

# A bullet laden park: potential for battlefield tourism in the Golden Gate Highlands National Park

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## Abstract

This paper follows the recent discovery of thousands of ammunition from the Anglo-Boer war in the Golden Gate Highlands National Park. We explore the potential of the ammunition to attract tourists and as a stimulant for local economic development. Drawing on focus group discussions, key informant interviews and personal observations, the research established that the local community was eager to benefit because it had previously not benefited from the activities taking place in the park. Because of the historical significance of the ammunition which shaped modern day South Africa, the local community perceive the discovery of the ammunition in the park as a tool for generating tourism products in the park which they previously thought was reserved for the elite few. Drawing on such sentiments, it is imperative that the ammunition sites are urgently conserved, preserved, developed and marketed for the benefit of current and future tourism products.

**Key words:** Ammunition; Golden Gate, Conservation, Battlefield tourism, Economic development

## Introduction

The tourism industry is very dynamic such that many forms of tourism continuously emerge (Bennett 2000). Connell (2009) has observed that in recent decades, a number of new and significant niches in tourism have steadily appeared and evolved. Battlefield tourism in South Africa has significantly grown in the past few years, especially in Kwazulu-Natal and the Northern Cape (Moeller, 2005). There has been a remarkable increase in the number of tourists at battlefield sites in Kwazulu

Natal such as Isandhlwana, Rorke's Drift and Blood River and this has encouraged the South African government government to invest in these Battlefields sites (Venter, 2011). The Golden Gate Highlands National Park (GGHNP), a Battlefield site in the Free State province of South Africa and adjacent to one of South Africa's most impoverished rural areas (QwaQwa), is laden with thousands of ammunition which is more than hundred years old. Specifically, there are two sites with ammunition within the park. It is our hope that if the ammunition sites are properly conserved,

preserved, developed and marketed, there is potential to attract tourists and contribute to the Local Economic Development (LED) in QwaQwa, as is the case with other Battlefield sites discussed by Venter (2011). This is however quite a mammoth task because there are other established and competing forms of tourism. Previous researchers (e.g. Forstner, 2004; Lukhele & Mearns, 2013) have reported that people in rural areas of developing countries pursue multiple strategies to make a living and tourism is one of the potential sources of income to complement other activities. Schoemann (2002) concurs with this notion and argues that tourism is often regarded as a catalyst for economic empowerment and development of rural South Africa. Venter (2011) argues that Battlefield tourism provides a commercial solution to preserving the battlefield historic sites which are usually lost as time progresses.

This paper follows the recent discovery of thousands of ammunition from the Anglo-Boer war in the GGHNP. It is against this background that we explore the potential of the ammunition to attract tourists as this can be a platform to stimulate local economic development. The Anglo-Boer war remains the most terrible and destructive modern armed conflict in South Africa's history (Giliomee & Mbenga, 2007). Because of this, this paper will not give details of what transpired during the war, but will only dwell on how the ammunition left from the war can be promoted as a strategy for tourism and economic development of QwaQwa. Battlefield sites are significant historical sites whose potential for domestic and international tourism generation must be explored (Venter, 2011).

Worldwide, tourism is regarded as a tool for stimulating economic growth by creating jobs for local communities and bringing development to regions and countries, especially those endowed with tourist resources (Eccles, 1995; Croes, 2006). The most common tourist resources are wildlife,

beautiful landscape scenery or water. Interestingly, South Africa could be the only country in the world with a rare tourist resource in the form of thousands of ammunition laden in a national park. Many developing countries are currently promoting tourism development, not only for social and economic reasons but as part of the globalization policy (Ondicho, 2003), and South Africa is no exception. Although it remains a contentious issue on whether the ammunition was dumped or was being stored at the two sites during the Anglo-Boer war, it plays a significant role in the history of South Africa and can be used as a resource to attract tourists, both local and foreign. A fierce battle was fought in and around the Golden Gate Highlands National Park during the Anglo-Boer war and it is widely believed that as the Boers surrendered to the British, they left their ammunition in the park. Another view maintains that the ammunition was simply dumped in the area when the Boers hurriedly evacuated the area following a spring attack by the British. The most credible school of thought on the origin of the ammunition proposes that when the Boers were cornered by the British they blew up some of the ammunition wagons instead of handing them over to their enemies before surrendering. Nevertheless, the origin of the ammunition is not of much interest. What is of significance about the ammunition sites is their importance as heritage sites and their role as a possible tourism attraction.

If marketed properly, the ammunition can serve as one of the biggest motivations for traveling to the Golden Gate Highlands National Park. In today's competitive business environment, most tourism managers are under pressure to develop new products that can entice clients (Kgotse & Kotze, 2013). The bullet laden park is one of the unusual tourism products that consumers could be interested in, hence the rationale of engaging in the current discussion. The decision to travel stems

from an individual's urge to have needs satisfied, and influences tourists travel behaviour (Schoeman, 2010). The rationale of promoting tourism from the ammunition sites is to increase the net benefits to rural people. Because of the possibility that a high number of visitors may be interested in coming to see the ammunition which originated from an event that shaped modern day South Africa, the paper goes further to propose conservation measures in order to curb degradation of the sites in order to promote sustainable tourism.

Although the ammunition sites may be considered a small tourism enterprise, many researchers stress the importance of maximizing linkages with, and correspondingly the local potential of small tourism enterprises (Rodenburg, 1980; Ashley & Roe, 2002; Mitchell & Ashley, 2006; Rogerson, 2006). Much of the previous research on tourism in Southern Africa primarily focuses on tourists' perceptions (Mmopelwa, Kgathi, & Molefhe, 2007), preferences (Chaminuka, Groeneveld, Selomane, & van Ierland, 2011), travel motives (Saayman & Saayman) and willingness to pay for tourist products (Barnes, Schier, & van Rooy, 1999). The ammunition from the Anglo-Boer war can be viewed as the most recent tourism product that has not received any attention by park officials. The nature and quality of the tourism product plays a vital role in the success of tourism development and the one that is currently in the GGHNP is of exceptional quality, given the historical significance of the ammunition.

### **Materials and method**

The GGHNP is located in QwaQwa which is on the foothills of the Maluti Mountains (Taylor & Atkinson, 2012), in the north eastern Free State province of South Africa. QwaQwa was established in 1974 as a homeland for the people of the southern Sotho tribe as part of the homeland policy of

the South African apartheid government (Slater, 2002). From an administrative perspective, QwaQwa falls under Maluti a-Phofung local municipality (Mwalukomo, 2008). The place is densely populated and characterized by unemployment and extreme poverty.

Photographic data about each ammunition site (see Figure 1 and Figure 2) was captured using a digital camera (Samsung st 66). GPS coordinates were recorded for each site using a Germin Global Positioning System. Five focus group discussions, each comprising 10 peasant villagers living in and around the park were held. In addition, key informant interviews were held with senior officials from the South African National Parks, Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, Maloti a-Phofung local municipality, Golden Gate Highlands National Park management, the National Heritage Council, provincial tourism authorities and the traditional leadership. The discussions were mainly centered on (1) the possibility of conserving, preserving and strategically developing the two ammunition sites for social and economic upliftment of the local communities and the nation at large (2) the historical significance of the ammunition and (3) how the sites could be developed and marketed as a tourism product that is beneficial to local communities. It was imperative to talk to the peasant villagers because they are usually not given a significant voice in natural resource management or tourism development in areas adjacent to or inside national parks (Lepp, 2002). Neglecting local community participation usually results in a bad relationship, misunderstanding and conflict with park managers and tourism developers. In addition, local community understanding plays a pivotal role in creating a sustainable tourism industry beneficial to both parks and people (Akama, 1996; Scheyvens, 1999; Sindiga, 1999; Sharpley, 2000).

## Ammunition sites description

*Site 1:* GPS Coordinates: S 28.48088 E 028.71917 Elevation 1840 ± 4m



**Figure 1:** Densely populated ammunition on Site 1 (Photo: Wisemen Chingombe).

*Site 2:* GPS Coordinates: S 28.49084 E 028. 71599 Elevation 1840 ± 4m



**Figure 2:** Sparsely populated ammunition on Site 2 (Photo: Wisemen Chingombe).

The size of each of the ammunition sites is about 900m<sup>2</sup>. Both sites are not fenced or protected and there is no controlled access to the public and wild animals. Consequently, the ammunition may soon disappear if conservation and preservation measures are not urgently proposed and implemented. Animals in the park are trampling on the ammunition which eventually gets embedded into the soil. At Site 1, where the greater amount of the ammunition is found, there is evidence that the ammunition is being washed towards a waterhole, which is only 40 metres away. The waterhole provides drinking water to animals in the park. In addition, concentration of the ammunition on site 1 increases towards the waterhole, suggesting the bullets are being washed and eroded towards the waterhole. There is an urgent need to carry out a chemical analysis of the water because it could be polluted by chemicals from the ammunition. Pollution might have a detrimental effect to the animals that drink the water, thus affecting wildlife in the park. There is a significant quantity of animal droppings on site 1, which may suggest that animals like the site because it is very close to the waterhole. There is no sign of vegetation growth on the two sites, especially where the bullets are concentrated. Although we cannot conclusively explain the absence of vegetation at the ammunition sites, it can be inferred that the poisonous effect of chemicals released by the ammunition has a detrimental effect on vegetation.

Some bullets are exhibiting a bluish and greenish powdery coating, suggesting that chemical reactions are taking place on the copper bullets. A possible explanation for this is that due to exposure to the atmospheric gasses and weather elements, copper is oxidised into copper oxide, thus giving the bluish colour found on the bullets. This occurs when rainwater or moisture

from dew in which oxygen is dissolved gets in contact with the copper bullets.

After prolonged exposure, the reaction products of copper turn blue to green due to the formation of copper sulphate, carbonate or chloride salts in varying concentrations which could be detrimental to water quality. In addition, there are some chemical elements present in the bullets, some of which can pollute soil and water. The elemental composition of bullets usually includes antimony, arsenic, bismuth, silver, tin and cadmium (Spiegelman, Tobin, James, Sheather, Wexler & Roundhill, 2007).

The characteristics of Sites 1 and 2 are more or less the same, except that Site 2 is much more eroded, further away from the water source and has fewer bullets compared to Site 1. Observations that were made at the two sites clearly indicated that the ammunition is being lost because of the trampling effect of wild animals as evidenced by the footpath of the animals through site 2 as well as massive erosion taking place at the site.

## **Results and discussion**

Focus group participants and key informants emphatically stated the urgent need to propose and implement conservation measures of the ammunition sites and devise strategies to develop them as tourist destinations. This response was registered more strongly within the peasant community, where hopes to reap tangible benefits from the highly unique tourism product were high. It is a common practice for tourism authorities to channel part of the revenue generated to local communities in the vicinity of the tourism products. The discussions revealed that the ammunition sites may become significant tourist attractions with the potential to increase

local economic development in QwaQwa and promote development in the north eastern Free State province in general. Many countries now consider tourism development as a crucial investment for the present and future role in economic growth and development. Because of tourism's contribution to local economic development, several developing countries have turned to tourism expansion as an engine for economic growth (Ondicho, 2003).

The results also indicate that the majority of the members of the peasant community were eager to tangibly benefit because they had previously not benefited from the tourism activities already taking place within the GGHP. This concurs with Schoemann (2002), who has reported that the tourism industry in the Free State province does not currently have any real impact on local livelihoods and the economy of the province. Because of the historical meaning and heritage importance of the ammunition, the local community stated that it was convinced time had come for them to benefit from the park which they previously thought was reserved only for the few and elite (Taru, Mukwada, Somerai & Chingombe, 2013). Drawing on such sentiments, it is imperative that the ammunition sites are urgently conserved, developed and marketed for the benefit of current and future generations.

If the ammunition managed to survive for over a century on its own, then present humans must be able to propose conservation measures to preserve the ammunition for future generations. Conservation measures should however not interfere with the aesthetic value of the ammunition sites. There must be controlled access to the ammunition sites. Both sites must be fenced off so that the ammunition is not vandalized or trampled by animals and tourists. It should however be noted that fencing off the ammunition sites may not appeal to tourists. Tourists roaming freely over the ammunition sites can contribute to

soil erosion if not controlled, eventually destroying what they want to see (Venter, 2011). Although it may seem impractical, equally important is to cover the sites from rainfall. Because of severe erosion taking place around the ammunition sites, the flow of water must be diverted so that runoff does not wash away the bullets. Sheltering the ammunition from rainfall will also minimize land pollution from the bullets, since interaction of rainwater and chemicals inside the bullets result in chemical reactions which release toxic substances to the soil and this must be avoided. Once these proper conservation measures and controlled access are in place, the sites must be well marketed, basing on the historical significance which shaped modern day South Africa. The focus group discussions and key informants were in total agreement that once access to both heritage sites is restricted, visitors must pay a fee to access the sites, thus generating proceeds for local communities.

### **Marketing of the ammunition sites**

A comprehensive marketing plan of the GGHP and its ammunition is necessary and different markets must be considered in view of the educational and historical nature of the ammunition. Because of the current technological advancement, the ammunition sites can be marketed using simple online platforms or other social media. This is a cheap and effective way of destination marketing and advertising, with an international appeal. Venter (2011) argues that technology plays a vital role in reaching the market and drawing attention, particularly to young people.

Locally, distribution of flyers, daily newspapers and radio programmes could be used to market the ammunition sites. Community awareness campaigns and outreach programmes to cater for the usually disadvantaged communities are also necessary. Although these communities may not be financially sound to visit the

ammunition sites, the sites exist within their vicinity and community involvement could definitely play a pivotal role in the success of tourism activities and conservation efforts within their geographic jurisdiction. It is however important to note that each of the marketing strategies that have been mentioned has its own share of problems although the net benefit outweighs those problems.

According to Ekonde (2010), the tourism fraternity is full of statements like:

- (1) *"I would love to spend my honeymoon in a beautiful place"*.
- (2) *"I hear people from that part of the world behave differently"*
- (3) *"It has a magnificent display of nature; I would love to have pictures of that"*

If the ammunition sites are properly conserved, developed and well marketed, we are sure that both domestic and international tourists will soon add to their vocabulary the following statement:

*"I would love to see the ammunition in the Golden Gate Highlands National Park for myself"*.

This may seem a mammoth task because the reality is that there are other forms of tourism establishments which compete with Battlefield tourism, but we are convinced the site will make a name for itself although it may take some time.

## Conclusion

For the GGHNP battlefield tourism to have a significant impact on local livelihoods there must be a strategic plan to serve as a guideline for marketers, developers and other role players on the ammunition sites. Deposits of ammunition found in the park possess sufficient historical and heritage significance for generating tourism and thus have the potential to stimulate local and regional economic growth. The

development of tourism around areas of historical significance must attract an increasing focus among tourism policy makers both at local and national level of government as this could be a potential driver for local economic development.

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