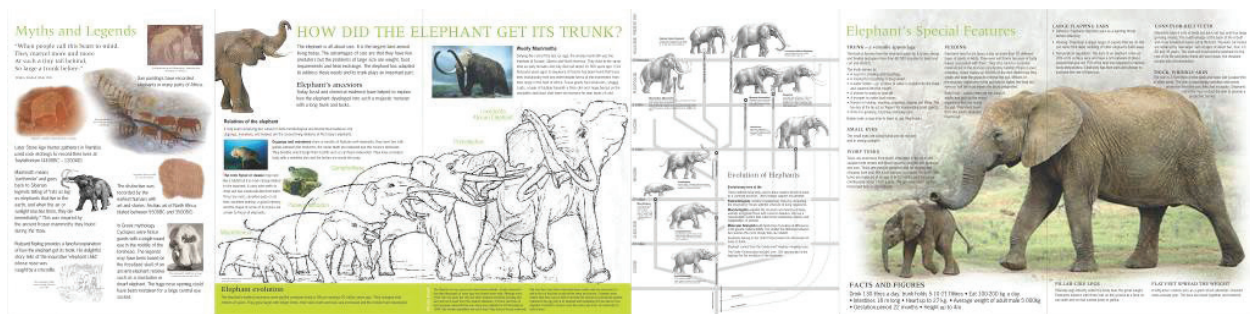


Figure 7. Evolution of elephants [36].



Figure 8. Hapoor and the elephant family tree [36].



Figure 9. Interior view of the Ulwazi Interpretation Center [36].

3. Conclusion

High expectations are placed on national parks namely that they have to enhance local economies, conserve natural and cultural heritage as well as provide an ever-increasing number of visitors with experiences in nature [17]. Washburn explains that '[t]he survival of the national park system in the twenty-first century depends on how it interacts with society and how much society values it. The Interpretation Program is the primary means by which the National Park Service engages diverse publics with their national parks, providing access to meanings, establishes relevance and connects people and communities to national heritage [42]'.

Considering the interpretation initiatives taken by SANParks, one would agree that there is clearly an effort to improve the current situation. SANParks' interpretation plans predominantly focus on the soft interpretation examples [43, 44]. These authors explain that one should consider interpretation on a continuum where the one end, hard interpretation, refer to economical, physical and regulatory strategies to manage visitors and on the other end, soft interpretation, use educational strategies to manage visitors. The question is, therefore, whether national parks should only consider soft/educational interpretation strategies or should they also consider the hard interpretation strategies as part of the interpretation plans? Similarly, interpretation can be categorized into primary, secondary and tertiary interpretation based on easily identifiable characteristics. Primary and secondary interpretation's explanation is similar to that of soft interpretation but what is interesting is that tertiary education is considered to enhance the experience with the more noticeable examples of interpretation. Limited research is available on the correlation between hard and soft interpretation to support the notion of including hard interpretation into the interpretation plans of SANParks. This is probably why SANParks have separate visitor interpretation plans and visitor management plans [24, 39]. But what is clearly noticeable from SANParks' initiatives for visitor interpretation or visitor management plans is the fact that these plans form part of their responsible tourism mandate rather than sustainable tourism mandate [29]. Although similar on minimizing negative impacts, there is a common consensus that responsible and sustainable tourism should not be used interchangeably [45]. Responsible tourism has an emphasis on competitive advantage, involving communities, triple bottom line diversity and promotion of sustainable use of local resources [45]. This is a valuable lesson that other national parks can also take from SANParks. The interpretation plans of SANParks therefore go beyond the message of sustainability but also include an awareness of local cultures (history, stories, legends and myths), incorporating local communities (employment) and more of visitor enjoyment emphasis.

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