The Making of a ‘Big 5’ Game Reserve as an Urban Tourism Destination: Dinokeng, South Africa

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Abstract

Since 2000, against the background of chronically high levels of city unemployment and of the stagnation or rundown of the manufacturing sector, many urban governments across South Africa pivoted towards the building of competitive tourism economies as an anchor for local economic development, employment creation and small enterprise development. With the tourism sector being the most popular sectoral focus for local economic development programming in South Africa, the evolution of place-based development initiatives around tourism is a topic of policy relevance. This paper contributes to tourism scholarship concerning new product innovation and development for urban tourism in South Africa. It investigates the unfolding planning and challenges of a unique tourism development project for the creation of a ‘big 5’ game reserve located on the periphery of the country’s major metropolitan complex and economic hub, Gauteng province. The evolution of the project and the challenges of destination development are themes under scrutiny.

Keywords: Urban tourism; game reserve; Gauteng; destination development; product innovation; Dinokeng
Introduction

In terms of geographical gaze, most tourism scholarship across sub-Saharan Africa is traditionally rural in focus (Novelli, 2015; Novelli, Adu-Ampong & Ribeiro, 2021; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2011). Much attention is accorded to the region’s tourism products around wildlife, nature, iconic attractions of natural beauty as well as emerging tourism products variously in cultural heritage tourism, adventure tourism or volunteer tourism (McKay, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020; Lwoga, 2019; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2018a; Rogerson & Slater, 2014; Saarinen & Rogerson, 2015). As compared to the large volume of writings on rural tourism, questions surrounding tourism in African cities generally are given lesser consideration as shown by a number of research overviews (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021; Rogerson & Visser, 2014). Nevertheless, research about tourism in Africa’s cities is on the rise with a number of distinctive themes under scrutiny. These include informal sector tourism, the development of accommodation services and a discovery of the importance of understanding past urban tourisms (Greenberg & Rogerson, 2015, 2018, 2019; Rogerson, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2018b, 2019, 2020a; Tichaawa, 2017; Visser & Eastes, 2020).

Within sub-Saharan Africa, the overwhelmingly majority in terms of spatial locus for urban tourism writings, is South Africa where there is a burgeoning scholarship that has been documented (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2017, 2021; Rogerson & Visser, 2005, 2007, 2011). Over the past 20 years, for South African tourism geographers, urban tourism has been one of the growth points for research (Rogerson & Visser, 2020: Visser, 2016a). Arguably, among the most significant themes in recent urban tourism scholarship about South Africa, is tourism’s role in urban economic restructuring, initiatives for employment creation, and poverty reduction (Rogerson & Visser, 2020; Visser, 2019). This thematic focus parallels that which emerged in cities of the global North where tourism became “an essential tool for economic regeneration and employment creation, for place promotion, for re-imaging cities and helping to create identity in the new global system” (Williams, 2009: 208). Spirou (2021) documents how urban places across the United States searched for policy options to remedy the devastating effects of economic restructuring connected to globalisation, de-industrialisation and decentralisation. The burst of a parallel South African scholarship around restructuring and investigations of tourism’s role in economic diversification and city regeneration is inseparable from the importance which is attached (since the democratic transition) to the pursuit of place-based local economic development interventions (Rogerson, 2014). In terms of the Constitution, local governments in South Africa are mandated to support local economic development. Venter (2020) points out that among the responsibilities of municipal government are the delivery of equitable and efficient services, building local democracy, and the promotion of economic and social development. Since 2000, against a backdrop of worsening levels of city unemployment and the stagnation or rundown of industrial employment, many urban governments across South Africa pivoted towards the building of competitive tourism economies as an anchor for local economic growth, job creation and small enterprise development (Kontsiwe & Visser, 2019; Nel & Rogerson, 2016; Rogerson, 2020; Visser, 2019).

As is stressed by Booyens (2020) innovation and innovative product development are of critical importance for maintaining and strengthening urban tourism economies. In many instances innovation can be built upon local tourism assets for advancing place-based development (Dlomo & Tseane-Gumbi, 2017; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020b). All South Africa’s major cities, in a multitude of different ways, are involved in using local assets for tourism expansion, job creation and inclusive growth (Rogerson, 2013; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2014; Nel & Rogerson, 2016). The target markets are those of both international and domestic...
tourism (Rogerson, 2015; Rogerson & Visser, 2006, 2007). In the search for more competitive tourism economies, it is observed that the pathways and directions of city tourism development in South Africa have followed divergent trajectories (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2017). The coastal centres of Cape Town and Durban have a markedly different set of leisure tourism products to leverage compared to ‘non-traditional’ urban tourism destination such as Johannesburg (Ferreira & Visser, 2007; Rink, 2020; Rogerson & Visser 2007, 2011; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2014, 2020c; van der Merwe, 2019; Visser, 2016b, 2020).

Overall, as a mirror of the broader phenomenon of cultural commodification, the leading focus of tourism promotion in South African cities is the production of new experiences for leisure consumption. Waterfront re-developments (most notably, Cape Town and Durban), hosting sports events (including the FIFA World Cup), casino developments, the construction of new shopping and leisure complexes (such as Sandton City or The Mall of Africa in Johannesburg) and the creation of cultural heritage products have been at the cutting edge of local initiatives for boosting tourism in South Africa’s major cities (Boucher, Cullen & Calitz, 2018; Ferreira, 2011; Masilo & van der Merwe, 2014; Nyakana, Tichaawu & Swart, 2014; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2017; Roux, 2018; van der Merwe, 2013; van der Merwe & Rogerson, 2018). Festivals and events, including for conference and exhibition tourism, have also been on the agenda of both policy makers and astute private entrepreneurs (Donaldson, 2013; Harmer & Rogerson, 2017; Rogerson, 2005, 2015; Rogerson & Harmer, 2015; Visser, 2005).

Several ‘niche’ forms of tourism have emerged to strengthen the product base of South African urban tourism economies (Rogerson & Visser, 2011). These include, for example, for adventure tourism (McKay, 2013, 2017), cruise tourism (Rink, 2020), gay tourism (Rink, 2013; Visser, 2002, 2003), poverty tourism (Frenzel, 2020), volunteer tourism (Rogerson & Slater, 2014) and wedding tourism (Rogerson & Wolfaardt, 2015). Currently much attention focuses upon opportunities for product innovation in creative tourism (Booyens & Rogerson, 2015, 2019a; Rogerson, 2006), food tourism (Ferreira, 2020; Ferreira & Muller, 2013; Naicker & Rogerson, 2017; Rogerson & Collins, 2015, 2019), township tourism (Booyens, 2010; Booyens & Rogerson, 2019a, 2019b; Frenzel, 2016, 2020; Koens & Thomas, 2015; Rolfes, Steinbrink & Uhl, 2009) and ‘off the beaten track’ tours in South Africa’s inner cities (Frenzel, 2020; Opfermann, 2020).

**Aims, scope and methods**

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that South African tourism scholars have investigated a host of issues surrounding the developmental mandate of local governments. As the tourism sector is identified (at least, pre-COVID-19) as the most popular sectoral focus for local economic development programming in South Africa the evolution of place-based development initiatives around tourism is an important topic for local researchers (Kontsiwe & Visser, 2019). This paper aims to contribute to tourism scholarship concerning new product innovation and development for urban tourism in South Africa. It investigates the unfolding and challenges of a unique tourism development project for the creation of a big 5 game reserve which is situated on the periphery of the country’s major metropolitan complex and economic hub, Gauteng province. The research focus is Dinokeng, a project which aims to create a premier tourist destination in the north-east part of Gauteng and running across into sections of the adjacent provinces of Limpopo and Mpumalanga (Fig. 1).
Methodologically, the discussion is based on the collection and analysis of key planning documents concerning project developments at Dinokeng. In addition, it draws upon existing research studies (Moeng, 2004; Singh, 2008; van Rooyen, 2005) as well as stakeholder interviews undertaken with key provincial actors involved in the implementation of planning for Dinokeng, and a total of 27 semi-structured interviews which were conducted with owners of local accommodation establishments at Dinokeng. The discussion is organised into two further sections of material. The first examines project planning for Dinokeng as an innovative product for an urban tourism destination. The analysis adopts what is referred to sometimes as the “unfashionable” chronological approach (Worthington, 2003: 370). The second section turns from concerns about project planning instead to interrogate aspects of the area’s development as a tourist destination and several of its challenges.

The evolution of Dinokeng project planning
In terms of its location Dinokeng is situated in the north-eastern part of Gauteng province within close proximity of the densely populated centres of Pretoria, Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni. Its geography incorporates some of the poorest and most economically undeveloped areas of Gauteng province. Indeed, Dinokeng’s location is the basis for its development potential and also defines many of the economic and environmental risks that
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affect the area (Singh, 2008). The area is characterised by a mix of savanna, wetland and grassland habitats which serve as the ideal environment for game animals and the big 5. Importantly, the project is situated with good access to O.R. Tambo International airport, South Africa’s international gateway and transit point for many tourists – many on short business visits and, thus, often without the opportunity to travel to experience the ‘big 5’ in their natural surroundings in the iconic game reserves of Limpopo and Mpumalanga. It was considered that the planning of an ‘All-Africa’ tourism destination around a big 5 game reserve combining linkages of culture and nature would offer an opportunity to promote Gauteng as a comprehensive tourism product. In addition, it might provide an urgently needed developmental boost – especially in terms of tourism employment opportunities - to a relatively marginal and underdeveloped part of the province (Rogerson, 2004; Van Rooyen, 2005).

It was against this background that the strategic decision was taken by the Gauteng provincial government to plan for developing the area’s local natural and cultural product offerings. In terms of project planning and roll-out, Dinokeng formed part of a basket of projects launched in the early 2000s as part of the Gauteng Spatial Development Initiative by the Gauteng Provincial Government (GPG) through its economic development agency, Blue IQ (Rogerson, 2004). The Dinokeng Project was termed a ‘geospatial initiative’ and designed to stimulate the local economy of the Dinokeng area and its surrounds (Dinokeng, 2017; GPG, 2010, 2011). The project documentation continually emphasizes its role for addressing the developmental problems and issues in the economically depressed regions of north eastern Gauteng (GPG, 2015, 2016, 2017). The Blue IQ initiative was an investment of R3.5 billion by GPG seeking to create or upgrade strategic economic infrastructure through eleven (originally ten) mega-projects (Pillay, 2004). It focused on a range of economic sectors of technology, transport, high value-added manufacturing as well as tourism to forge Gauteng as South Africa’s ‘smart’ province (Rogerson, 2004). The agency, Blue IQ, had been deliberately founded by the province as a commercial enterprise able “to stimulate certain sectors of the economy in a language to which the private sector is able to respond” (Blue IQ, 2012: 6).

Dinokeng was one of a suite of tourism projects supported by Blue IQ which included the heritage and cultural tourism products of Constitution Hill, Newtown, and the Cradle of Humankind (Rogerson, 2004; Rogerson and van der Merwe, 2016; van der Merwe, 2013). This said, it must be appreciated that planning for tourism development in what would become Dinokeng pre-dated the launch of the Blue IQ development agency. As Singh (2008) points out, the project’s beginning is most appropriately traced back to 1996 when it was conceptualized as the Wallmansthal development initiative and later re-styled as the North Eastern Gauteng Initiative (NEGI). Overall, the unfolding planning for the Dinokeng project began to crystallize out of many planning ideas that emerged from feasibility studies that were conducted during 1998 and 1999.

During the 1990s the region of North Eastern Gauteng was characterised predominantly by agricultural activities with smaller land uses such as recreational resorts, some residential clusters, small-scale mining and light industry (DACEL, 1999). According to Moeng (2004) at that time the area included 123 small- to medium-size farming units and 60 farms with mixed land-use activities. The region was not, however, environmentally well-suited for intensive agricultural production as it did not receive significant rainfall or have good soil resources (Moeng, 2004). Many farms were limited to small plots using irrigation purposes to produce maize or vegetable crops. Only some farmers kept animals or operated dairy farms. As many (if not most) farmers believed agriculture in the area to be of limited profitability, they sought to diversify their operations. Such factors led many local farmers to discontinue their agricultural practices and instead to develop conservancies. The goal for developing the conservancies was to promote ‘uni-activity’ conservation and increase the possibility of small-
scale tourism by dropping internal fences which would allow the replacement of domestic animals with game (Moeng, 2004).

The North Eastern Gauteng Initiative (NEGI) aimed to establish a conservation based eco-tourism destination in the north east of Gauteng (GPG, 1999). The anchor project for this was to be the establishment of a big 5 game reserve. In its original conception, the NEGI project intended to cover an area of over 100 000ha. and extend into conservation land in both Mpumalanga and Limpopo provinces. The planning included potentially negotiating with land reform beneficiaries (in the Rust Der Winter land reform pilot) with a view to incorporating some of their land into the project. In addition, for the expanded development of Dinokeng, there was considerable available military land in the area. Negotiations were planned to occur also with the South African National Defence Force with a view to the potential incorporation of their land into the project (Singh, 2008). The project area demarcated for NEGI encompassed a number of existing tourism destinations and facilities. These include Cullinan with the Premier Diamond Mine, the Haakdoornfontein Clay Borrow Pit (with some of the oldest insect fossils in southern Africa), Loopspruit wine farm, Roodeplaat dam and several existing game farms in the area. Of the group of existing tourist attractions, the Cullinan area was by far the most developed as it represented an incipient heritage tourism destination as is documented by van der Merwe and Rogerson (2018). The core intention of project planners was to build a competitive tourist destination by developing the area as a natural and cultural hub under the marketing slogan of “All of Africa in One Day” (Fig.2).

Figure 2. Outdoor Advertisements Marketing Dinokeng as ‘Africa in One Day’ (Source: Based on Singh, 2008).
Initially, the management of Dinokeng initially was located within the Gauteng Department of Agriculture, Conservation, Environment and Land Affairs (DACEL) as a strategic short-term development project with budgets deriving from Blue IQ. The Member of the Executive Council of the provincial government stressed that the provincial government’s watchword through the Dinokeng planning phase has been “balance” with the need to balance business development and at the same time ensuring that the project maximized the benefits of the developments for local communities (Singh, 2008). DACEL undertook the process of establishing a Master Plan, namely the Integrated Tourism Development Framework (ITDF) wherein an intensive study was done in 2001 for the development of Dinokeng as a viable urban tourism product (DACEL, 2001). The ITDF proposed that Dinokeng would be a different destination offering domestic and international tourists a diverse “Africa in a day” circuit providing ‘windows’ into Africa’s cultural and natural experiences (DACEL, 2001). Tourists would be enabled to journey through various ‘windows’ to experience the diversity and richness that Africa has to offer. Three major hubs and four cultural centre ‘nodes’ were proposed as key focus areas or ‘windows’ for the project. These planned hubs and nodes were to serve as starting points for exploring the local area through a number of proposed routes (Fig. 3).

Two of the three hubs were situated in areas with some existing tourism and recreational infrastructure, namely the Roodeplaat Dam and Cullinan. The third hub was the Dinokeng Game Reserve. The nodes would align and link each hub together, thereby offering various

Figure 3. The Conceptual Planning of the Dinokeng Project
routes to travel and experience the destination (Fig. 3). The nodes incorporating cultural centres would be operationalised between the hubs. The objective in this tourism planning was to introduce a new and vital flow of visitors to the area and catalyse involvement of private sector entrepreneurs. As discussed by Singh (2008) the planned nodes were to include, *inter alia*, windows into music, dance and drumming (drum making; traditional instruments; musical groups; singing; dancing; interpretation); traditional African farming and medicine (crops; Nguni cattle; goats; production of medicinal herbs; *Sangoma*; interpretation); African adornment (beadwork, crafting; interpretation); and African craft (crafting, firing; styles; uses; interpretation). Finally, in order to ensure linkages between the circuit and existing visitor attractions, a variety of theme routes and scenic routes were proposed for the southern part of Dinokeng. These included an agricultural history route and history building route, a Ndebele cultural route and township tours, battlefields and cemetery route, and a birding route (Singh, 2008). Fig. 4 shows the spatial framework of the hubs which guided the original conceptualisation of the Dinokeng project.

![Spatial Framework of the Dinokeng Project Showing the Three Hubs](https://example.com/space.png)

*Figure 4. Spatial Framework of the Dinokeng Project Showing the Three Hubs (Source: Authors)*

It was observed that with the goal of fostering brand awareness the marketing of Dinokeng as a tourism destination commenced ahead of the completion of projected development for these various hubs and nodes (Singh, 2008). Fig. 5 provides one example from the mid-2000s of marketing for Dinokeng as an emergent tourism destination with its many potential different product offerings. Arguably, Dinokeng was marketed as an alternative urban tourism destination in a completely different manner to other urban tourism products available in South Africa in that the focus was of bringing the wild to the city by initiating a game reserve within close proximity to cities with large population concentrations.
Overall, therefore, an array of different tourism products was planned to encourage visitors to come at different times of the year and to different places within the project area (Singh, 2008). Existing tourism products provided the foundations for new project initiatives. The three hubs were identified as follows. First, was Roodeplaat Dam, a location for mass recreation and environmental education facilities which was specifically designed for domestic visitors and school groups. Under the racial segregation of facilities that existed during apartheid the Roodeplaat Dam Public Resort was the first of its kind in South Africa. It had opened in 1979 to service the recreational needs of (only) Coloured and Indian communities (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020a). Second, was Cullinan with its mix of heritage tourism
attractions including surface and underground mine tours, a mine museum, train rides, Edwardian architecture, restaurants, tea gardens and art exhibits (van der Merwe & Rogerson, 2018). Lastly - and most important - there was to be the Dinokeng Game Reserve as a big 5 game reserve which would incorporate a range of accommodation services and allow game drives as well as other nature-based activities. Undoubtedly, the making of a big 5 game reserve was the centrepiece for the Dinokeng project (Van Rooyen, 2005). This hub consisting of the Dinokeng Game Reserve was to comprise a mosaic of state- and privately-owned properties in the northern and north eastern portions of project area (DACEL, 2001). It was planned that, unlike most public-sector initiated game reserves, national parks and other types of protected areas in South Africa, the central objective of the envisaged Dinokeng Game Reserve was not the conservation of biodiversity. Rather it was to contribute significantly to economic growth and poverty alleviation in Gauteng Province as a whole and the underdeveloped Dinokeng area more specifically through the stimulation of a wildlife-based tourism industry (Singh, 2008).

Critical secondary objectives of the project included nature conservation as well as empowering previously disadvantaged local communities including through employment preferences for local residents in the reserve or from surrounding communities (Van Rooyen, 2005). In addition, agreements were sought with stakeholders that local small medium and micro-enterprises (SMMEs) and Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) suppliers should be sought out through preferential procurement for operating in the supply chains of tourism or reserve enterprises.

Destination development and challenges
The Gauteng Province committed to ‘seed’ project development for Dinokeng through an allocation of R150 million from its Blue IQ fund to stimulate and attract private sector investment via infrastructure development. As a central project objective was that of stimulating economic growth, job creation and income generation in the local area the project plan provided for several initiatives targeted to spread the project benefits to disadvantaged communities (Singh, 2008). Funds were earmarked for a land acquisition and tenure security programme that would enable landless people to ‘buy into’ game farming ventures and re-wilding practices. In particular, dedicated funds were set aside for the establishment of a game incentive scheme that would broaden ownership in the project (GPG, 1999). Overall, the big 5 reserve was to comprise largely of land under private ownership and function on a conservancy basis through the establishment of a management authority. It was envisaged that land mobilisation for the planned reserve would take place in a phased development over a number of years (GPG, 1999).

The actual establishment of Dinokeng took place only in January 2006. The formal opening of the Dinokeng Game Reserve occurred on 22 September 2011. The slow pace of destination development was underpinned by several factors include a complex of governance-related and institutional issues including inter-governmental coordination as the project crossed provincial boundaries (Singh, 2008). From its inception the project was highly ambitious. As Van Rooyen (2005: 605-606) points out it involved a complex partnership which necessitated an extended process of developing agreements for “bringing together a number of key stakeholders including local communities, private landowners, municipalities, business entities and the Gauteng Provincial Administration”. The project had long been in an incubation phase and could move forward toward actualisation only after extensive negotiations were completed with at least 200 representative landowners with the finalisation of a raft of legal agreements (GPG, 2006). A major focus in these legal agreements surrounded certain provisions that had to be met by the Dinokeng Game Reserve Management Association requiring it to comply with BBBEE requirements and targets, implement socio-economic plans to promote the interests of
current occupants and workers as well as to invest a certain percentage of profits into community development programmes in order to support local/surrounding communities (GPG, 2006).

The actual physical expansion and development of the game reserve was constrained by multiple challenges. Early advertising about Dinokeng had been wildly optimistic of the size of the reserve with marketing hype for exploring 240,000 ha (see Fig. 2). By 2006, the extent of the game reserve was estimated at 25,000 hectares with the potential to expand to 45,000 hectares by 2011 (GPG, 2006). However, by 2009 only 13,500 hectares had been consolidated as part of the start-up area (GPG, 2010). A significant portion (5,000 hectares) was added into the reserve a year later as a result of the incorporation of private land and a state military base (GPG, 2010). This physical expansion allowed the focus shift more towards the management of the game reserve (GPG, 2010). Dinokeng opened in 2011 with 18,500 hectares of land at a time when it was acknowledged that it needed to extend its size to 40,000 hectares in order to reach ecological and economic viability (Dinokeng, 2014). This said, the ability of Dinokeng to expand its size to 40,000 hectares was reliant on the willingness of potential landowners to incorporate their pieces of land into the reserve (Dinokeng, 2015). An application to declare Dinokeng a protected area was submitted for approval in 2009 (GPG, 2010). Nevertheless, despite constant engagement, protected area status was delayed due to several issues most importantly the lagging processes in finalising land claims which it was considered at one point put the entire project in jeopardy (Dinokeng, 2015). By 2018 the area was still not declared with protected area status. Fence construction for the game reserve, however, started in 2006 and was completed by 2010 (GPG, 2010). This served as some of the first internal infrastructure to be developed (GPG, 2006). By 2014, the perimeter fence had been extended with a cumulative total of 206km of fencing (Dinokeng, 2014). The infrastructure of five planned gates for Dinokeng was undertaken during 2010 with further development through completion and full operationalization by 2014 of a ticketing system (Dinokeng, 2014). Indeed, the five gateways became crucial for the operation of Dinokeng as it resulted in an income stream through the collection of conservation fees at the entry boom gates (Dinokeng, 2014).

For ecological continuity and rehabilitation operations the Dinokeng Game Reserve maintains an open natural landscape (Dinokeng, 2015). The utilisation of ecological field assessments and bio-monitoring serve as vital management tools to restore ecosystem health and ensure project sustainability (Dinokeng, 2015). The use of veld condition assessments, game counts, ecological carrying capacity assessments, and river health bio-monitoring ensures delivery of ecosystem services such as clean water, clean air, productive soils and natural resource harvesting including for wood and game products for curio sales (Dinokeng, 2015). It was within such a context that during the early 2000s some stocking of game began to occur. In 2010 a significant step of progression was when 1,500 heads of game were added to the reserve by participating landowners (GPG, 2006, 2010). Game counts serve as a significant indicator of habitat management and sustainability within Dinokeng (Dinokeng, 2017). The introduction of wild cats in Dinokeng is viewed as another move toward the area’s successful evolution into a big 5 game reserve. During 2014 a pair of cheetahs was released improving the appeal and marketing of Dinokeng as a tourist destination (Dinokeng, 2014). Another achievement for Dinokeng was that it was one of the few game reserves in South Africa in 2015 that did not experience rhino poaching which was attributed to the reserve’s strict access control, security and patrolling (Dinokeng, 2015).
One vital signal of destination development is the growth of a range of accommodation service providers in Dinokeng. For 2018 an audit of accommodation services in Dinokeng revealed the operation of 57 lodging establishments with a 3000 total bed capacity. It is evident that many of these establishments – at least one-third - were founded before the implementation of the Dinokeng project. Many of these early lodge developers can be characterised as lifestyle entrepreneurs. The interview respondents, however, stressed that since the early 2000s major growth has taken place in accommodation service provision at Dinokeng by a group of opportunistic investors following the establishment of Dinokeng, which created business promise which was confirmed by tourism growth. Further the interviews disclosed a small group of lodges developed as a retirement option for other entrepreneurs. A churning of ownership of establishments was observed with new lodge openings, take-overs of ownership and even the closure of certain establishments. The location of these accommodation establishments is shown on Figure 6. An analysis showed that the most common provision is for self-catering chalet accommodation (68 %) followed by bed and breakfast providers (16%)}
and camping and caravan facilities (10%). The smallest provision (6%) share is for full service or dinner, bed and breakfast provision which is available at only a select few upmarket lodges at Dinokeng. The full service accommodation establishments were the highest quality providers in Dinokeng and formally graded. Overall, however, the vast majority – 77% - of accommodation service provision at Dinokeng in 2018 was available in ungraded accommodation. In terms of length of stay the average reported was 1.7 days with survey respondents stressing that Dinokeng mainly serves as a weekend destination for domestic tourists.

Figure 7. The distribution of facilities within Dinokeng game reserve. (Source: Authors).

Beyond accommodation products for tourists, the reserve offers a range of infrastructural facilities for day visitors. Figure 7 shows the spatial distribution of various activities offered within the game reserve in 2018. These include for the pursuit of 150km long self-drive routes (SDR), access for ‘twitchers’ to birding hides, a range of picnic spots, curio shops, adventure activities and restaurants. In addition, the provision of conference facilities assists in growing the market for business tourism at Dinokeng and bush wedding venues open
up the reserve to the Gauteng wedding tourism market. Newer activities include hot air ballooning, microlight flying and a scuba diving school. The stakeholder interviews with accommodation providers revealed considerable challenges with the self-drive routes. Issues included confusing signage on the routes such that many people get lost, visitors drive onto private land and too much traffic to control during peak seasons such as Easter. These are among the several challenges facing the management structures at Dinokeng.

In terms of local impacts by far the most significant is that since the establishment of the game reserve more than 800 permanent jobs have been provided for residents in adjoining communities. Other local ‘pro-poor’ spin-offs relate to opportunities for the provision and sale of craft goods, and skills training. Since the opening of Dinokeng in late 2011 the 18 500 ha. game reserve has grown in stature to support an abundance of indigenous wildlife. It has provided a grassland/bushveld habitat for free-roaming game and a variety of animal, trees and birds. In terms of its land rehabilitation and conservation processes the Dinokeng Game Reserve must be credited with returning former degraded land to productive utilisation. By 2018 – the timeline of the field research – the Dinokeng project still was a work in progress with the need for physical expansion of the game reserve one of its most pressing issues. Indeed, given the relatively short time-span of its existence (less than a decade) evaluations would be premature at present concerning the project’s long-term impact for enhancing local development prospects, most especially for community development in this economically marginal space of Gauteng province.

Conclusion

In the environment of the COVID-19 pandemic certain tourism scholars are drawing attention to the importance in tourism recovery planning of “local tourism” in general and specifically for the potential of the greater utilisation of natural parks and protected areas (Hall, Scott & Gössling, 2020; Romagosa, 2020). With its location close to South Africa’s largest metropolitan complex the Dinokeng area can anticipate a future expansion of tourism in the context of COVID-19 and new consumer demands for nature tourism. This paper contributes to tourism scholarship concerning new product innovation and development for urban tourism in South Africa. Using documentary as well as interview sources the research has traced the key steps in planning of this innovative urban tourism product. In addition, it has highlighted several of the challenges which were associated with the unfolding evolution of this game reserve. Overall, it provides a benchmark of what must be viewed as a set of historical information for year 2018 at the near close of the pre-COVID-19 tourism era. This benchmark can be utilised by other tourism researchers to examine the extent of transformation as well as to assess changes taking place at Dinokeng during coming decades.

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