

## South African Mountain Guides and their Experiences of, and Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article was to survey a select group of mountain guides in South Africa. This was to ascertain how the varying alert levels forced by the Covid-19 pandemic and promulgated by the South African Government had affected their businesses over the last three years (2020-2022). Mountain guiding is a small and relatively unknown commercial tourism operation in the country. The country's mountain guides work in geographically isolated areas and perform a range of physically arduous activities in the service of their clients. There is limited literature on mountain guiding and the pandemic. The methodology was to contact the guides and ascertain their views and experiences during the historical trajectory of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. The data collection instrument was a questionnaire and follow-up questions. Research analysis comprised a thematic analysis of the questionnaires, including timeline analyses of the answers. The knowledge of changing tourism preferences and the modus operandi of the guides did improve understanding of a tourism sector that is heavily dependent on foreign visitors and foreign exchange, and which had been forced to markedly change due to the pandemic. Recovery steps and initiatives were focused upon as pointers towards establishing a more resilient economic sub-sector. A number of recommendations regarding further research have been included.

**Keywords:** Mountain guides, Covid-19 pandemic, business adaptation, adventure tourism, Drakensberg

### Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic confronted South Africa, along with the rest of the world, and its industries with a historically unprecedented crisis. Not even the 'Spanish Flu' or Great Influenza outbreak of 1918/1919 had such an effect on industries and the wider economy. Tourism, especially adventure tourism and micro-industries, was heavily affected for obvious reasons. As Shivakoti (2021: 18) explains, "Tourism is especially vulnerable to measures to thwart pandemics because of restricted mobility and social distancing. The situation is unique. Within the space of months, the structuring of the global tourism system moved from over tourism (e.g. Dodds & Butler, 2019; Seraphin et al., 2018) to non tourism, vividly demonstrated by blogs and newspaper articles illustrating popular tourism sites in 'before' and 'after' photographs (Condé Nast Traveller, 2020)." Tourism is a dynamic phenomenon and is in a state of constant change, and mountain tourism and guiding is particularly dynamic and constant, due to the ever-changing, potentially dangerous and capricious (weather, etc) conditions it operates under. There are also important responsibilities a guide has. For this reason, training in Europe to become a guide is extremely rigorous. Cleare (1980: 131) writes of the "rigorous guides' qualifying examinations" and Unsworth (1977) details over two pages the roles and responsibilities of a mountain guide. For example, to become an Austrian guide, one has to undertake about 47 days of four stages of highly intensive training, a mixture of practical work and examinations, where only about 33% get through to the next stage. As Unsworth (1977: 162) writes, "guides are responsible for the well-being of their clients and in Switzerland are accountable in law." An example of this, albeit in France, is that of a British

man who took his late father's guide to court (Mellor, 1997). Mountain guides, in general, are drawn to make a living in the environment/s they love. As Long et al. (2012: 369) explains "...mountain guides have a very sensitive and contemplative approach to moral aspects of our relationship with nature, which they try to transmit to their clients." The authors go on to say the participants of their study "were mountain guides by conviction" (Long et al., 2012: 369). Mountain guides also have to naturally adaptive. Salim et al. (2019), in a study on mountain guides and their observations of the effects of climate change in the French Alps, have shown the resourcefulness of mountain guides. The authors explain that, while mountain guides are highly impacted by climate change, they are also capable of implementing "a lot of adaptation strategies" (Salim et al., 2019: 107).

One of the issues in South Africa is that there is no national guiding association, unlike in Europe and North America, where there are established organizations. An association did previously exist in this country but is now redundant. Thus, there was no single authority to approach for a research ethics gatekeeper letter, for example. Mountain sports and activities are also a very tangential and peripheral market to the broader South African tourism market. For example, there are guide associations in western alpine towns like Chamonix and Courmayeur. There is no equivalency in South Africa, with no town, or even mountain range, having the same economic pull on visitors interested in climbing challenging mountains and hiring a guide to do so. There is a national mountain user group but this is strictly recreational and non-commercial, and therefore does not and will not speak for commercial operators. I did examine a number of online advisories for mountain guides, issued after the onset of the pandemic, and which had been issued by British and North American guiding associations. Chief amongst these were Muskett (2020) which detailed the loss of earnings of British mountain guides in 2022, and the *57hours* article which surveyed US mountain guides. In this survey, it was shown that "92% of guides surveyed facilitated their last guided trip in February or March 2020. Most respondents indicated they have already lost 75-100% of their guiding income in 2020." Among adaptation measures the surveyed guides have employed, "frequent equipment disinfection, mask-wearing, mandatory health testing, and physical distancing will all be part of the new normal" (Survey Exposes Impact of COVID-19 on Mountain Guides, n.d.).

Grivel (2020), an Italian mountain equipment company, published on its blog the transcript of an interview, regarding adaptation measures and the pandemic, the Grivel CEO had with five prominent guides from a variety of countries. The Mountain Guides (2020), a US mountain guide association, has also published directives on the Covid-19 emergency on its website. Another US association, the International Mountain Guides (2022), has published a policy for its 2022 programs in respect of the pandemic.

## Literature review

Rogerson and Rogerson (2020a: 1086) list the five alert levels the South African government put in place for its risk-adjusted strategy for phasing-out lockdown. Level 5 meant "High virus spread and/or low health system readiness", Level 4 "Moderate to high virus spread with low to moderate health system readiness", Level 3 "Moderate virus spread, with moderate health system readiness", Level 2 "Moderate virus spread with high health system readiness" and Level 1 "Low virus spread with high health system readiness." The economic cost of the lockdowns on small and micro tourism firms has been well shown by the authors: "83% (of firms- my words) report decline in revenues in March 2020 by more than 50% as compared to March 2019; for 34% respondents revenues are reduced by 100%, and... 58 % of firms unable to service debts in March 2020" (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020a: 1088). The fact is that the lockdowns, and worse, the changing and unpredictable alert levels, had a devastating effect on

tourism and nature-based firms. The authors are scathing of the government's response: "above all, what is evidenced is national government's seeming indifference and uncaring attitude towards the crippling consequences of its interventions (or sometimes lack thereof) for the majority of the country's tourism enterprises, their tourism workforce and the livelihoods of tourism-dependent communities" (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020a: 1089). In another article by the same authors, a spatial analysis of tourism spaces of vulnerability in the country has been done. Here the authors show that "those local authorities that are the most vulnerable to the downturn/collapse of tourism as a whole as well as to the hollowing out of specific forms of tourism, namely domestic as opposed to international travel, leisure as opposed to business or VFR travel" (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020b: 382). This has relevance to this study (Okhahlamba is mentioned on p. 395). Nyawo (2020: 1156), in a study on government responses and measures regarding Covid-19 in the tourism sector, maintains that "... little attention has been given to the tour guiding profession in South Africa." Dube (2021: 270) has written on "the sudden halting of the tourism industry (which- my word) threatened conservation efforts and the business viability of many tourism establishments." In a highly relevant study, Booyens et al. (2022) write about a study of the vulnerability of small tourism firms, located in the Western Cape and Eastern Cape, in the country to the lockdown measures. "Among key findings are that small and micro lodging firms that have suffered severe financial losses because of the COVID-19 shock have few viable mechanisms to cope with the impact of the crisis and that government support to aid recovery has been insufficient in South Africa" (Booyens et al., 2022: 121). Young (2020) also corroborates this, with respect to leisure pursuits. In a study on survival mechanisms employed by tourism guides, centred on the Gauteng Province, Mbatha et al. (2021) found that various cost minimisation and income generating measures were utilised by guides who had lost their work during the pandemic.

Further afield, Cherkaoui et al. (2020: 1), writing about ecotourism in Morocco, report that threats to biodiversity and conservation areas have increased during and after the pandemic. In particular they name "poaching, wildlife trafficking, and forest logging activities" as activities that resumed due to the "lockdown and ecotourism collapse." Furthermore the writers show how the entire Moroccan "tourist chain is at a standstill and the entire activity is paralyzed." Of particular relevance to this study, they explain that "elsewhere, in the hinterland and far from the traditional concentration touristy areas, the hiking trails are deserted as well as the lodges and guest houses. All the mountain guides, trek logistics providers lose their jobs and incomes" (Cherkaoui et al., 2020: 2). Cahyadia and Newsome (2021: 199) also state that "...evidence from wildlife tourism hotspots suggests increased poaching and deforestation has occurred in protected areas due to reduced conservation actions and ranger patrols during the lockdown." The two authors (ibid.) also call attention to "the significant economic impact on tourism actors" in Indonesia, in particular the "local community members who work as porters, guides, mountain guides and provide homestay services" in geoparks (ibid.: 207). Another two authors have described the impact of the pandemic on the tourist industry of Nepal. For understandable reasons (the Himalaya is the northern border of the country), adventure tourism is very prominent in the country. Shivakoti (2021) calls for strong support from the government to support the tourism industry, and also for all stakeholders to stand together as a collective. Ulak (2020: 123) also describes the impact of the pandemic on the country's considerable adventure tourism industry: "...adventure tourism is backbone of Nepal's economy, and the shutdown of expedition has affected livelihoods of around a million people including mountain guides and Sherpas, shops, restaurants, transportations, hotels, tea houses, B&Bs and other tourism- related businesses." The wider effect of changes to tourism in conservation areas, of which the Drakensberg is an obvious lodestar, has been covered by Spenceley et al. (2021: 103), who comment on the "...negative consequences for conservation finances, tourism

businesses and the livelihoods of people who supply labour, goods and services to tourists and tourism businesses.” The authors also call attention to the extreme vulnerability of tourism and, by extension the tourism operators, to future shocks and disruptions.

### **Methodology**

An application for ethical clearance was made shortly after the call for papers was announced and the result was exemption from ethics review (HSSREC00018462). Regarding the need for a research ethics gatekeeper letter, there is no overarching authority for the mountain guides of South Africa as all guides and their companies are completely independent entities. However, I did write to a prominent mountain guide on 18 July 2022. The person concerned did very helpfully give me the contact details of other mountain guides in the country. Three research questions were devised as part of the ethics review and follow: 1) What were the effects of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic on your business? 2) List the ways you had to adapt your business model to the pandemic. 3) Have any changes been permanent or were they only of a temporary nature?

The data collection process was constructed for both quantitative and qualitative approaches. No case study per se was selected. The target population was four or five active mountain guides in the Republic. Mountain guides by their very nature have to be physically fit, highly accomplished mountaineers and also be business astute, and this limits the potential number of operators. Guides also had to be prepared to complete the sometimes onerous task of filling in forms, in terms of the questionnaire and informed consent form, to take part in this process. The sampling, which was purposive, and selection of participants followed this procedure. All potential respondents were emailed to elicit participation in the study. Participants were to be recruited once they had filled in an informed consent form. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were that respondents had to be currently active in the industry and also be registered mountain guides. No secondary data was used.

In the event, 29 guides throughout the country, but mainly in the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, were invited to participate in the research project. Full responses were received from only four mountain guides, all KwaZulu-Natal based, which was very close to the target population. One partial response was received from a Western Cape-based guide but this could not be used due to the informed consent form not being returned. In percentage, the response rate was 13.8%. Apologies for not being able to participate were received from three guides. The questionnaire contained eight questions, of which the first five were background based. The sixth question (which was on the changes occasioned by the alert levels) was arranged as a timeline chart with five sub-questions (changes to tourism modus operandi, changes to business model, adaptation measures, success or not of measures, and permanence or not of measures). It was decided to summarise the timeline chart with alert levels that coalesced. Whenever, there was a sudden change in alert levels, care was taken to include the alert level and dates. The seventh question was structured very similarly to the sixth, except that social and environment changes noticed in the mountains were included. The eighth and last question centred on whether or not the respondents considered that their businesses would ever revert to the pre-Covid-19 state. It was decided not to have interviews afterwards for the answers in the questionnaires were very comprehensive and no obvious gaps or opportunities existed for a follow-up interview. Instead, the five questions that were going to be asked in a joint interview session were emailed to the respondents. These follow-up questions centred around the noteworthiness of the specific changes (economic, response mechanisms, social, environmental and the permanence of the revised business model). In the event, only three of the four completed this section. All questions were described as scenarios in the data analysis section. For data storage and protection protocols, all data will be stored for five years on my



university laptop and then be deleted. Respondents and their business entities will not be identified by name. Respondents will be invited to read the published article. No funding was received for the study. The analysis procedure was to collate the answers and to construct simplified and summarised answers from the questions. Key issues, themes and trends were enumerated and discussed. Rates, for example income, were averaged to give an answer. Care was taken to produce historical trajectories from the two timeline-based questions.

## Results

All four respondents possess either an honours degree or postgraduate diploma. One respondent has a degree in botany/ zoology and tourism studies. Another respondent is clearly more of a bird/ nature guide than a mountain guide; one is a generic adventure site guide, another is an advanced mountain guide, while one (an outlier) is an exceptionally well qualified mountain guide and instructor. One respondent has served as a guide for under five years while another has served between 6 and 10 years. Two have worked as guides for over ten years. Two respondents work mostly in KwaZulu-Natal, another works in Gauteng and the other works in southern Africa in general.

Regarding the scenario (Changes to your tourism operation *modus operandi*, including if you contracted the virus yourself), the answers were that there were “no clients” (Respondent 1, thereafter 1), “no changes” (Respondent 2, thereafter 2) and that “work for March slowed down” (Respondent 3, thereafter 3) and “none” (Respondent 4, thereafter 4) for the build up to the lockdown. Once the Level 5 lockdown had been announced, the whole country and economy closed down and guiding was no exception, Respondents reported “no clients” (1) and “canceled and offered full refunds” (2) and “all overseas clients cancelled” (3) and “No business...online marketing” (4). For Levels 4 and 3, Respondent 1 reported “no clients” while Respondent 2 reported “offered hikes –we wore buffs for safety”, Respondent 3 “No clients- local or international” while Respondent 4 stated “some guidetraining... instructional work.” The next two Levels (2 and 1) saw respondents reporting that “no clients” (1), “only local clients” (3) and “some instructional work- promoted courses” (4). The downward trajectory of levels stopped on 29 December 2020 when Level 3 was announced again. Here respondents reported “no clients”, “lots of cancellations” and “guided rock and hike routes”. After this period, Levels 1 and 2 were announced again, with the guides (respectively 1, 3 and 4) reporting “no clients”, “very few local trips” and “guiding rock and hike clients”. Again the downward trajectory of Levels was stopped again on 16 June 2021 when Level 3 was announced. However, for Levels 3 and 4, answers were very similar to the previous levels. The situation started normalising for Levels 3, 2 and 1 when guides reported “no clients” (1), “work trickling in” (3) and “almost normal rate of guiding” (4). On 5 April 2022 the National State of Disaster was lifted with guides reporting “no clients” (1), “some international clients” (3) and “business reverting to normal” (4).

In terms of the scenario (Changes to your business model, including revenue streams [please give + or -percentages]), respondents answered thus: that there was “no income (0%)” (1), “no change” (3) and “none”(4) for the build up to the lockdown. Once the Level 5 lockdown had been announced, respondents reported “no income” (1), “income dropped to zero” (3) and “online marketing...tips...zero income” (4). For Levels 4 and 3, Respondent 1 reported “no income” while Respondent 3 reported “zero income from tourism- other income 40-50% of normal” while Respondent 4 stated “small income and Tourism grant in June- 40% of income.” It is clear that two of the three guides were highly affected by the lockdown with the one having to diversify from tourism and the other opting out. The next two Levels (2 and 1) saw respondents reporting slight to medium improvements with “No income (0%)” (1) “10-20% of normal” (3) and “50% of normal” (4). The downward trajectory of levels stopped on

29 December 2020 when Level 3 was announced again. Here respondents reported “No income (0%)” and “40% of income-all non-tourism.” After this period, Levels 1 and 2 were announced again, with the guides reporting “No income (0%)” (1) and “income increased but no to before COVID levels” (3). Again the easing trajectory of Levels was stopped again on 16 June 2021 when Level 3 was announced. For Levels 3 and 4, answers were “No income (0%)” (1), “income dropped- only non-tourism” (3) and “50% of income” (4). The situation started generally normalising and improving until the United Kingdom Government’s decree of a second Red List for Levels 3, 2 and 1 when guides reported “No income (0%)” (1), “70% from freelance and 30% non-tourism” (3) and “90% of income. Increase of clients when UK red list was lifted in about Oct 21. Then second UK red list in Dec- Jan wiped out all bookings except one local guiding trip” (4). On 5 April 2022 the National State of Disaster was lifted with guides reporting “No income (0%)” (1), “Freelance work 75-80%, personal guiding 10%, non-tourism 10%” (3) and “normal incomes” (4).

With respect to the scenario (Coping/ adaptation measures that you employed), during the build up to the lockdown, respondents stated “Took business online” (1), “Nothing” (3) and “none” (4) while during hard lockdown, the guides understandably said that “Took business online” (1), “Nothing yet...” (3) and “Living off savings” (4). For Levels 4 and 3, these answers were given: “Took business online” (1, the guide was asked what this meant but never reverted to me), “Training in new skills-Cultural guiding and doing extra advertising on electronic media” (3) and “Less work, less income, but less expenses” (4). This shows the diversification and promotion of activity, and the minimisation of costs that were employed during this period. During Levels 2 and 1 this trend continued, “Took business online” (1), “Upskilling into ABEL to start working with school groups and doing more freelance work with schools camps” (3) and “no major change in strategy, as there were few ways when government shuts you down” (4). With the lifting of Alert Levels to 3 on 29 December 2020, the guides stated that “Took business online”(1), “extra advertising and focusing of development of own programs” (3) and “continuous online marketing” (4). When the Levels were dropped to 1 and 2, guides averred the same as for Level 3 and this trend continued in June and July 2021, when the Levels were again lifted to 3 and 4. Moreover, during Levels 3, 2 and 1, this trend carried on. Finally with the lifting of the State of Disaster, the guides said that “Took business online” (1), “Started doing a lot of ‘freeby’ trips with small school groups...started to focus on slack packing trips in partnership with other lodges and camps” (3).

Regarding the next scenario (the success or not of the measures, and the explanation thereof), the answers were as follows: During the build up to the lockdown, respondents stated “They were successful” (1), “Nothing yet” (3) and “Not applicable” (4) while during hard lockdown, the respective guides said the same except for Respondent 4 who answered “Yes.” For Levels 4 and 3, these answers, uneven in nature, were given: “They were successful” (1), “Extra advertising opened up new opportunities but did not lead to more business” (3) and “Yes” (4). During Levels 2 and 1, Respondents 1 and 4 repeated their answers but Respondent 3 noted “to some extent yes but it was difficult to get enough work as most people were very cautious of the pandemic.” With the lifting of the Alert Level to 3 on 29 December 2020, Guides 1 and 3 repeated their answers. When the Levels were dropped to 1 and 2, this trend continued with Guides 1 and 4 answering in the affirmative but Guide 3 maintaining that “to some extent as people were open to travel but wanted very low prices.” In June and July 2021, the Levels were again lifted to 3 and 4 with Guides 1 and 4 answering in the affirmative again but Guide 3 adding a proviso, thereby showing geographic limitations, in “No much in terms of internationals but locals still interested in traveling.” During Levels 3, 2 and 1, Guides 1 and 4 continued their affirmative trend with Guide 3 stating the contrary with stated “Not yet but

some enquiries.” Finally, with the lifting of the State of Disaster, Guide 1 answered in the affirmative again with Guide 3 averring that “Still ongoing as it’s not easy to get into the school market. Slack packing seems to create interest for especially older or the not so outdoors people that still want to be outdoors.”

The last scenario in this series (The permanence or not of the changes, and explanation thereof), during the build-up to the lockdown, the respondents stated “Yes, I am now working online” (1) and “Nothing in place yet” (3) and “N/A”(4) while during hard lockdown, Guides 1 and 3 repeated their answers with Guide 4 stating “No.” For Levels 4 and 3, Guides 1 and 4 repeated the trend of their answers and Guide 3 stated “Yes- became a Cultural guide and started to do extra work on the side- nor related to tourism.” During Levels 2 and 1, Guides 1 and 4 repeated their answers with Guide 3 specifying that “Yes became a ABEL freelance facilitator and started to do some freelance work.” With the lifting of Alert Levels to 3 on 29 December 2020, the guides repeated their answers with Guide 3 detailing that “The freelance work became semi-permanent....” When the Levels were dropped to 1 and 2, the guides continued the trend and substance of their answers. In June and July 2021, the Levels were again lifted to 3 and 4, with Guide 1 repeating the answer and Guide 4 stating “No.” This trend continued during Levels 3, 2 and 1 except for Guide 3 stating “Yes started to do a lot more advertising on social media.” Finally with the lifting of the State of Disaster, Guide 1 repeated the trend of answers given with Guide 3 again stating that “Freelance work seems to become 100% of my focus....”

The third last scenario in the questionnaire dealt with the social changes noticed in the mountains during the different stages of the pandemic, that merited mentioning. The respondents stated “Nothing to be honest” (2), “Drug smuggling was still going on in certain areas as well as stock theft” (3) and “No” (4) while during hard lockdown, the guides were unable to answer the question due to not being out at the time. For Levels 4 and 3, Guide 1 stipulated “Drug smuggling” with Guide 3 saying “Did not see anything” and Guide 4 answering “no.” During Levels 2 and 1, the guides stated “Very little local people on the high berg and no sheep or goats were seen. Did not see smugglers but could see their traces in the caves and on paths. Signs of illegal hunting in the buffer zone – snares and signs of where kills happened” (3) and “Lesotho herders seemed to have been removed from the northern area . Giants Castle to Monte aux Sources. Many hikers noticed the lack of herders and livestock. It appears this was a Lesotho government decree” (4). With the lifting of Alert Levels to 3 on 29 December 2020, the same guides repeated the substance of their answers. When the Levels were dropped to 1 and 2, Guide 4 repeated the answer, with Guide 3 limiting the answer to the Lower Drakensberg: “Increase of local hikers on the lower berg. Was told of increase of smuggling activities and stock theft but did not see it myself just the signs of their activities on the paths.” In June and July 2021, the Levels were again lifted to 3 and 4, with Guide 4 stating “Can’t say.” For Levels 3, 2 and 1, Guide 3 stated “Population returning on the high berg with big flocks of sheep and goats – veld still in good conditions but showing signs of over grazing. Lower berg was full of local hikers and I did not notice illegal activities but would guess it still took place – had smugglers visit us in a cave on night but they were returning to Lesotho” with Guide 4 repeating the last answer. Finally with the lifting of the State of Disaster, Guide 4 repeated the answer already given.

The penultimate scenario dealt with the environmental changes noticed in the mountain during the different stages of the pandemic, that merited mentioning. The respondents stated for the build-up to Level 5, “Only caused by weather” (2), “Overgrazing on the high berg was very bad with signs of erosion” (3) and “no” (4). During hard lockdown, the guides were unable to answer the question due to not being out at the time. For Levels 4 and 3, Guide 3 very interestingly stipulated “Air quality was a lot better” with Guide 4 saying “no.” During

Levels 2 and 1, the guides noticed the regeneration of the vegetation after lock down with: “High berg was green with no signs of over grazing and the veld looked the best Ive ever seen it. Lower berg showed signs of erosion of paths – no maintenance done and very over grown” (3) and “Much lush grasses on top of Drakensberg” (4). With the lifting of Alert Levels to 3 on 29 December 2020, Guide 4 repeated the answer and this carried onto Levels 1 and 2. In June and July 2021, the Levels were again lifted to 3 and 4, with Guide 4 stating “Can’t say.” For Levels 3, 2 and 1, Guide 3 noticed poor path maintenance in the lower Drakensberg and the return of negative veld practices on the High Drakensberg: “Still very little path maintenance done away from the main camps-close to camp the paths were cleaned and cut to accommodate the visitors. Erosion and over grazing taking place on the high berg as flock started to return” and Guide 4 repeating the answer given. Finally with the lifting of the State of Disaster, Guide 4 continued the answer already given.

Regarding the ultimate scenario (The likelihood of your business ever reverting to the pre-Covid-19 model and experience, and explanation thereof), answers were given with two guides answering in the negative and two in the affirmative: “No, I will always do my business online, that is the strategy I have adopted during Covid” (1), “Yes we have, no one has contracted Covid-19 on a hike. We had three occasions where someone attend with Covid (unknowingly) and there was no spread. Of course, if someone has covid they are not accepted onto the hike and 50% of their fees are credited to the next one” (2), “I don’t think so as I have realized that I cannot have just one income stream from hiking activities – diversity seems to be key and thus I have included Cultural guiding to my Adventure guiding and is doing a lot of freelance work for school camps (ABEL) as the work seems to be steady and repeat business. It is just difficult to get into the school market as it sometimes feels like it’s not what you know but who you know. I would ideally be looking at developing my business to be spread out more evenly as currently it more a 70% freelance work, 20% non-tourism and 10% pure adventure guiding work” (3) and “My business has already gone back to pre Covid model” (4).

With respect to the follow-up scenarios (instead of the semi-structured interview session that was deemed unnecessary), in answer to the scenario (The most dramatic economic change to your business during the pandemic alert levels), respondents answered thus: “Level one” (1, Level five is surely meant), “Complete shutdown- 0 income in” (2) and “Zero income for about the first 6 weeks. There after some income at times and was very erratic. Very hard to have any cash-flow forecast. The second UK red list wiped out income again in Dec 21 to end January 22” (4). Regarding the second scenario (The most effective response mechanism which worked best to combat the negative economic effects of the pandemic while the alert levels were in place), the answers were as follows: “Opening of border gates” (1) and “Lots of advertising of courses” (4). The most noteworthy social change noticed in the mountains during the pandemic alert levels was “Mask waring” (sic, 1) and “People were more eager to explore the mountains after covid” (2). Another respondent (4) couldn’t say. Environmentally, the most noteworthy change noticed in the mountains during the pandemic alert levels was “The lack of hereders (sic) and stock in the northern Drakensberg” (4). Another respondent (1) indicated “ Nothing.” Respondents indicated the following to the question (Do you think your revised business model is permanent?): “Yes, is permanent” (1) and “Yes, more or less” (2) and “No” (4).

## Discussion

All guides were in possession of a postgraduate qualification (this contrasts with the study by Mbatha et al., 2021 where most participants had a degree). Moreover, the majority of the guides were all highly experienced. Guides hailed mostly from KwaZulu-Natal. In answer to the first research question (What were the effects of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic on your



business?), there was the disappearance or reduction in clients, both local and international. There was a balance in the answers about changes to the modus operandi in the build up to the lockdown. Obviously, the hard lockdown (Level 5) had respondents report no business opportunities, with one having to offer a full refund due to cancellations. For the next phase (Levels 4 and 3), three out of four respondents reported no clients, while one offered hikes while wearing buffs for safety. Local or no clients were engaged by guides during Levels 2 and 1, while one worked on instructional work. From 29 December 2020, when Level 3 was re-announced, another recalibration had to be factored in. Two out of three guides reported no clients and cancellations, while one was still able to do some guiding. The next easing phase (Levels 1 and 2) saw guides reporting no clients and few local trips. Respondent 4 was clearly an outlier as routes (both rock and hiking) were still guided. 16 June 2021 saw Level 3 announced and later Level 4 but with no major changes to the modus operandi. When Levels 3, 2 and 1 were promulgated, some recovery was evident with one guide (4) reporting even “normal rate of guiding.” Once the State of Disaster was lifted on 5 April 2022, international clients were mentioned by one guide and the normalisation of business by another. Only one guide (4) reported receiving a tourism grant.

In terms of the associated revenue stream, there was a downward trajectory in revenue from the Level 5 lockdown on 26 March 2020 till when Level 3 was announced on 16 June 2021 (a period of about 15 months). Nyawo (2020), Dube (2021) and Booyens et al. (2022) concur on the effects on small tourism operations. There was obviously zero income during the hard lockdown, followed by under 50% of income during Levels 4 and 3, and around 32% (for two out of three guides) during Levels 2 and 1. This trend continued under the next phase (Level 3) and the following (Levels 1 and 2). As said, a rise in income commenced in June 2021, with two guides reporting about 50% of normal income. The next phase (Levels 3, 2 and 1) saw two guides out of three stating an average of 80% income. Normalised income (practically 100%) was gained on 5 April 2022 when the regulations governing the pandemic were lifted.

The most dramatic economic change the guides had to adapt to appear to have been Level 5 hard lockdown (understandably) with no income for six weeks. One guide reported difficulties having any kind of cash-flow forecast and the second United Kingdom Red List which voided all of the guide’s international bookings from December 2021 till January 2022 (see Mbatha et al., 2021). This shows how vulnerable this sub-industry is to international fluctuations. One respondent (2) reported that “people were more eager to explore the mountains after covid.”

Regarding the second research question (List the ways you had to adapt your business model to the pandemic), adaptation measures included taking the business online, reported by one guide, and re-/ up-skilling and advertising measures reported by another at the start of the lockdown measures. The propensity of guides to adapt has been shown by Salim et al. (2019). Another guide was able to minimise expenses through the drastic reduction in work. During Levels 2 and 1, one guide reported working with school groups and freelancing, while another could not change strategy as there were few options to re-strategize when government has closed the industry down (this has been reflected by Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020a). From 29 December 2020, it does appear that much more advertising and marketing was done by the guides. This trend carried on right through to the lifting of the State of Disaster. One guide, following the lifting, appears to have moved from traditional guiding to taking ‘slack packing’ trips.

The success of the adaptation measures seems to be a mixed bag with one or two guides clearly not succeeding as another. Extra advertising did not seem to translate into necessarily more business for one guide. This guide also reported on the cautiousness of clients to come

on trips and even clients wanting low prices. One guide reported success with locals but not with international tourists. One guide reported lots of advertising to the question (Which response mechanism worked best to combat the negative economic effects of the pandemic while the alert levels were in place?).

The third research question (Have any changes been permanent or were they only of a temporary nature?) saw the following in answers. The permanence or not of the adaptations and changes can be unevenly gleaned from respondents' answers. Certainly, one guide was more open to the long term effects than the others. This guide appears to have transitioned to being a cultural guide and freelancer. Two guides answered in the negative to the question (Do you think your business will ever revert to the pre-Covid -19 model and experience?) and two in the positive (hence there was balance in the answers). One appears to have gone completely online, although the details are sketchy. Another guide has decided that it too risky depending on pure guiding and has moved to diversification of employment activities. Another guide has seamlessly transitioned back to the pre-Covid-19 business. In summary, two respondents view their business model adaptation/s as permanent while another stated to the contrary. The social changes occasioned by the pandemic appear not to have been permanent. The hard lockdown led to a voiding of people and livestock on the High Drakensberg, and this appears to have been Lesotho Government-sanctioned, at least according to one respondent. This regime appears to have lasted from 18 August 2020 till 26 July 2021. The same respondent (4) reported on the "lack of herders (sic) and stock in the northern Drakensberg" in answer to the question "What was the most noteworthy environmental change you noticed in the mountains during the pandemic alert levels?" On the South African side of the Drakensberg, smuggling, stock theft and illegal hunting appear to have been occurring, between 18 August 2020 till 4 April 2022. This reflects the experience in Morocco (Cherkaoui et al., 2020) and Indonesia (Cahyadia & Newsome, 2021). Environmentally, overgrazing and erosion was reported by one respondent before the hard lockdown was instituted. Superior air quality was noticed by the same respondent after the lockdown and after 18 August 2020, the verdant and lush slopes of the Drakensberg were noticed by two respondents. This verdancy and lushness of grasses and slopes appear to have lasted till mid-June 2021 (a period of ten months unprecedented in the last 100 years). Negative environmental signs started returning to the High Drakensberg after 26 July 2021 when livestock starting returning, according to one respondent.

## Conclusion

This small scale study shows the historical trajectory of the differing experiences of a limited number of mountain guides during the greatest economic disruption to affect South Africa (and the world) since the Second World War, certainly. The value of this research lies in the fact that mountain guides by their very nature have to be observant and resourceful. The observations that this group of four mountain guides made during the phases of the pandemic provide valuable commentary on a niche adventure tourism sub-industry, and also on the social and environmental changes that occurred. There were parallels with Morocco and Indonesia, in terms of observed negative human behaviour in protected areas. The research shows how vulnerable this sub-industry is to shocks and disruptions, especially international, and just how adaptable and innovative mountain guides have to be to survive the economic disruption. More advertising and marketing appear to be successful recovery efforts. Reskilling and upskilling, for example changing from individuals to school groups, also featured as a recovery efforts, as did expense minimisation. Government support for these mountain guides was seen as either non-existent or negligible (only one guide reporting receiving a tourism grant and that was not enough to allay losses), and this tallies with the published research. A strong enough marketing profile, diversification of offerings, as well as being able to cope financially with revenue

fluctuations are to be recommended for a more resilient economic sub-sector. In this, savings or income insurance are advisable in a sub-sector that is very vulnerable to drastic changes. More research is recommended for Western Cape mountain guides and the region's mountain ranges (for example, Table Mountain and the Cederberg) as this study was primarily uKhahlamba/Drakensberg-centric. It is also recommended that further research be carried out on stocking rates and veld recovery on the Lesotho side of the uKhahlamba/Drakensberg. Mountain guides can also serve as excellent research sources for the observation of climate and environmental change in mountain areas.

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