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Jonathan Linde and Stefan Grab

# Regional Contrasts in Mountain Tourism Development in the Drakensberg, South Africa

65



*The Drakensberg is the highest mountain range in southern Africa and is considered a valuable natural and economic resource; it is also a primary tourist destination in the region. The present article compares recent*

*tourism development and management in the well-established Royal Natal National Park (RNNP) and the adjoining Mnweni Valley, which is a developing center and former apartheid homeland. Trends in tourist characteristics, governance, and revenue streams are presented for the two centers. Although the Mnweni region has experienced significantly greater percentage growth in visitor numbers than the RNNP over the last few years, it currently lacks the capacity to ensure adequate conservation of the mountain environment. Given the considerable contrasts in mountain tourism development in the Drakensberg, it is essential to establish mountain sustainability networks and collaboration between local and regional “actors.”*

**Keywords:** Drakensberg; tourism; development; conservation; South Africa.

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## Introduction

There is a substantial literature focusing on mountain-based tourism, including ecotourism and sustainable development (Funnell and Price 2003), tourism and conservation of biological and cultural heritage (Lama and Sattar 2004), planning, marketing and economies (Mason and Leberman 2000; Parvez and Rasmussen 2004; Hudson and Miller 2005), the effects of recent climate change on mountain tourism (Buerki et al 2003), and the impact of such tourism on the environment (Pignatti 1993). As one of the largest and fastest growing global “businesses,” tourism accounts for a growing proportion of gross domestic product, particularly in developing regions (Butcher 2003, p 6) such as Asia (Rai and Sundriyal 1997; Cochrane 2000; MacLellan et al 2000). Ecotourism can potentially improve the quality of livelihoods in mountain regions (Nepal 2002). The growth of tourism markets in rural mountain regions may increase maintenance of local services, allow diversification of the rural economy, and stimulate support for the preservation of natural landscapes (Canovés et al 2004). However, Canovés et al

stress that negative environmental and socioeconomic impacts are commonly generated and may be greatly influenced by visitor numbers and tourist activities, along with a host of other factors. Remoteness and lack of development in many rural areas limit economic options. Where livelihoods are based on small-scale or subsistence agriculture, tourism can provide an alternative source of income and thus improve local economies (Liu 2006).

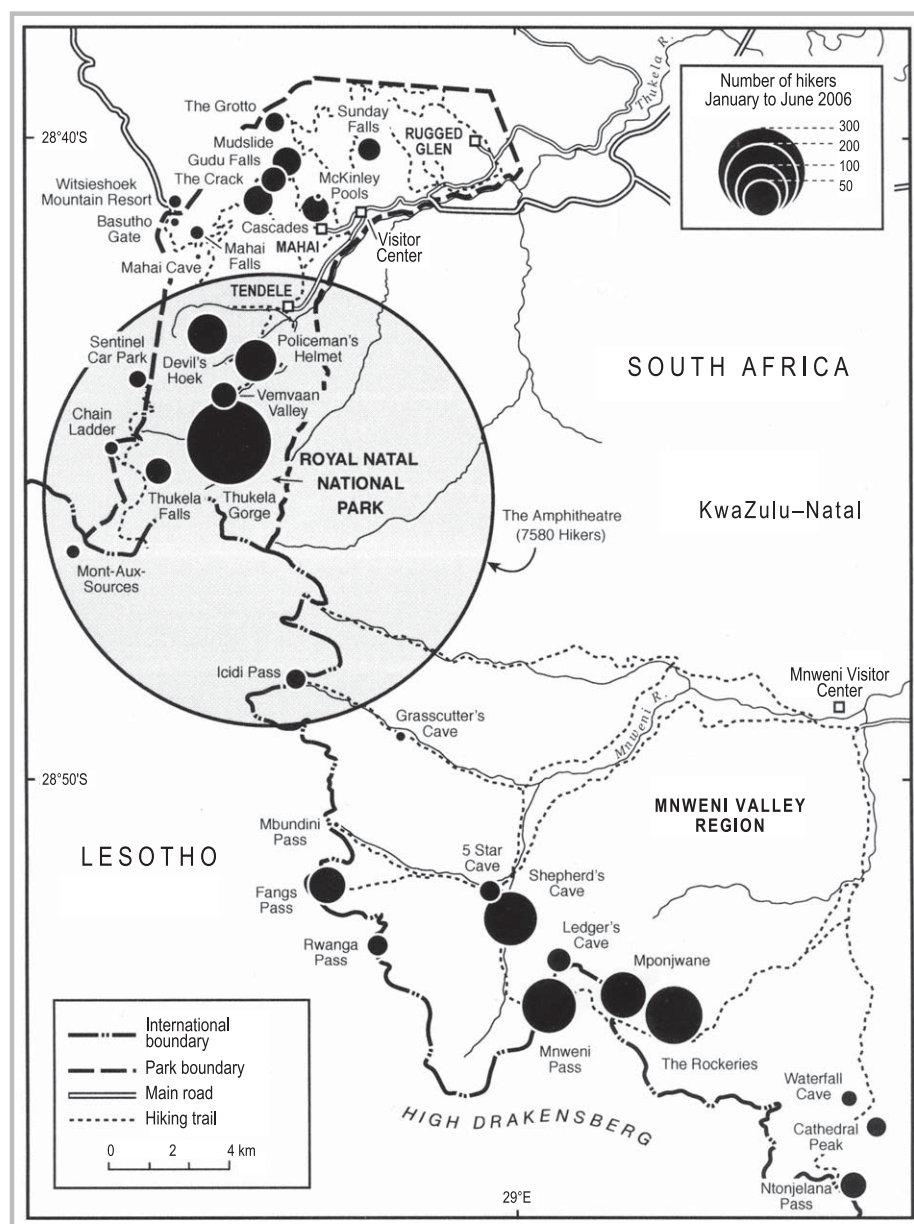
Most previous studies of mountain-based tourism have focused specifically on either developed or developing regions. This article compares 2 development structures from neighboring tourist centers in the Drakensberg, South Africa, representing a well-established and a developing geographic milieu. The geographic trends in tourism in both centers are compared, including tourist numbers, local involvement practices, and management of revenue generated from hiking activities.

## Regional context

The Drakensberg is the longest and highest mountain range in southern Africa, reaching an altitude of 3482 m. The main escarpment, which averages close to 3000 m for 200 km, constitutes a natural border between Lesotho and KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa (Figure 1). In 1903 a game reserve near Giant’s Castle was established by Government Notice No 735 (Barnes 2003), with the purpose of preserving a portion of the mountain landscape for public use and enjoy-



**FIGURE 1** Location of the case study areas in the Drakensberg–Maluti Transfrontier Park in southern Africa. (Map by Wendy Job, Jonathan Linde and Stefan Grab)



**FIGURE 2** The various trekking routes and a comparison of numbers of hikers in the Royal Natal National Park and the Mweni Valley region. (Map by Wendy Job, Jonathan Linde, and Stefan Grab)

ment. Subsequently, an additional 11 protected areas were established immediately east of the Great Escarpment, spanning the full length of the Lesotho and KwaZulu-Natal border with the exception of the Mweni region, which had previously been set aside as a homeland during the apartheid era. Until the 1990s, the Drakensberg was largely considered a place to enjoy high-quality natural settings, but since the proclamation of a combined (natural and cultural) World Heritage Site status in 2000 (Grab and Nüsser 2001), cultural heritage tourism has added to the attractiveness of this region. More recently, a Drakensberg-Maluti Transfrontier Area was established in June 2001 by the National Environment Secretariat of Lesotho and the KwaZulu-Natal Nature Conservation Service. Today the uKhahlamba/Drakensberg Park encompasses a portion of the eastern Lesotho alpine belt and covers a total area of 8113 km<sup>2</sup> (UNEP 2003; Figure 1).

Access to the Drakensberg has been affected by issues concerned with public right of access, which involves legal rights and movement of people across public, private, and common property resources (Kaltenborn and Haaland 2001). Bantu groups previously lived within the current Drakensberg conservation areas, but after their relocation to the adjacent foothills they were for the most part denied recreational access to the mountains during the apartheid era. It was only in the Mweni region that Bantu groups had direct access and continued to live within the Drakensberg montane region east of the escarpment. The Lesotho high-alpine environment remains sparsely populated and is used for high pasturing within a somewhat complicated transhumance system (Quinlan and Morris 1994; Grab and Nüsser 2001). Communities living in mountainous regions are often amongst the poorest and most marginalized in the world (Godde et al 2000),



**FIGURE 3** The Tendele hutted camp in Royal Natal National Park, with the Amphitheatre in the background. (Photo by Stefan Grab)



and those who have lived in the Drakensberg are no exception. However, opportunities for financial gain exist in the intricate connections between conservation areas, tourism, and development (Marsh 1987). In order to explore some of these connections, we compare some recent tourism developments within the Royal Natal National Park (RNNP) and the adjoining Mnweni Valley region.

#### **Royal Natal National Park**

The RNNP was formally established by the Provincial administration in 1916, and following a visit by the royal family was renamed Royal Natal National Park in 1947. The fenced park encompasses 8094 ha in the northern sector of the Drakensberg (Figure 1) and is managed by Ezemvelo KwaZulu–Natal Wildlife (EKZNW), who oversee the provincial conservation and ecotourism initiatives. The park offers an extensive net-

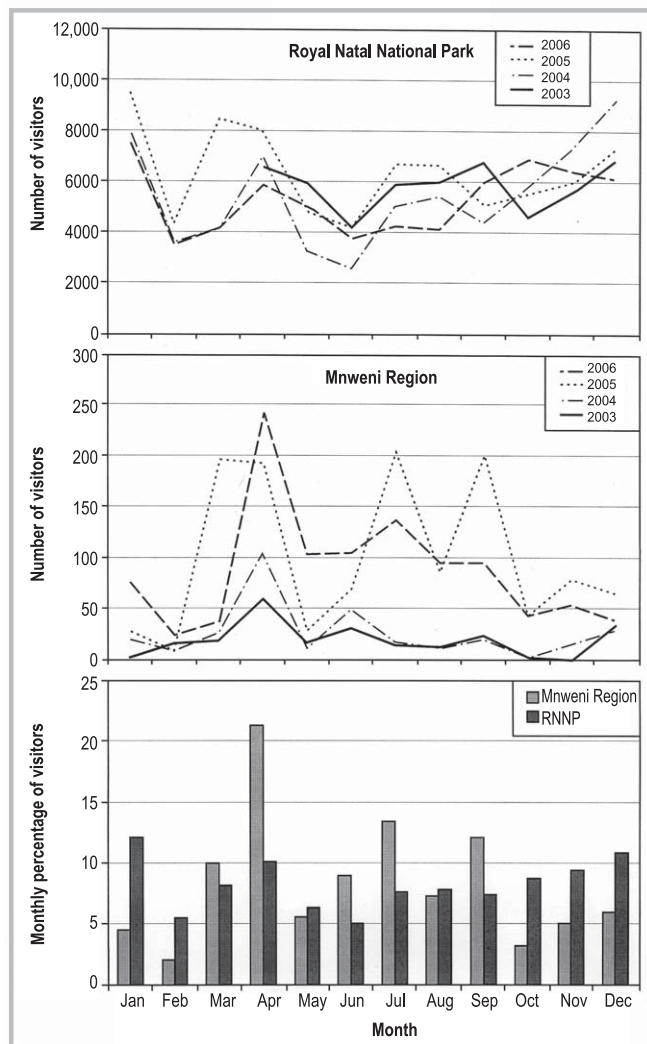
work of well-maintained trails and footpaths, totaling 69 km of varying difficulty for hiking tourists (Figure 2). Relatively 'up-market' cottages and chalets provide 94 beds for overnight tourists at the Tendele camp (Figure 3). The park also provides 75 campsites with plug points and ablution facilities at the Mahai and Rugged Glen campsites. Entrance to the park is on well-signposted tarred roads, easily accessible from the national road (N3).

#### **Mnweni Valley region**

The Mnweni Valley is an unfenced traditional home-stead region located between the RNNP and Cathedral Peak (Figures 1 and 2). The area serves as an important catchment for the delivery of clean water to downstream rural communities and water extraction projects. In addition, it offers spectacular mountain scenery and archeological and cultural heritage. Until recently,



**FIGURE 4** The upper 2 graphs indicate monthly visitor numbers to RNNP and Mnweni for the years 2003–2006, the lower graph indicates the monthly percentage of visitors to the 2 regions, based on the 2004–2006 data.



the area was administered through traditional amaNgwane community structures and had no tourist infrastructure. The Mnweni Valley region has thus been restricted to informal and self-organized hiking and adventure tourism. There is a network of 114 km of degraded and overgrown hiking paths in a rather eroded landscape (Okhahlamba 2006). More recently, the Rand Water Mnweni Trust was launched in 1999 to develop a community tourism initiative which should become self-sustainable within a few years. A grant of R 2.2 million was provided to construct tourist facilities and provide local community training in various relevant fields of tourism and natural resource management. The outcome thus far has been the establishment of the Mnweni Visitor Center, which was opened in September 2002. The Mnweni Visitor Center is managed by the amaNgwane community; all guides/porters are registered with the KwaZulu–Natal Tourism Authority and accredited by Amafa (the provincial cultural authority;

RWMT 2005). The Mnweni Visitor Center is accessible on 23 km of relatively poorly maintained gravel roads, with signposts at only a few crossroads (Tourism KwaZulu–Natal 2005).

## Methodology

Information on local stakeholder involvement, environmental issues and revenue streams was obtained directly from the management of the Mnweni Visitor Center and the RNNP, primarily through on-site open-ended discussions with park management. Income figures and visitor/hiker numbers were obtained from the Mnweni Visitor Center and EKZNW head office. Given that the Mnweni Visitor Center has only been operational for a few years, data were obtained for the period 2004–2006 for both case study areas. Both areas require the submission of mountain registers, which provide information on nationality, intended hiking route, and group size. Hiking trail usage could then be determined based on information contained in the completed registers. Further data from a tourism assessment of the Royal Natal National Park region was used to obtain information on the number of hikers undertaking walks to the Amphitheatre (3000 m) from the Sentinel car park (UPDC 2005; Figure 2). The currency referred to here is the South African Rand (R 1 = approximately US\$ 0.14).

## Results

### Visitor characteristics

The mountain registers of the Mnweni Visitor Center are well archived, with complete monthly records from 2004 to December 2006. Contrary to expectations, mountain registers at the RNNP are inadequately archived and are only available for certain months from 2005 to 2006. However, a complete record of visitor numbers passing through the gate of the RNNP is available from April 2003 to December 2006. This does not necessarily indicate the total number of tourists who engaged in hiking activities, but it is safe to assume that almost all visitors engage in either short day walks or overnight hikes, as there are no sporting or other entertainment facilities within the park. During 2003, a total of 67,923 visitors were recorded, which increased by 6% to 72,365 by 2005, but dropped to 63,480 in 2006 (Figure 4). In comparison, the Mnweni region received 234 visitors in 2003, which increased by 81% to 1200 visitors by 2005, again dropping slightly to 1047 visitors in 2006. Thus it would seem that although the well-established RNNP records substantially higher visitor numbers and still experiences marginal long-term annual increases, the Mnweni region, due to its recent development initiatives, is growing rapidly in popularity as a hiking destination.

Monthly trends in visitor numbers are particularly variable for the Mnweni region (Figure 4), with April recording 21% of annual visitors and only 2% recorded in February (monthly standard deviation = 5.353; Figure 4). The higher numbers of visitors in April, July, and September coincide with southern African tertiary and secondary education vacation periods. Thus, monthly visitor numbers to the Mnweni region are apparently controlled by domestic drivers. The region is becoming increasingly popular among South African adventure tourists, yet is relatively unknown and possibly considered unsafe and/or underdeveloped by foreign tourists. The more established RNNP has considerably less inter-monthly variability in visitor numbers (standard deviation = 2.135; Figure 4), as a high percentage (possibly 40%) of visitors are international, and thus the park is less controlled by domestic drivers than the Mnweni region.

The spatial patterns of trail utilization reveal contrasting characteristics on the nature of hiking tourism between the 2 regions from January to June 2006 (Figure 2). Despite the substantial variety of trail networks within the RNNP, 46% of hikers prefer the popular gorge walk (23 km round trip), whilst 20% of hikers take walks of less than 5 km. It would appear that the RNNP is primarily a destination for day hikers who return to the central accommodation and camping facilities on a daily basis, in part because overnight stays in rock shelters and tents are restricted. Only hikers departing from the Sentinel car park just outside the RNNP and destined for the Amphitheatre summit area (approximately 3000 m) are likely to sleep in shelters and tents on the summit. The Amphitheatre is by far the most popular hiking destination in the northern Drakensberg region, with some 7580 hikers taking this route in the first 6 months of 2006 (Figure 2). In contrast, the Mnweni region has fewer short trail options (although covering longer distances) and limited formal overnight accommodation or camping facilities, yet sleeping in rock shelters ('caves') and tents is permitted in the wilderness. The Mnweni Pass and Rockeries routes (Figure 2) require more substantial mountaineering experience, as they involve steep rocky inclines, longer trekking routes into the alpine zone, and exposure to harsh climatic conditions.

### Management and financial structures

The RNNP receives annual government funding and has a hierarchical management structure. This management style is effective when sufficient funding is granted, and consumer services can be leased to private companies (Eagles 2001). For example, the RNNP Hotel (which is not currently operational) is privately leased, although it is on RNNP property. Local boards have

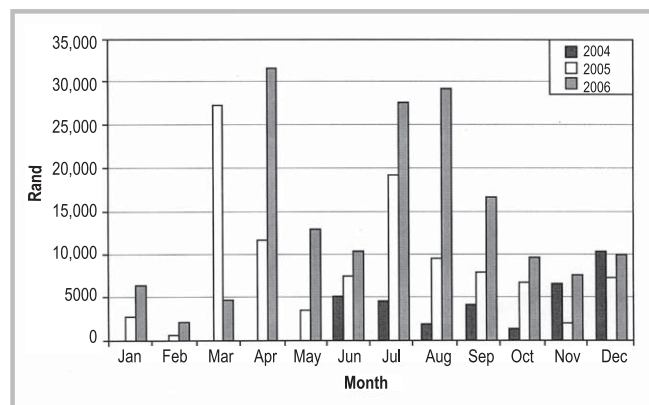
been set up in the central section of the Ukhahlamba Drakensberg Park, involving various tribal authorities (KZN Wildlife 2007). These boards are supported by KZN Wildlife, which is the implementing agency of the Nature Conservation Board. Members of the local boards are selected from the formally constituted organizations, tribal authorities, formal agriculture, regional tourism, business sectors, regional and town councils, local authorities, environmental groups, and special interest groups (KZN Wildlife 2007). Each local board makes decisions on community levy distribution, natural conservation management, and other issues.

During the off-season or winter months, the RNNP employs approximately 70 permanent staff. When the main tourist season begins, the park may employ 50 casual employees, bringing the staff base to 120 people. Two car guards are employed from communities outside the park, while local women are permitted to sell woven crafts to visitors.

The Mnweni Visitor Center is controlled by a Board of community members from the 3 wards of the Mnweni Valley Triangle (Isandlwana, Mabhulesini, and Manzana). The 6-member community Board has managed the Center since 2003. The manager meets with the Board and additional stakeholders (eg Bergwatch and Rand Water) on a monthly basis, primarily to discuss environmental and socioeconomic concerns and developments affecting the region. The Mnweni Visitor Center currently employs a manager and 5 additional staff members. The 5 employees reside in communities within the Mnweni Valley Triangle, and 8 guides from the surrounding area are employed on an ad hoc basis. Hiking tourists pay 98% of guide hire costs to the guide and 2% to the Mnweni Visitor Center. Most payments seem to be made informally and directly to the guides, thus bypassing the Visitor Center management structures, which has caused accounting problems for the Center.

The income generated at Mnweni for overnight hiking and camping is R 120 per person/night. Fees are payable to the Mnweni Visitor Center, and are used for community development projects, such as the training of community guides. After staff salaries have been paid, the majority of the balance is directly allocated to the Mnweni community. Community guides and staff employed at the Center have direct financial benefits from developing tourism. The total monthly income for the Mnweni Visitor Center has grown from about R 1000 (October 2004) to over R 30,000 (April 2006), while income generated directly from trekking has grown from R 200 (August 2004) to almost R 18,000 (April 2006; Figure 5). In contrast, overnight camping outside designated campsites costs R 30/night, while an entry permit to the RNNP costs R 25, of which R 1 is committed to a community levy and a further R 1 to the

**FIGURE 5** Total income generated from trekking tourism in the Mnweni region (2004–2006).



emergency rescue fund. Between 1998 and 2006, the RNNP had committed over R 800,000 to local community development projects (Luthuli 2006). The Mnweni region collects no formal rescue/relief levy, so adjacent parks (RNNP, Cathedral Peak) are relied on for such assistance.

## Conclusion

Global trends indicate that smaller ecotourism establishments may have difficulty in competing with larger and better established destinations (Nepal 2002; Beedie and Hudson 2003). To this end it is pertinent to compare the developing Mnweni region with the adjoining well-established RNNP. Contrary to expectations, the Mnweni region has experienced significantly greater percentage growth in visitor numbers than the RNNP over the last few years, which may be attributed in part to the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism investing in such a 'fledgling' establishment. Although the management structures between the two centers are different in composition and size, both have

successfully incorporated local community participation and have contributed positively to capacity building, training, and rural development. However, as Hudson and Miller (2005) caution, responsible marketing is necessary to ensure a sustainable competitive advantage. In addition, it is essential to balance development and conservation of mountain resources (Draper 2000), which seems to have been achieved by the RNNP but not in the Mnweni area. The lack of guidelines and capacity for environmental conservation in the Mnweni region means that environmental obligations have been neglected. Hence there is widespread soil degradation, poor maintenance of footpaths and overnight shelters, and poor refuse removal (Okhahlamba 2006).

If the Mnweni region is to become economically self-sufficient and further increase its income through mountain tourism, then conservation of the mountain environment is essential, particularly as tourists visit the area for its remote natural beauty and biodiversity. However, the Mnweni community has neither the funds nor the trained staff to implement conservation measures. To this end, the establishment of sustainability networks with more experienced local 'actors' such as the neighboring RNNP and Cathedral Peak areas is important. On a local scale, developing mountain centers such as Mnweni should not necessarily try to compete with adjoining larger and better established centers (RNNP), but rather explore forms of collaboration that could benefit complex local mountain agendas. On a macro scale, the greater Drakensberg–Maluti Transfrontier Park has a well-developed ecotourism and conservation infrastructure on the South African side of the mountain range, while the Lesotho side is underdeveloped (Figure 1). Thus, suggestions for mountain sustainability networks and collaboration between 'actors' are applicable to both local and regional scales in the Drakensberg.

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