

# Sociopolitical Change and Interpretation Emphasis in Kruger National Park, South Africa

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PARK INTERPRETATION CAN FOCUS ON EXPLAINING RESOURCE QUALITIES, supporting management, or meeting visitor needs and expectations (Hockings et al. 1998). Environmental education (EE) can be “about,” “in,” or “for” the environment{Government, 2005 #525}, or as more recently framed, “about,” “in,” or “for” ecologically sustainable development (Pavlova 2011). The relationship between environmental education and ecologically sustainable development depends on “the historic role EE has played in a country (prominent or marginal) and the way EE itself is interpreted (broad or narrow)” (Wals 2009). The same may be said of the relationship within and between park interpretation and EE, where the emphasis given is related to historical perspectives of countries and managing agencies. For the purposes of this paper, we define environmental education as a learning process that increases people’s knowledge and awareness about the environment and associated challenges. In a more formal setting, EE develops the necessary skills and expertise to address environmental challenges, and fosters attitudes, motivations, and commitments to make informed decisions and take responsible action (UNESCO 1978).

In contrast, interpretation is a process of facilitating an evaluation of natural or cultural information gathered from first-hand experience in leisure settings. Interpretation is a reflective and experiential process and constructivist in its epistemology. While the semantic difference between EE and park interpretation might be considered inconsequential, we distinguish between them in terms of dominant communication processes, scope or focus, and purpose. We propose park interpretation to be primarily experiential, park resource-focused towards appreciation and protection of park values and safe and satisfying visitor engagement with park resources. It includes a management perspective. We propose EE as being a formalized learning process (teaching) about how natural environments function and how people can manage their behavior within ecosystems and live sustainably. While interpretation is usually strongly influenced by park management policy, EE tends to be more independent. However, in South Africa, since 1994 the mandate of SANParks, the country’s national parks agency, has been to focus on EE over interpretation. Thus EE is influenced by government policy and lacks its normal independence.

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With these perspectives, we provide an outsider reflection on how the changing political and social culture of South Africa has affected the communication of conservation messages through the balance given to EE and park interpretation in Kruger National Park (KNP), an iconic national park of long standing. This analysis of one program in one iconic park is central to our understanding of how park managing agencies operate, especially in terms of the attention given in public contact programs seeking to foster an appreciation of the values that make features of a park, and the park itself, iconic. The research contributes to the conceptual model (see Figure 1 in Miller et al., this issue) by exemplifying how sociopolitical global change processes can influence the Broker-Local-Tourist (BLT) (Miller 2008) dynamic (within the human component of the model). This case study identifies how changing public sector emphasis (i.e., broker focus) in favor of increasing local environmental awareness (environmental education for schools) has led to declining emphasis on visitor (tourist) services (interpretation) in KNP. One consequence is the need for private sector brokers to take on the interpretation role, with the risk of communication misinterpreting park conservation messages. This has implications for the understanding of “nature” and priorities for “technological” development that services park visitors.

## Background

**Historical, social and cultural context.** Parts of the area now known as KNP were first protected in 1898 as the Sabie Game Reserve by the president of the Transvaal Republic, Paul Kruger. He proposed the need to protect the animals of the Lowveld in 1884, but his revolutionary vision took another 12 years to be realized, when the area between the Sabie and Crocodile rivers was set aside for restricted hunting. KNP was formally established in 1926 under the National Parks Act no. 56. However, human use of and impact on KNP’s ecosystems began long before.

South Africa’s history dates back to prehistoric times when *Homo erectus* exploited resources of the area between 500,000 and 100,000 years ago, with Stone Age humans (*Homo sapiens*) leaving evidence of continuous human existence in this area for more than 300,000 years (SANParks 2008b). The area has over 250 cultural sites, 130 rock art sites, as well as Baobab trees that have stood for over 4,000 years. Human activity undoubtedly modified the landscape and impacted fauna populations, especially the hypercarnivores. But it was not until the arrival of early European hunting parties and gold prospectors in the mid-19th century that broad-scale impact on the land and its fauna emerged as a conservation issue (Moore and Masuku van Damme 2002). The impact of this exploitative activity on the KNP area culminated in the extinction of both black and white rhino through hunting, with reintroduction of both species occurring in the 1960s and 1970s.

The founding of KNP occurred at a time in South African history when social repression, segregation, and violence were the norm. After the British defeat of the Boers and the ensuing establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, white dominance of English and Afrikaans pervaded all facets of society and development. US and Australian national parks, established just prior to South African national parks, were said to be founded on the principle of linking the nation through its natural resources; but, as Carruthers asks, “Who

comprises the nation”? (Carruthers 2003, 2008). In South Africa, the “nation” was not inclusive, since segregation and then (after 1948) apartheid characterized the nation. Access to Kruger, and all national parks, reflected the social norms of the dominant white South African society. The park was established with management objectives suited to the ruling class of the day. KNP was primarily a “whites only” park, with black South Africans and coloreds excluded (Carruthers 1995; Khan 2002). If they did visit, facilities set aside for their use were, at best, inferior (Carruthers 2003, 2008). Indeed, black South Africans were excluded from land they had occupied, and only employed in the park in low-level positions, which attracted poor treatment and discriminatory conditions. This created hostility towards the national parks (Carruthers 1995, 2003, 2008). James Stephenson-Hamilton, the first park manager, noted that the park’s clientele need not be wealthy (Carruthers 2001), so long as they were white.

White visitors at the time were divided into three main classes: wealthy visitors from overseas and the larger cities of South Africa; large groups of working-class visitors from local industrial areas; and local residents primarily wanting to hunt (Stevenson-Hamilton 1937). It seems that motivation to travel also delineated these white groups between “nomadic desires of working class sightseers” to “refined desires for the wilderness experience” by amateur naturalists (Bunn 2008). However, after the South African 1948 general election and formalization of the apartheid policy, KNP also became a symbol for the Afrikaner identity of God and nature (Carruthers 1995). For black South Africans, their role in the park remained as guides and camp staff. This oppression continued until the reforms of 1994, when a new political and social regime was declared in South Africa and national parks were opened to all South Africans with a new philosophy of “South African National Parks connecting to Society” (SANParks 2013)

### **Tourism as a driver of change**

**Early tourism.** The first recognized tourists did not visit KNP until 1918 (Joubert 1990; SANParks 2008b). The opening of the Selati rail line in 1923 facilitated greater access, and by 1927 the first motorists entered the park. Initially the wilderness experience was accompanied by minimal comforts, but as tourism increased, so too did the development of infrastructure and services (Joubert 1990). Interpretation development paralleled infrastructure, starting with Stephenson-Hamilton in the 1930s, who believed in educating the visitor (Carruthers 2003; SANParks 2008b). Thus by the 1950s a time of focused and best-practice park interpretation ensued for white South Africans, with staff and departments employed specifically for interpretation purposes (Joubert 2007; Swemmer and Taljaard 2011). By 1990, KNP had extensive facilities and staff to inform and educate visitors (e.g., Letaba Elephant Hall and the Stephenson-Hamilton Library at Skukuza) and park interpreters were numerous. Specialized staff undertook EE, visitor interpretation, marketing, promotion, and public relations (Moore and Masuku van Damme 2002; Joubert 2007). Visitor interpretation incorporated a variety of interpretive techniques based on the US parks model (Tilden 1957; Ham 1992). However, before 1994 interpretation primarily targeted white audiences and rarely were black audiences included (Moore and Masuku van Damme 2002).

**Contemporary tourism.** SANParks' core business is seen to be biodiversity conservation; however, tourism is recognized as a major source of revenue (Msimang et al. 2003; Biggs et al. 2014). Today, South African parks cater to all ethnic groups, especially international tourists and increasing numbers of black South African visitors, although their numbers remain low. Much of this can be attributed to the absence, for almost nine decades, of reference to black cultural history in the park. Regardless, tourism to KNP is the major contributor to SANParks operating budget, contributing 88% of the total income (SANParks 2013, pers. comm.) for operations, conservation, and research across South Africa's 20 national parks. While Kruger is the largest park (1,962,362 ha), it is the second-most-visited park after Table Mountain National Park in Cape Town, with 1,450,481 visitors per annum and 913,237 beds and 432,515 camper visitor-nights. This brings an income of ZAR417,866,000 (South African rands, the national currency, equivalent to about US\$38 million) to the park system. Of these visitors, only 10% (153,696) participated in SANParks-led activities in all parks.

### **Interpretation and environmental education**

**Changing focus of communication.** SANParks' current vision statement—"South African National Parks connecting to society"—sets the overarching goal for park communication with all stakeholders, including school and community groups, scientists, and visitors. This vision also reflects the commitment to engage communities in the management of national parks and other protected areas. As Swemmer (2011) has identified, SANParks historically recognized interpretation as intrinsic to management during the establishment and growth of the SANParks protected area estate from the 1950s through to the 1980s. When the apartheid era ended in 1994, change occurred in all levels of South African government and society.

Within SANParks, changes occurred that were not always beneficial to park operations, such as the protection and presentation of park iconic conservation values. Interpretation disappeared from the revamped organization, with the new government's priority of educating South African youth, rather than continuing to provide visitor services, such that conservation was linked to issues of development and human need (Moore and Masuku van Damme 2002). After 1994, this resulted in interpretive center closures, and a number of departments within SANParks being amalgamated or disbanded. One such change was the integration of the SANParks arm responsible for overseeing park interpretation and tour guiding into an EE department within a Social Ecology Unit (Moore and Masuku van Damme 2002). A consequence was a reduction in experienced interpretive staff available to communicate park issues and conservation, and reduced interpretive services for visitors, fewer physical interpretive displays, and loss of quality in display maintenance and production (Moore and Masuku van Damme 2002). By 1994, interpretation of the iconic wildlife and values of KNP devolved to private tour operators, with limited input from SANParks staff. Today SANParks operates minimal interpretive activities and many of the private tour guides no longer operate in the park (K. Moore, personal communication).

Benefits from the change included changed management structure from a white male, Afrikaner nationalism focus (Carruthers 1995; Khan 2002), to a more gender and racially

balanced structure (Moore and Masuku van Damme 2002; Carruthers 2003). The development of a new corporate plan recognized that ecological, cultural, and socioeconomic issues were critical to the survival of the parks. Thus, an era emerged where SANParks' emphasis was on opening parks to all South Africans, regardless of color or economic status, with a priority given to bringing black South Africans into the parks. The establishment of the Social Ecology Unit in 1994 to address SANParks' relationship with local communities led to funding shifts, with more work programs and increased EE outreach to communities surrounding the parks (Moore and Masuku van Damme 2002). Emphasis shifted from interpretation and promotion of iconic values to raising general environmental awareness. This has led to an unbalanced education agenda where EE has dominated communication regarding management of the parks. Some impressive EE programs have emerged that specifically target school-age groups and increase community knowledge and awareness about conservation issues. These programs include Kids in Parks, Imbewu, Kudu Green School Initiative, Junior Ranger Program, and teacher development programs (SANParks 2012). The SANParks 2012–2013 annual report indicates that the EE program reached 213,327 children, an increase of 42.7% over the set target. EE was again emphasized in the 2012–2017 strategic plan, with budgets set to accommodate increases in EE program participation (SANParks 2012). Absent from the current strategic plan was any reference to interpretation.

Education of youth, and stewardship by local communities, is critical for the survival of South Africa's natural wealth. While acknowledging the need, merits, and benefits of the overdue change in policy for public contact, there is a possible perverse outcome. Visitors and tourists, who come to the park to experience the iconic wildlife of KNP, are left to self-interpret their value, ecological significance, and conservation management needs. At some risk is the income that tourists generate, which funds park operations and conservation initiatives across the SANParks estate.

Despite the lack of focus on interpretation in key SANParks policy and strategic planning documentation, there is evidence of interpretation activities persisting on the ground, with ad-hoc displays in every rest camp. Other interpretive activities, requiring considerable funding and planning, have included the development of the Rhino Hall at Berg-en-Dal rest camp and the construction of the Mapungubwe National Park interpretive center with the objective of presenting the area's history and providing awareness and understanding of the vulnerability of the local ecology. Outreach efforts, such as KNP's "Kruger to Kasi" program and the involvement of local communities in the construction of Mapungubwe National Park interpretive center, have also formed part of the broader conservation strategy that jointly achieves interpretation and community engagement objectives. This involvement focuses on benefit-sharing mechanisms under the premise that if local communities benefit from the parks, this will induce positive attitudes toward conservation (Moore and Masuku van Damme 2002,; Ramage et al. 2010). However, the challenge of such benefit-sharing mechanisms may be that they limit the perceived value of natural resources to material or tangible benefits, disregarding intrinsic and bequest values of such resources.

A holistic understanding of the value of natural resources provides opportunities for cultural change. In addition, using tangible benefits to induce behavior change may pose

challenges when the utility of benefits decline over time or become considered inadequate by beneficiaries. Interpretation aims to build long-term behavior change through creating attachments to intrinsic environmental values, where conservation of iconic elements become symbolic of South Africa's wealth. There is obvious need to broaden the scope of conservation efforts beyond education and benefit-sharing mechanisms to also include a wider range of interpretive infrastructure and services.

Recent research investigated the interpretive infrastructure in three rest camps in KNP (Peake 2014). This 2012–2013 study examined the available infrastructure and its content for interpretive and conservation messages. The study found that while there is a vast array of infrastructure, the content did not communicate the core values of the park or organizational objectives, nor interpret the conservation requirements of featured species and habitats (Peake 2014). Most content was information based on park operations, rather than communicating the values of the park's animals, plants, and ecosystems or critical conservation issues, such as rhino poaching. Basic information on the park and its iconic species was missing, outside of two species-specific centers: Letaba (focused on elephants) and Berg-en-Dal (on rhino).

Visitors who do not go to these centers, or go on an organized game drive, and those with expectations of learning about the environment or animals in general will be disappointed, and must rely on their personal knowledge to educate themselves while in the park.

**Policy for public contact.** In 2002, the Department for Environmental Affairs and Tourism developed a responsible tourism manual for South Africa (DEAT 2002), highlighting and recommending the development of a number of interpretation facilities and services (Spenceley et al. 2002). In response, SANParks prepared an environmental education and interpretation strategy (SANParks 2002). The aim of the strategy was to guide planning and decision-making, identify best practices, and monitor and evaluate environmental interpretation and education to enhance performance and improvement. However, this document remains a draft.

In 2003, SANParks established the People and Conservation Division to complement and support the Social Ecology Unit in providing EE programs in national parks (SANParks 2005). This division's responsibilities included reviewing and updating the stalled 2002 environmental education and interpretation strategy (SANParks 2002). This resulted in the preparation of an environmental education policy (SANParks 2005). However, the interpretive focus was dropped from the title and the word "interpretation" only appears three times. One reference is to the title of the previous document, the other two references are to the environmental program objective, to enhance visitors through environmental interpretation and education (SANParks 2005). There are no further details regarding strategies to achieve the interpretation part of this objective. In 2006, SANParks produced another draft document titled "Coordinated Policy Framework Governing Park Management Plans" to guide the management of all national parks. This policy framework was produced to meet the requirements of the Protected Areas Act No. 57, 2003. There is no reference to interpretation in this important guiding document. The KNP management plan (SANParks 2008a: 103), Section 2.3.1 addresses the differences between EE and interpretation, but goes no further.

In 2008, SANParks undertook an independent review of its interpretation programs. The review was critical of the state of interpretation (Bunn 2008) and as a result, in 2011, SANParks approved the “Responsible Tourism Policy” aimed at the development and management of tourism across all national parks. This acknowledged the need to address the quality of the visitor experience, and not continue to rely on visitors being satisfied with the single focus of seeing animals (Biggs et al. 2014). Drawing insights from this document, a tourism research agenda was drafted which, in part, highlighted the need to develop an “understanding of the underlying factors behind visitor satisfaction and changes in expectations and perceptions” and align interpretation “more closely with SANParks’ objectives for tourism, awareness-raising and constituency building” (Biggs et al. 2014: 3). However, as noted above, SANParks’ five-year strategic plan (SANParks 2012) does not budget nor plan for interpretation, reflecting a lack of commitment to this important park management tool. Instead, it continues to view interpretation as an add-on to other programs, such as environmental education and tourism marketing initiatives.

## **Discussion**

KNP is a protected “island” in a “sea” of humanity, with more than two million people living on its borders. Thus, SANParks faces significant challenges in managing this protected area for conservation and sustainability while balancing the needs of communities and its tourism funding source. SANParks’ budget and policy emphasis on supporting EE rather than park interpretation clearly responds to government policy and contributes to addressing educational inequities inherent in pre-1994 policy. In BLT (Miller 2008) terms, government (public sector) brokers of tourism have emphasized the broad educational needs of local communities at the expense of tourists. For SANParks, as brokers, there is a missed opportunity to use interpretation as a tool to support conservation management action, meet the needs of tourists for information that enhances experiences and ensures understanding of safe behavioral practices, and explain the iconic values and significance of KNP. If tourist operator (private-sector) brokers undertake these interpretive roles, in the short term the consequences are likely to be minimal. However, the risk is that operators, with a client focus and incomplete knowledge of the rationale for management actions, will misinterpret, emphasizing entertainment ahead of appreciation and understanding of conservation management, and fail to explain the iconic values and significance of KNP. Given the limited number of SANParks-led activities and the decline in private-sector operators (unless one stays at a private lodge), tourists may be left to self-interpret, with inherent risks. There is also the risk that tourist satisfaction may decline, with implications for the image of South Africa and the significant revenue streams for SANParks. The “island” nature of KNP means that secure and considerable funding is needed to manage wildlife populations. The current situation is unlikely to remain static and global and local change could signal the start of a downward spiral in values. Pressure on the iconic wildlife may increase with a changing climate (increasing temperature, increased fire events and water shortages), with consequences for the visitor experience and visitation rates. In this context, tourists visiting, or considering visiting, KNP

may perceive that their park experience will be lessened and the probability of wildlife sightings reduced, with consequences for visitation and thus funding of SANParks wildlife conservation operations.

## Conclusion

Despite SANParks' historical focus on incorporating interpretation into the management of the national parks (pre-1994), there is now no clear evidence of a comprehensive interpretation program within Kruger National Park. There is evidence, however, that investment in interpretation over the past 17 years has declined. Since 1994, EE has dominated conservation strategies in the management of SANParks. Although some consider interpretation a subset of EE, there are many differences in focus, delivery, and outcomes that set the two communication and learning strategies apart. Most importantly, EE and interpretation target different audiences. EE targets schools and communities for longer-term development of ownership and stewardship (with no short-term income advantage), while interpretation targets the visitor, SANParks' main source of revenue (with potential for greater income generation) for its operational, conservation, and EE requirements. Parks such as Yellowstone in the USA have addressed park interpretation budget deficits through a user-pays system (especially for self-guiding material). One of Peake's 2014 recommendations was for the development of pay-by-donation self-guiding brochures. SANParks has not adopted this idea except for paid game drives. This could be linked to the government's mandate of making parks accessible to all South Africans, many of whom are extremely poor.

Regardless, the case of KNP demonstrates that a single, public sector, broker-sponsored policy decision can cascade through the broader park management system, with implications that are positive for local communities but negative for tourists. It also demonstrates that implications can extend beyond immediate stakeholders to affect economic issues and long-term consequences for park management capacity that may be exacerbated by global environmental change.

For now, KNP rests on its iconic status to attract and satisfy visitors, who possibly depart with a narrow view of savanna conservation because of the lack of information and interpretation. Today's park tourists have greater expectations and demands for quality experiences, including meaningful interpretation. SANParks' reduced attention to visitor services has affected the tourist experience (Du Plessis 2011), and although the consequences remain unclear, they may be highly significant for managing the park. In the interests of risk management, it might be prudent to reconsider the interpretation-EE balance, including consideration of:

- Allocating appropriate resources for interpretive infrastructure development, research, capacity-building, planning, implementation and evaluation;
- Adopting a working definition for interpretation, based on themes that reflect the values of the parks through participatory processes involving staff and community members;
- Integrating the broader scope of interpretation into SANParks' higher-level policies and individual parks' planning processes;



- Ensuring that interpretation is linked to park business goals through the communication of relevant themes as part of promotional and support resources; and
- Accommodating the needs of repeat visits in presentations and other interpretation activities.

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