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Tourism issues in Ithala Game Reserve

The purpose of this study is determine tourists' attitudes towards choosing Ithala Game Reserve as a tourist destination and the marketing strategies that can be used to promote Ithala Game Reserve to domestic tourists. The study was aimed at finding out whether these tourism benefits compensate for loss of land in which people were forcefully removed. The results showed that respondents believe that Ithala Game Reserve can bring tourism benefits. To address the concerns of the community, various recommendations were suggested. These included tourism awareness strategies, consultation and involvement of local community in tourism development initiatives, translation of tourism brochures into Zulu and construction of a cultural village. Discussion of the findings and research implications are suggested.

Key words: Tourism, Development, Community

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Introduction

In any problematic situation, the basic step towards providing effective solution is to understand the cause and nature of the problem. Tourism in Ithala cannot be understood in isolation. It should be understood within the context of all previously neglected communities, therefore some of its solutions need to be drawn from the already existing governmental frameworks of societal rehabilitation such as Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and others.

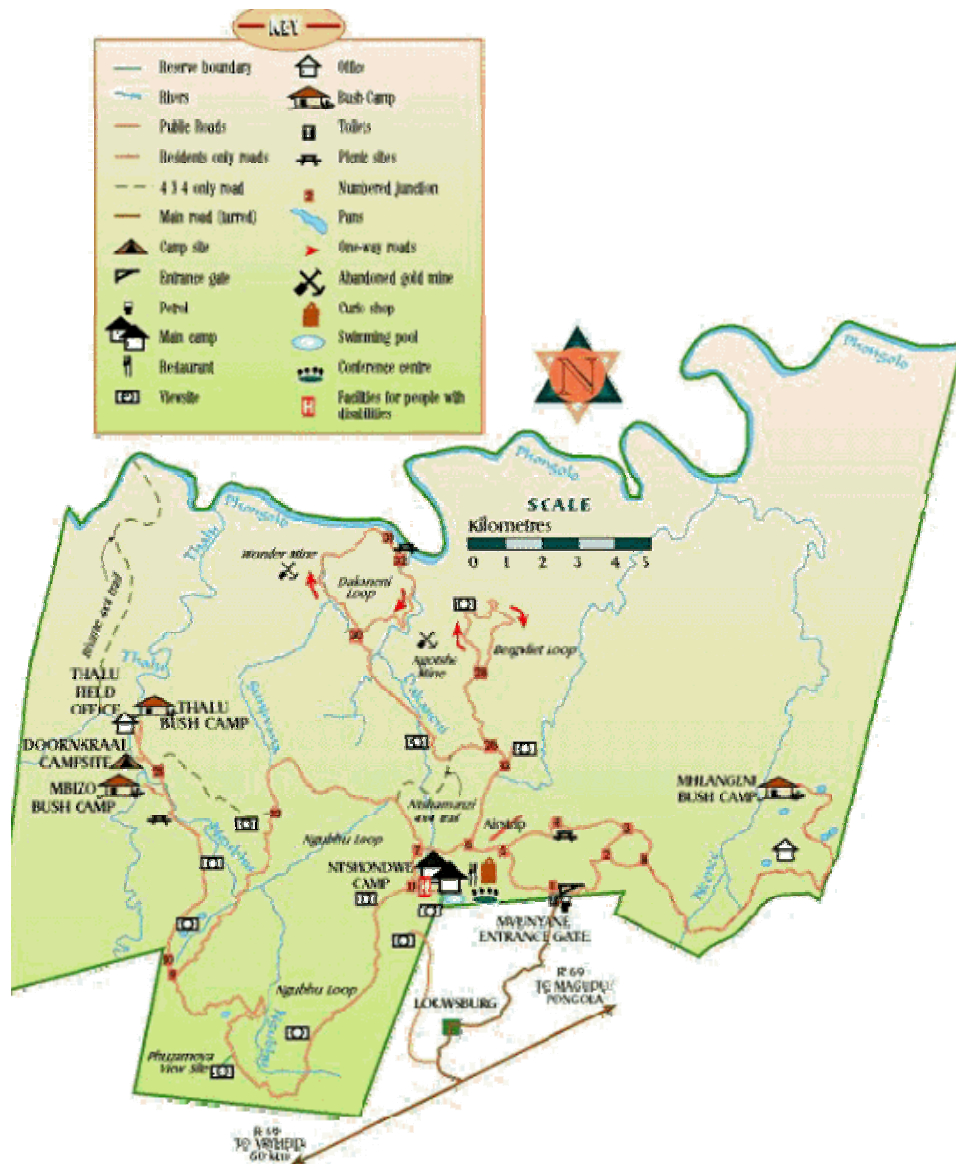
The study was conducted against the background that Ithala Game Reserve has a lot of tourism benefits to be shared by the local community mainly the people who were evicted from Ithala. The study was aimed at finding out whether these tourism benefits compensate for loss of land. This aim was narrowed down to the following objectives:

- To determine tourists' attitudes towards choosing Ithala Game Reserve as a tourist destination
- To establish the number of domestic tourists who currently visit Ithala Game Reserve
- To indicate the type of facilities and features within Ithala Game Reserve that can be promoted to attract domestic tourists
- Establish the marketing strategies that can be used to promote Ithala Game Reserve to domestic tourists
- Extent to which Ithala policies assist in the development of the area.

The study assumes that:

- The tourists have a positive attitude in choosing Ithala Game Reserve as a tourist destination
- The number of domestic tourists visiting Ithala Game Reserve is lower than that of international tourists
- The type of facilities found within Ithala tend to promote and attract local tourists
- There are adequate marketing strategies used to promote Ithala Game Reserve
- There are inadequate policies used to assist in the development of the local area.

Fig. 1.1 Physical Location of Ithala Game Reserve



Data was collected through the use of questionnaires, which had both open-ended and closed-ended sections. Data was analysed through the use of a computer programme, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). This programme was used to formulate frequency tables and to relate variables.

Various findings were deduced from the responses of all interviewees. It was discovered that the Ithala community has limited knowledge about tourism activities and benefits thereof. Such limitation resulted from the fact that for a long time, the local community has been excluded from tourism development initiatives. This community was scattered over a large area after eviction, so they know very little about what is happening in the area.

The study further found that, another stumbling block to access tourism benefits is that the recent arrangements to involve the community in the tourism management are still neatly typed in the Memorandum of Understanding (the legal document that was signed by the claimants, the Board, NCS), which is not easily accessible to people. People can begin to benefit from tourism activities provided they have sufficient knowledge about these tourism activities.

To address the concerns of the community, various recommendations were suggested. These included tourism awareness strategies, consultation and involvement of local community in tourism development initiatives, translation of tourism brochures into Zulu and construction of a cultural village. Once local people begin to grasp the concept of tourism, they will begin to accrue more benefits from this lucrative venture.

Keywords:

Tourism, Protected Area (Reserve), Tourist destination, Community, Previously neglected communities, Perceptions, Participation, Blacks, Eviction, Ecotourism.

Community involvement in decision-making

Over the past few years there has been an outcry from many previously disadvantaged communities that the local people were never consulted when the decision concerning their wellbeing was taken and this was the case of the Ithala people. To address the issue of local people, both KZN Nature Conservation Services and the Ithala Community Trust Fund Committee must maximise the involvement of people in decision-making. This means that meetings must be held more often.

The people of Ithala should feel that decisions are taken to contribute towards their betterment. Such a situation can only be possible when decisions that are taken reflect the will of the people. Failure will result in people feeling more alienated from their own affairs.

Tourism awareness

The involvement of people in decision-making lies heavily on how much knowledge people have. This means therefore, Ithala people must be empowered with tourism knowledge. Tourism awareness strategies that need to be employed include disseminating tourism brochures. These brochures need to be written mostly in the language that the local communities understand (in this case Zulu). These brochures should be readily available in public places and information centres. These museums and information centres are not yet available, so they have to be constructed where the people are.

One of the most effective tools for addressing the challenges that are related to tourism development in the Ithala area is tourism education and training. Provision of tourism education can help to create tourism awareness amongst the Ithala community. Such a notion cannot be confined to the Ithala area alone, but is applicable to all South Africa (ANC, 1994), the Tourism White Paper (DEAT, 1996) and others.

The White Paper (*The Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa, 1996*) states that while the tourism industry has tremendous potential to create jobs, the government recognises that appropriate skills and experience are necessary to facilitate employment growth as well as international competitiveness. With the projected staffing needs of the tourism industry and the current lack of physical and financial capacity to deliver education and training, the industry will increasingly be faced with critical shortage of skills (Cooper *et al*, 1996). Tourism education and training is one of the fundamental pillars of development of a new responsible tourism in South Africa. Education and training needs to be adopted in the Ithala context.

Special tourism education and training for Ithala community members who may wish to participate in tourism enterprise need to be established. Such programmes include introductory and riding courses where community members from all age groups will be taught the basic skills needed in the tourism industry.

One of the alternative tourism-related skills training that has a potential of enhancing Ithala community involvement is a transportation service. Transportation service will make this place more accessible to tourists and the local community. The taxi transport sector needs to

be incorporated into tourism industry and taxi operators need to be empowered with hospitality skills so that they can be competent in managing tourists.

Knowledge dissemination

To ensure that all Ithala tourism beneficiaries are at the same wavelength with regard to tourism resource accessibility, the Trust Committee must make the Memorandum of Understanding easily accessible to the Ithala community. This legal document may be translated into a language used by the Ithala people which is Zulu and put alongside tourism brochures so that people can fully understand what tourism entails. This will help in enhancing the peoples' level of knowledge. People can start to access the resources as soon as they become aware of the procedures that have to be followed when needing access.

Public meetings need to be held as often as possible. These meetings should be rotated to the venues where people are, that is to say meetings need to be rotated to the areas in and around Ithala. Such rotation should be done to ensure that everyone has access to information. It will also familiarise the Trust to people. Such familiarity will then provide a convenient atmosphere for effective communication.

Programmes with a potential of promoting tourism

Cultural tourism and youth tourism should be encouraged, in order to promote tourism at Ithala. Through cultural tourism, local people can develop self-employment and tend to depend more on themselves. Once people start generating income, they will become more self-sufficient and begin to let go of the bitterness of eviction. Some Ithala tourism benefits should be put aside for youth development programmes. The White Paper recognises that young people have a critical role to play in the growth and development of the tourism industry (DEAT, 1996). The government should consider establishing special programmes aimed at addressing the needs of the youth, in particular to address backlogs in training, job creation and recreation. Such programmes include the encouragement and development of youth travel where young people should be encouraged to travel. Such government initiatives should be incorporated into Ithala youth development programme so that Ithala develops at the same pace with the rest of historically disadvantaged areas of South Africa. Involvement of youth in tourism related initiatives would ensure that tourism is transmitted from one generation to the other.

The Ithala youth can be empowered through the creation of summer jobs in the tourism industry to expose youth at an early age to travel and tourism industry. This could include for example, internship at hotels and restaurants, tour guides, trackers, hospitality ambassadors at airports, points of interest and tourist attractions.

Marketing and promotion of Ithala Game Reserve

The geographical location of Ithala makes it accessible to tourists. Such credentials need to be marketed through utilisation of modern computer and communications technologies. This marketing and promotion of tourism should be spear-headed by local communities so that all the benefits that will be accrued will be channelled directly to the Ithala community.

Another equally important aspect of tourism that needs to be strengthened is safety and security. The number of tourists who visit Ithala can increase if they are certain that safety and security is guaranteed. The message of guaranteed safety and security should be incorporated into the marketing and promotion of tourism in Ithala area. Local communities also have to be encouraged to safeguard the experiences of the tourist against any form of criminal activity that may be targeted at tourists.

It is an undeniable fact that some areas of Ithala are ecologically sensitive, therefore any form of development in such areas should be administered with great care. To ensure that environmental hazards are avoided in all new tourism projects, the Integrated Environmental Management should be conducted. In such areas that are ecologically sensitive, sustainable and responsible tourism development should be promoted and encouraged, *interalia* by means of incentives to private enterprise and communities (White Paper: The Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa, 1996).

Conclusion

As in any other society, the eviction of people from their land was a painful experience in the lives of the Ithala people. About 500 households were evicted, leaving behind their arable land, crops in the fields, plenty of natural resources, like herbs and wild fruits, etc. These households were trans located to areas in and around Louwsburg. There was no explanation that was given to people as to why were they being evicted, so the people ended up concluding that they were despised in favour of a pine plantation and animals (IUCN, 2000). The idea of tourism was never mentioned during the time of eviction, so people have little or

no idea about tourism development initiatives. The only solution to solve this challenge of lack of tourism knowledge is community involvement in decision-making.

Although the tourism issue in Ithala area is still clouded with lack of information to the local community, it is hoped that in the near future people will gradually understand tourism and its related development. The outcry from local people that they are not thoroughly consulted when tourism decisions are taken, needs to be given serious attention. Once people feel that their voice is given enough respect, they will begin to accept the intricacies of tourism and therefore begin to search for lucrative development initiatives which will be manned by them. Such state of affairs will bring prosperity and social stability amongst the Ithala community.

Ithala is doubtless one of the spectacular destinations of Africa; it needs to be handled with care, so that it can provide optimum benefits in the world of tourism. All development initiatives need the involvement of local people so that they can learn the skills required in the field of tourism.

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