

The Evolution of Rural Tourism in South Africa: An Historical Lens

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Abstract

This paper utilises archival research to provide a glimpse into the historical development of rural tourism in South Africa. It points to the minimal focus on historical studies in international scholarship on rural tourism. The analysis demonstrates rural tourism in South Africa is not a new phenomenon with a recorded history going back as far as the late 19th century. Different rural spaces are shown to be associated with different niche products of rural South Africa. The earliest forms of rural tourism were promoted to both groups of domestic and international visitors. Arguably, the evolutionary pathway of rural tourism in South Africa is different to that which has been documented in the Global North. Overall, the paper represents a contribution to the limited international literature on rural tourism in its historical aspects as well as to evolving rural tourism scholarship in South Africa. In addition, it offers an historical window on issues of tourism and change in the Global South.

Keywords: historical tourism; rural tourism; archival approach; rural South Africa

Introduction

To advance the progress of tourism studies MacKenzie, Pittaki and Wong (2020: 1470) point to the value-add of pursuing historical research and assert that “hospitality and tourism research has much to gain by incorporating historical methodologies”. The benchmark research and publications of Walton (2003, 2005, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2011) reinforce the limited development of historical tourism research and encourage scholars to engage more seriously with the past in tourism research. More recently, in a similar vein, MacKenzie and Gannon (2019) and MacKenzie et al. (2020) stress the benefits of undertaking historical research in order to enhance the progress of tourism and hospitality studies. Archives are seen as socially constructed repositories of mainly documentary evidence from a time past (Craggs, 2016). For tourism and leisure scholars Tully and Carr (2021: 1) identify archives as a data source that is “replete with untapped research opportunities”. This said, in terms of an enhanced understanding of the development of tourism and hospitality, historical methods such as archival research, “have largely been overlooked” (MacKenzie et al., 2020: 1484).

Over the past decade a notable trend in South African tourism scholarship has been the appearance of research interest in tourism past, tourism history and of the historical geography of tourism. Indeed, the advance of an historical strand of South African tourism studies might be viewed as distinctive in international tourism scholarship and most especially for the Global South. The merits of pursuing archival research in tourism and hospitality scholarship have been demonstrated by several South African studies (J.M. Rogerson, 2017, 2018, Rogerson & Rogerson, 2018, 2019; Sixaba & Rogerson, 2019; J.M. Rogerson, 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson 2020a, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a). The research reported in this paper must be read as a further and

modest addition to what is an emergent cluster of investigations on tourism historical development in South Africa. Existing studies are authored by tourist historians (Grundlingh, 2006; Saunders & Barben, 2007; Bickford-Smith, 2009; Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2020; Dlamini, 2020; Pirie, 2022) and South African tourism geographers (Rogerson & Visser, 2020). Within the extant literature are works which examine for example, the historical development trajectory of the national hotel sector, the development of urban tourism in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pretoria, the evolution of caravanning, the growth of business tourism, the impact of apartheid policies and legislation on tourism development, and of struggles waged against the production of racialized tourism spaces in South Africa (Bickford-Smith, 2009; C.M. Rogerson, 2011; J.M. Rogerson, 2016, 2017, 2018; C.M. Rogerson, 2019, 2020; J.M. Rogerson, 2019, 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2018, 2019; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020b; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a, 2021b, 2022b).

It is evident that the largest focus of this historical scholarship on tourism development in South Africa is concentrated so far mainly upon the country's largest cities and of historical urban tourism. Outside of the cities historical research forays into rural areas and of the development of tourism in rural areas have been much less in evidence. There are, however, a number of exceptions that warrant mention. These include historical works on protected areas (Carruthers, 1989, 1995; Brooks, 2005; Carruthers, 2011, 2013; Brett, 2018), mountain tourism (Carruthers, 2013), pioneer African entrepreneurs in tourism (Sixaba & Rogerson, 2019), and safari tourism (Dlamini, 2020). Building upon the foundation of such studies this paper is informed by Walton's (2009a, 2011) advocacy of a need for further advancement of historical tourism studies in general and specifically concerning the analysis of aspects which have not been scrutinised in depth to date.

The aim is to re-trace the early development in South Africa of what would be described in international scholarship as the phenomenon of "rural tourism". The meaning of this term is contested (Dashper, 2014). According to Lane (1994) rural tourism should be located in rural areas, be functionally rural and rural in scale in respect of being anchored upon small-scale enterprises, traditional social structures, ways of life, agrarian economies and natural settings. In their overview of the state of rural tourism research Sharpley and Roberts (2004: 119) considered that Lane's (1994) discussion to be "ground-breaking in its attempt to define and clarify rural tourism". Our analysis of rural tourism evolution for South Africa adopts this definition and draws upon a review of existing literature which is combined with the use of archival materials. The time period of investigation is from the late 19th century and closes in 1948, a landmark year in South African history. Sources include documents accessed from the special historical collections of the National Library of South Africa (Cape Town) and in particular the collections of the South African Railways and Harbours. The SAR & H assumed a crucial role in publicising and shaping the directions of much of early tourism in South Africa (Foster, 2003; Saunders & Barben, 2007; van Wyk, 2013).

Overall, the paper represents a contribution to the limited international literature on rural tourism in its historical aspects as well as to evolving rural tourism scholarship in South Africa. In addition, it offers an historical window on issues of tourism and change in the Global South (Saarinen & Rogerson, 2021). Two sections of discussion are presented. The next section locates historical research on rural tourism within the wider context of the growth of international tourism writings. Attention then moves to a review of material relating to the early historical evolution of rural tourism in South Africa.

Rural tourism scholarship: The oversight of history

Several surveys of international academic research concerning rural tourism have been produced (Page & Getz, 1997; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997; Roberts & Hall, 2001). Among

these investigations are included a number of works which have been produced in the past decade (Dashper, 2014; Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015; Karali, Das & Roy, 2021; Rosalina, Dupre & Wang, 2021; Ruiz-Real, Uribe-Toril, Valenciano, & Gázquez-Abad, 2021). Together these recent systematic reviews on the state of the art of international scholarship on rural tourism indicate that it “has been a key research area over the last few decades” (Karali et al., 2021: 1).

It has been shown that academic attention to this field of study commenced in the 1970s with the appearance of descriptive studies on tourism taking place in rural areas (Lane, 1994; Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015; Karali et al., 2021). Although an expansion in academic research response occurred from the 1980s Page and Getz (1997: 3) could assert during the 1990s that “rural tourism has continued to suffer from a neglect among tourism researchers” and “remained peripheral to the focus of tourism research”. In charting four decades of rural tourism scholarship Karali et al. (2021) demonstrate that a ‘take-off’ in academic writings on rural tourism is most noticeable for the decade of the 2000s. This post-2000 surge of writings and research has accelerated in momentum since that time (Gabor, 2015; Karali et al., 2021; Rosalina et al., 2021). As was observed by Kastenholtz & Lima (2011: 62) “rural tourism has deserved increasing interest from tourism researchers and practitioners in the past decades as a result of the recognition of both its potential for enhancing rural development and of market trends making rural areas stand out as spaces particularly apt to accommodate new tourism and market demands”.

The content of rural tourism research has matured and progressed beyond early descriptive case studies. For the period of the 1990s, however, Page and Getz (1997: 10) bemoaned the fact that with a few notable exceptions “impact studies has not been at the forefront of methodological and theoretical developments”. Within the emerging literature on rural tourism an array of themes and issues can be observed including certain social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts, research on different forms of rural tourism and the implications of rural tourism for rural areas (Page & Getz, 1997; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997; Roberts & Hall, 2001). By the 2000s academic writings include debate on weightier issues such as management and conservation, resource control, economic regeneration, the influence of neo-localism and, on occasion, even the ramifications of climate change (Dashper, 2014; Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020; Karali et al., 2021). The findings from a study of 1848 articles published since 2000 highlighted a major focus on tourism management, economic issues, environment/ecological issues and themes in broader regional development especially sustainability (Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015).

In research conducted by Rosalina et al. (2021) across 218 studies on rural tourism the key macro-themes were identified as sustainable development, the role of local communities, the importance of ‘experience’ for the rural tourism product, and the challenges facing rural tourism development and more specifically for rural firms. Across four decades of rural tourism scholarship the thematic investigation undertaken by Karali et al. (2021) emphasized strongly the issues of the impact of rural tourism, the role of stakeholders, and the performance (including challenges) and management of rural tourism. Other themes included marketing, market segmentation, tourist motivations, policy issues and technology. The nexus of technology and tourism was also highlighted in the systematic review which was produced by Kumar and Shekhar (2020). Over the four decades, maximum academic attention appears focused on impact studies, stakeholder issues regarding the host community, and performance related issues (Karali et al., 2021). What is absent in all the reviews of international research on rural tourism is any attention given to historical issues and of the evolution of rural tourism over the years.

The significance of understanding the history of rural tourism is stressed by Gartner (2004). A detailed account of the early development of rural tourism remains, however, one of

the many unwritten tasks in tourism history. Towner (1995) points to an interest in rural environments by many of the British upper classes going as far back as the mid-16th century. According to Lane (2009: 354) the roots of rural tourism are traceable to the late 18th century and the Romantic Movement that raised the natural world into prominence; examples included the poetry of William Wordsworth and the music of Beethoven. It is generally accepted that modest flows of the urban middle classes to the countryside was a phenomenon that commenced in the 19th century and often encouraged by the images portrayed by popular culture of the time such as Constable's art and Wordsworth's poetry (Roberts & Hall, 2001). The early history of the opening of rural tourism in the English Lake District is recorded by Walton and McGloin (1981) and in greater detail by Wood and Walton (2016).

Of great importance in the history of rural tourism in Europe and North America was the period beginning in 1840 of railways development which opened up easier and safer access to attractive and previously remote rural areas for recreational purposes (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). In addition, higher levels of incomes as well as increases in leisure time meant that the growing populations of industrial areas were able to visit the countryside. Rural tourism grew as an antidote to the industrial revolution and was assisted by the development of rail links to rural resorts such as the Alpine regions of Europe. Rail-based rural tourism in North America was resort-based and was in many respects urban in style (Gartner, 2004). Another attraction for certain rural areas in Europe related to their perceived health benefits which meant that areas were visited by convalescing patients and those in ill health owing to the exceptional quality of their environments and more particularly their climates (Cavaco, 1995). As a consequence of such developments certain rural areas opened as new tourism spaces. By the close of the 19th century "many rural areas were benefiting from a thriving and established tourism industry" (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997: 4).

In the Global North 'modern' rural tourism is considered to have begun only in the post-World War 2 era and is seen as associated with the spreading of rural visitors from much publicised protected areas, such as the English Lake District or Yellowstone National Park in USA, to incorporate more 'ordinary' countryside spaces. Overall, in surveying the history of rural tourism in the USA Gartner (2004: 151) argues that "most developments are unplanned and result from market and economic forces that have greatly transformed the American rural landscape" with most rural destinations dominated by domestic visitors. Concerning the evolution of 'modern' rural tourism in Europe Lane and Kastenholtz (2015) periodise its evolution in relation to Butler's (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle Model. It is against this international background that our focus turns now to explore the historical evolution of rural tourism in South Africa.

The evolution of rural tourism in South Africa

For various reasons the trajectory of rural tourism development in the Global South has been viewed as different to that occurring in the Global North (Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015). The literature on the Global South often is dominated by issues of the dependency relationships that challenge rural areas (Britton, 1981). Accordingly, several scholars underscore the need for the separate treatment and research issues of rural tourism in the context of the Global South. Karali et al. (2021: 2) aver that "rural tourism of the developed and developing countries is required to be researched differently due to their unlike development and growth contexts". Further, that "rural tourism has different contextual dimensions and issues in the developed and developing nations which are needed to be addressed with the help of case-specific studies" (Karali et al., 2021: 21).

As observed by Briedenhann and Wickens (2004: 190) the concept and practice of rural tourism in South Africa "has a long history". Arguably, the beginnings of any large-scale

appearance of rural tourism awaited improvements for domestic travellers of infrastructure to access rural spaces initially through the railways and subsequently by road access and enhanced automobilities. This said, one of the first forms of rural tourism in South Africa related to international tourists and to a special type of ‘health tourism’. During the 19th century parts of South Africa earned a reputation for the therapeutic impact of its climate for improved health (Bell, 1993). The search for climate therapy resulted in a flow of ‘invalids’ to South Africa – mainly from Europe – with a number of small towns in the Karoo becoming celebrated as destinations for their healthful properties (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021c).

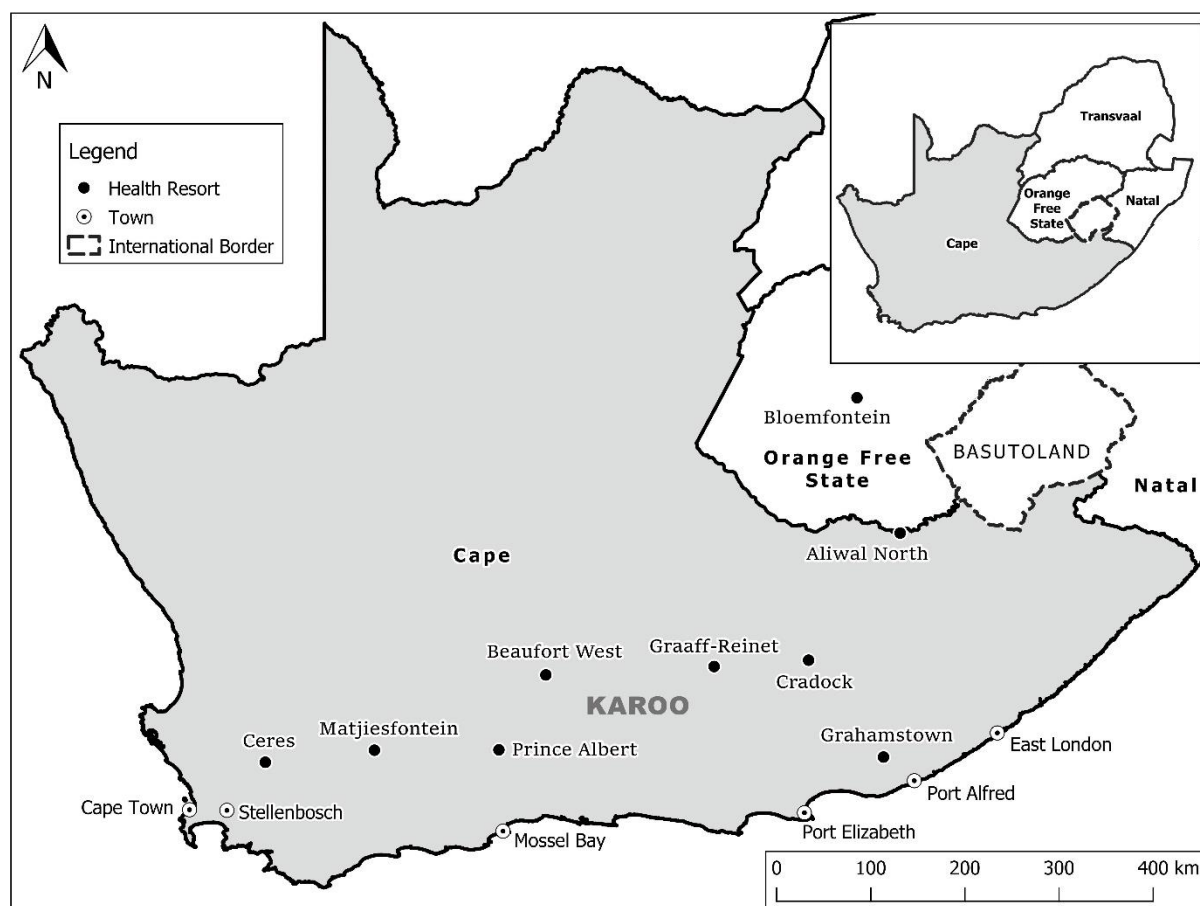


Fig. 1. The geography of leading ‘health resorts’ in late 19th century South Africa (Source: Authors)

Figure 1 maps some of the most notable health resorts of the late 19th century, the majority situated in the Cape Colony. As discussed by van Wyk (2013: 246) locations such as Ceres and Matjiesfontein “became known as ‘health resorts in their own right and were visited for health reasons as well as ‘socialites’ from Europe”. The perceived therapeutic regenerative qualities of South Africa’s climate therefore became a driver for the development of a form of international tourism that pre-dated the country’s emergence as a leisure tourism destination (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021c).

A sign of the beginnings of rural leisure tourism in South Africa was the appearance of a number of promotional pamphlets produced by South African Railways and Harbours (SAR & H) which detail various tourism assets of rural areas. The earliest publications surrounded the attractions of mountaineering and of mountain tourism which might be accessed by a road link from the railways. As early as 1910 SAR & H publicity material was seeking to lure climbers from Europe and North America suggesting that “tourists and mountaineers can no longer be satisfied with repeating the ascents of the well-trodden peaks of the Continent or

Canada, now that the beauties of the Drakensberg are making so emphatic a claim to attention” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1910: 7). Moreover, it was stressed that the “health and pleasure seeker can here hardly fail to obtain new energy and new inspiration, while the artist may find in the Drakensberg a new world to conquer and make his own” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1910: 7). In 1914 the publication *Mountaineering in South Africa* was produced with support from The Mountain Club of South Africa (South African Railways and Harbours, 1914). This was followed a decade later by *National Park, Mont-aux-Sources, Natal* which advertised the area as ‘the wonderland of South Africa’ (South African Railways and Harbours, 1925). Promotional material continued into the 1930s about the Drakensberg National Park, which was described as South Africa’s “mountain playground” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1937). In a 1932 guide rural tourism to the Drakensberg resorts was touted as follows: “A nation’s playground... Leave the City far behind for the new world of the mountains! Meet Nature in all her rugged majesty – crystal clean air, burbling rivers, gigantic peaks – the highest in the range!” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1932).

One of the first academic research forays into the history of rural tourism in South Africa was Carruthers (2013) work on Royal Natal National Park, South Africa’s first formal national park. During the first decades of the 20th century this region, straddling the (former) provinces of Natal and the Orange Free State (OFS), became popular for mountaineers and climbers. According to Carruthers (2013: 463) the Natal National Park “had its origins in the tourist industry and traces its beginnings to 1903 (the same year as Giant’s Castle Game Reserve) when Walter O. Coventry purchased the farm Goodoo with the idea of attracting holiday-makers to the mountains”. Access to the northern Drakensberg from both the Natal and the Orange Free State sides was the most critical issue for tourism development and, given poor condition of road infrastructure, tourists had to depend on rail travel. The access challenges of early rural tourists are recounted by Carruthers (2013: 466) as follows:

In Natal, there was a railway from Durban to Ladysmith and from there the journey to the hostel at Goodoo (50 kilometres) took six hours by wagon with many difficult river crossings. From the OFS side access was by way of a railway line to Bloemfontein from Cape Town from the south and from Johannesburg from the north. From Bloemfontein, a branch line ran to Kroonstad via Aberfeldy, the station closes to the mountains where passengers could disembark.

The critical importance of the railways for early rural tourism is underlined by the fact that most early visitors were English-speaking urbanites from Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg or Pietermaritzburg. For climbers from Cape Town, the stronghold of the Mountain Club of South Africa, “the grandeur of the Drakensberg was appealing and climbing conditions were very different from what they might enjoy closer to home” (Carruthers, 2013: 468). By the 1930s SAR & H publicity material was flagging the appeal of the Drakensberg to international tourists visiting South Africa (Carlyle-Gall, 1937). This asserted that the major peaks of the Drakensberg “are as interesting as the Alps or Himalayas” and that “the area comprises some of the grandest mountain scenery imaginable, and includes many caves containing interesting Bushman paintings” (Carlyle-Gall, 1937: 60).

Beyond mountaineering, walking and climbing, another activity focus for rural tourism was fly-fishing for trout. In 1916 the 124 page *Official Illustrated Guide to Trout Fishing in South Africa* was issued by the SAR & H (South African Railways and Harbours, 1916). Mainly for the benefit of potential overseas visitors South Africa was described as available for “for ten months of the year” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1929) for trout fishing with the caveat that “provided the sportsman changes his venue from time to time” (Carlyle-Gall, 1937: 17). Organized birdwatching was beginning in the 1930s as another activity of rural tourism. It advanced in popularity from 1940 with the publication of the first edition of the

Roberts Birds of Southern Africa, a guidebook that assumed a critical role in popularising bird watching in the country (Rogerson, Simango & Rogerson, 2013).

By 1940 there is clear evidence of the expansion of farm tourism in several areas of rural South Africa. In the annual guide to hotels and other accommodation in South Africa issued by the Publicity and Travel Department of SAR & H a supplement was given on farm houses where accommodation was provided. It was stated that the supplement had been added because of “the ever increasing popularity of the ‘farm holiday’” (South African Railways, Airways and Harbours, 1940: 164). The guide listed a total of 65 establishments mostly located in Cape Province and Natal. Many of these establishments sought rural tourists with their ‘beautiful mountain scenery’ as attraction. The other listed attractions associated with these establishments give an indication of the activities associated with this early form of rural tourism. Among those listed are mountain walks, shooting, trout fishing, river bathing and horse riding.

In terms of spatial development, the first green shoots of rural tourism became evident across several different parts of South Africa during the period 1920-1940. The natural wonders of the Congo Caves close to Oudtshoorn were a leading rural tourism attraction as early as the 1920s. One promotional guide enthused as follows:

Everyone has heard of Congo Caves: America sent an expedition recently to obtain films of them, and the Smithsonian Institute – after illuminating them in order to secure satisfactory negatives – has stated that they are the most wonderful in the world...As to the Caves themselves no pen has yet described their wonders adequately, because when attempting details one seems to be overwhelmed by the immensity of standing in the bowels of the earth, apparently in a building three or four hundred feet in height, where the action of the ages on the limestone has carved pinnacles, pyramids, growing arches, grottos, buttresses, all of which glisten and scintillate like a million diamonds in the light of the magnesium flares (The Union Publishing Agency, 1924: 143).

A decade later the marketing of Congo Caves continued in a similar manner: “these underground palaces and showplaces are glorious in colouring, while the wizardry with which their stalactite and stalagmite embellishments have been fashioned spellbinds the beholder” (Carlyle-Gall, 1937: 17).

With improving automobilities the fringe rural areas of South Africa’s major urban centres showed evidence of the beginnings of rural tourism. Although the area’s tourism history remains to be fully documented it is known that by the 1930s the Magaliesberg was developing as a recreational playground for the growing industrial and gold mining areas of the nearby Witwatersrand. Located next to South Africa’s largest potential market for domestic tourism and with expansion occurring of car ownership as well as opportunities for rail outings the Magaliesberg and its surrounds started to become a popular recreational and tourism space in the 1930s and 1940s (Rogerson & van der Merwe, 2016). A number of towns in the northern part of Orange Free State were promoted as potential early focal points for rural tourism. For example, Kroonstad, Bethlehem, Frankfort and Harrismith were deemed to offer ‘holiday haunts in a farming area’ (South African Railways and Harbours, 1928).

Another more remote region of South Africa starting to open up for rural tourism was the Eastern Transvaal with its natural scenic attractions as well as history of gold mining. As early as 1930 this region was described both as ‘the gateway’ to Kruger National Park but also as a scenic ‘wonderland’ (South African Railways and Harbours, 1930). It was noticeable, however, that this area earned hardly any mention in SAR & H publicity that was issued in the 1930s for overseas visitors (Carlyle-Gall, 1937). By 1940 a promotional guide highlighted the attractions of mountain scenery and trout fishing for Lydenburg, of ‘grand mountain scenery’ for the surrounds of Graskop, and that Sabie was described as “near Kruger National Park.

Gold mining area. Wonderful Scenery” (South African Railways, Airways and Harbours, 1940). The attractions of fishing continued to be marketed with Lydenburg viewed as a town “long-famous for its stocking policy” which had made “its rivers the rendezvous of local and visiting anglers” (South African Tourist Corporation, 1953: no page).

Finally, attention must be drawn to the appearance and promotion of a particular form of early rural tourism that distinguishes South Africa’s historical evolution from that recorded for Europe or North America (cf Gartner, 2004; Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015). As observed by Rassool and Witz (1996: 354) international tourists have long been drawn to South Africa because of its depictions of the “presence of different kinds of primitive and natural life” and most especially of “native life in its tribal state”. During the 1920s and 1930s publicity material from the SAR & H began to highlight the country as “a tourist paradise” where “the traveller encounters a remarkable conglomerate of races, varying from the most backward and primitive to the most virile and intelligent of the dark-skinned tribes” (Uys, 1936: 5). The tourist gaze was thus to be directed at ‘Native life’ a focus of advertising as “the African population was high on the priority list of what potential tourists from America wanted to see” (Wolf, 1991: 107).

Pirie (2022) argues that tourism in Africa has an unfortunate record of exploitative and demeaning dimensions in particular as regards dehumanizing people by treating them as objects. This was exemplified in SAR & H advertising of ‘Native life’ during the 1930s. Marketing was concentrated in particular upon the rural regions of the Transkei and Zululand. In 1937 the Transkei was described as a ‘native reserve’ where “in this entrancing domain of the primitive live over a million people comprising the Pondos, Xosa, Tembu, Baca and Fingo tribes” (Carlyle-Gall, 1937: 17). Likewise, the attractions of Zululand for tourists included “its unparalleled scenery”, “outstanding bird and game sanctuaries” as well as “its wealth of native life” (South African Railways and Harbours, 1939: 3). Other publicity material targeted at international tourists described Zululand in the following manner:

There are over a quarter of a million natives in Zululand living, for the most part, in quaint, beehive-shaped huts which decorate almost every hillside. If it cannot be said they are untouched by civilization, at least they are unspoiled by its influence for they observe the same manners and customs as their forefathers did, and conduct family life around their modest kraals with a wholly refreshing simplicity (Carlyle-Gall, 1937: 71).

Conclusion

The application of archival sources – viewed as the raw material of history – is acknowledged as one of the leading historical approaches for hospitality and tourism research (Power, 2018; Pirie, 2022). This article represents a contribution to the growing body of international scholarship and debates on rural tourism and in particular concerning the historical evolution of rural tourism. Using archival sources the study offers a glimpse into the little researched domain of rural tourism’s past in South Africa. It demonstrates that rural tourism in South Africa is not a new phenomenon and enjoys a recorded history that goes back as far as the late 19th century. Different rural spaces were shown to be associated with different niche products of rural South Africa. The earliest forms of rural tourism were promoted to both audiences of domestic and international visitors. Arguably, the evolutionary pathway of rural tourism in South Africa is markedly different to that which has been documented in settings of the Global North. Further detailed historical research investigations are required to provide insight into South Africa’s past rural tourism.

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