

LIMPOPO MEC FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, ENVIRONMENT AND TOURISM,
MR SEAPARO SEKOATI OPENS SANPARKS WEEK ON BEHALF OF ENVIRONMENTAL
AFFAIRS MINISTER, DR EDNA MOLEWA

9 SEPTEMBER 2018

Executive Mayor of the Ba-Phalaborwa Municipality, Clr Pule Shayi
Local Mayors present this morning
Member of the local traditional leadership
Chief Executive of SANParks, Mr Fundisile Mketeni,
Chief Executives of our partners – FNB and Total SA,
Officials from government departments
Distinguished guests and members of the media

Good Morning

It is my sincere pleasure to be here in Phalaborwa today, at the entrance to one of the most well-known tourist attractions and conservation bastions in South Africa – the Kruger National Park.

We are here to celebrate the start of South African National Parks Week, an annual programme supported by First National Bank and Total South Africa, to bring our national parks to the people. Without a partnership such as this hundreds of ordinary South Africans would never get to experience our national parks.

Programme Director, Ladies and Gentlemen,

South African National Parks Week was started in 2006 as a means to make our national parks accessible to the vast majority of the population, many of whom had never visited these wonderful conservation areas. The theme has quite rightly continued as “Know your national parks”. The hope is that through a week such as this all South Africans will develop and sense of pride and ownership of these iconic areas that are not only rich in wildlife, but also contribute significantly to the economies of the areas adjacent to them.

South Africa’s national parks are special places. They are places where people are able to connect to their roots, and where cultures, values and knowledge systems carry on through generations.

I am told that since SANParks week was started 364 275 day visitors have participated in the programme, and, that in 2017 77 340 people visited the parks during South African National Parks Week. That was a 24% increase from 2016’s 62 312.

This is a confirmation that our national parks, as historic landmarks, and cultural and natural treasures, make us all proudly South African.

It is therefore fitting that this year, we launch SA National Parks Week in the iconic Kruger National Parks, where the parks is celebrating 120 years of conservation management. Kruger National Park was first proclaimed in 1898 as the Sabie Game Reserve. The almost 2 million hectares is home to 254 known cultural heritage sites including nearly 130 recorded rock art sites. The Park's history is rich and exciting and cultural artefacts of Stone Age man have been found dating from 100 000 to 30 000 years ago. There are more than 300 archaeological sites of Stone Age man and evidence of Bushman Folk (San) and Iron Age people from about 1 500 years ago. The park also has many historical tales of the presence of Nguni people and European explorers and settlers in the Kruger area.

There are significant archaeological ruins at Thulamela, Albisini Ruins and Masorini cultural heritage sites. Conservation of these sites is imperative due to their cultural and spiritual value and the historical importance.

Earlier this year, Eco-tourism in South Africa featured as the third contributor to the growth of the Biodiversity Economy alongside wildlife and bioprospecting at the 3rd Biodiversity Economy Indaba in East London.

The inclusion of eco-tourism in the Biodiversity Economy Strategy is key as the economic activities in this sector involve mostly pristine, and relatively undisturbed natural areas, intended as a low-impact and often small-scale alternatives to standard commercial mass tourism.

This is an economic sector that is not only critical for local economic growth, but also plays an important role in educating people about the rich natural resources that the country can offer – all while promoting community participation in bringing the awareness about the importance and value of natural resources to society at large and to tourists visiting South Africa.

Our goal is to increase tourism to 5 million visitors a year, of which 1 million should be South Africans. It is important that our people, our local communities, get to know our national parks, and thus come to protect an important income earner for our country. Tourism contributes around R6.9 billion to our country's GDP.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

South Africa is home to more than 9 million hectares of protected areas network, which includes our national parks, nature reserves and world heritage sites. This is equal to about 8% of the country's land.

The majority of these protected areas are situated in rural areas and are therefore an integral part of the livelihoods of surrounding communities.

That is why the Department of Environmental Affairs introduced initiatives such as the People and Parks Programme to serve as an interface between conservation and communities in and around protected areas. This programme not only creates much-needed jobs, but also provides tangible economic and social benefits for communities.

It is through the People and Parks Programme that the Department is actively involved in restoring and maintaining natural ecosystems to stimulate rural economies; upgrading and developing new infrastructure in protected areas to boost tourism, developing commercial assets for communities owning or living around protected areas while supporting related industries.

Only two weeks ago Environmental Affairs Minister Dr Edna Molewa, announced that government will be investing R1.7 billion in People and Parks Programme projects, bioprospecting and wildlife economy through the Environmental Protection and Infrastructure Programme over a period of three years. This investment will be made as part of the Operation Phakisa Biodiversity Economy initiative.

An important message from the 8th People and Parks conference held not far from here in Thohoyandou was that South Africa's natural resources can only be properly conserved if there is support from communities living adjacent to protected areas for these initiatives, and from those communities who benefit from the rich natural resources on their doorstep on a day-to-day basis.

Delegates at the Biodiversity Economy Indaba this year pledged to not only bring on board investors in the tourism sector to expand business opportunities, but also for them to get involved in enterprise and skills development opportunities.

Amongst the commitments made was also an undertaking to create linkages between the formal tourism sector and the local economy, and to capitalise on the integration of land use to develop strong linkages between tourism and other economic sectors.

Despite the recession, South Africa remains an economy with enormous potential and is an economy in which tourism makes a significant contribution.

As the third-most mega-diverse country in the world, millions of tourists flock to South Africa every year to experience the beauty of our magnificent country. The most popular nature destination is the Kruger National Park, alongside all other national parks in South Africa.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

September is month in which we, as government, are able to link to the people – through heritage and tourism. It is fitting that in a month where we celebrate our national and cultural heritage and tourism that we have a programme such as this – where thousands of South Africans who have never had, and probably never will have, the opportunity to visit our national parks, to these wonders of nature and to the wonderful beauty our country offers who can get to know your national parks.

We have a beautiful country that needs to be showcased nationally and internationally. We need to market domestic tourism alongside the role that it can play in making a difference in people's lives either through job creation, education and awareness raising, or celebrating the beauty and rich biodiversity of our country. This is what builds communities.

The scenic and majestic beauty of our country would be worthless unless it is shared with communities that have historically been marginalized, and who have not had the opportunity to visit national parks on their doorstep.

It is because of the popularity of our natural heritage that national parks have had to relook their core mandate and not only focus their work on conservation of fauna and flora, but to expand their horizons to serve as important catalysts for economic development, particularly in rural South Africa.

An example is the Skukuza Safari Lodge that will not only be a world-class facility on completion, but will also attract, for example, catering for the needs of both the local and foreign visitors. That is a service that could be provided by local communities. Through a development such as this, jobs are created, enterprises are developed and poverty is alleviated in local communities as the economy grows.

As is evidenced by the inclusion of eco-tourism in the Biodiversity Economy – a Phakisa initiative – and the commitment in the National Development Plan (NDP) to tourism development, the development of the tourism sector is one of government's key priorities. This means a focus of our efforts on harnessing the potential of the sector to increase its contribution to GDP growth. On the other hand these efforts are aimed at enhancing and developing the skills of those working in the tourism industry and contribute to job creation, and thus uplift and improve the lives of our people.

The NDP places emphasis on increasing the number of tourists entering South Africa, as well as promoting the Southern African region as an international tourism destination by emphasising the broader biodiversity of the region as a tourist product.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Nature-based or Eco-tourism continues to be recognised worldwide as a critical component of sustainability in conservation management. The returns from SANParks' tourism arm are significant contributors to the sustainability of its conservation activities.

But, developing a symbiotic relationship between areas where animals are conserved and the communities that live around these areas is not easy. A first step to getting communities to buy in to the conservation of our natural heritage is to introduce the thousands of South Africans to our national parks.

The SANParks vision is 'A sustainable National Park System Connecting Society'.

As you are aware, this weeklong campaign, which starts tomorrow and ends in the majority of our parks on Friday, 14 September, is part of a worldwide campaign which grants day visitors, especially people from the local communities, free access to most of the country's 21 national parks and thus develop a sense of appreciation amongst our people of what we have.

I would like to encourage you to, during National Parks Week, discover more of our country, to learn about it and from it, and if you haven't already done so, fall in love with its rich beauty.

Our national parks are special places where people connect to their roots, where cultures, values and knowledge systems carry on through generations.

Allow me to once again express our appreciation, as government and South African National Parks, to our partners – First National Bank (FNB) and Total South Africa – for your continued support.

I urge all South Africans, young and old, to take advantage of this wonderful opportunity to visit national parks across South Africa.

I am proud to officially open National Parks Week 2018!

I thank you