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The Northern Drakensberg Cableway: An Unworkable yet Immortal Development

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Abstract

This study explores the proposed 'Drakensberg Cableway' in the Northern Drakensberg. This cableway project is mired in ongoing controversy with both the consultation process and feasibility study heavily criticised. The proposed site of the cableway borders a world heritage site, is within a culturally sensitive area and prone to highly variable weather, including thunderstorms and high winds. The purpose of this study was to garner the views of a mountain user group in South Africa regarding the proposed cableway using a questionnaire survey. Respondents were overwhelmingly not in favour of the development. Users noted several serious concerns ranging from economic, environmental, statutory and political impacts. In particular, the proposed cableway appears financially unsustainable due to low tourist numbers. Additionally, the infrastructure required will have a deleterious effect on the natural environment. It appears that lessons from South Africa's other two cableways, in terms of economic impacts, environmental issues and weather-related risks, have not been considered. While the provincial KwaZulu-Natal government may punt the proposed cableway as a 'silver bullet' solution for the development and social issues bedevilling the area; the project may instead even exacerbate already fraught social and environmental conditions, both at the proposed lower cableway and upper cableway station. Government officials touting this project need to recognise that tourism development in peripheral mountain areas has to proceed within a much wider social and cross-sectoral economic development context.

Keywords: cableway development, environmental impacts, mountain tourism, northern Drakensberg, South Africa

Introduction

South Africa is home to two cableways. Firstly there is the well-known Table Mountain Aerial Cableway, sited in the subsequently proclaimed protected area (the Table Mountain National Park) and World Heritage Site. It began operating on 1929 and an estimated one million people undertake the trip annually. The huge number of visitors places enormous pressure on the fauna and flora of the area (Peterson, 1983). The degradation of the environment has also been noticed by visitors (Deysel, 2013). Much of this is as a result of the cableway (Emms, 2013). The cableway cannot operate in bad weather (especially high winds), during fires or the threat thereof. The cableway has had to suddenly close in the past, due to accidents. In one incident, 800 visitors were left stranded for a number of hours on the top of the mountain as the cableway had to assist in recovering the bodies of climbers (Brophy, 2018). Amenities at the top include a restaurant and various tours. Prices vary from R150 to R380, making its annual turnover in the region of R150 to R380 million (average R265 million). Deysel (2013), however, found that very little of this money finds its way to underprivileged local communities. Another well-known cableway is the Harties Cableway in Hartbeespoort in the North West province. This cableway is the longest (1.2km) mono-cableway in Africa. It was built in 1973 but fell into disuse between 2005 and 2010 (it is now operational again). Prices range from R150 to R260 per person. Activities on offer include paragliding, hiking, mountain biking, a shop and a restaurant.

This study explores a proposed third South African cableway, mooted for the Northern Drakensberg, and which is, for the purposes of this study, currently dubbed the 'Drakensberg Cableway'. This cableway project is being championed by the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs with the stated aim of developing tourism in this peripheral mountainous area. This cableway proposal is not new and has garnered extensive media coverage over the years. For example, Stewart (2000:156) raised the proposal of the uThukela District Council to promote a cableway in the Mnweni area. "This proposal, it was believed, would bring thousands of tourists and thus economic development in the Mnweni. No feasibility study was done, yet colour brochures and other publicity talked of the project as if it were fait accompli." The feature of announcing a project as finalised without essential preliminary investigation and approval seems to be a trend in this saga. Writing further and referring to the Reineke, Stewart, Cooke, Lax and Kohler (2000) report, Stewart writes that "it was shown that a cableway would, environmental considerations aside, be economically completely unfeasible. The expectations of the local inhabitants are therefore being unrealistically raised." The last statement was proven rather premature because in May 2012, a Member of the Executive Committee (MEC) for KwaZulu-Natal announced another plan to build a cableway, this time in a little-known and isolated KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg valley (Naidoo & Fourie, 2012). A review of published news articles found that there was major media interest in the proposed project. There were also letters to the press, statements released by at least one political party, television documentaries, radio releases, and government speeches given by KwaZulu-Natal government leaders. The articles included valuable and nuanced commentary with attention drawn to the dangerous and changeable weather as well as the possibility of violence, even shoot outs, by cross-border smuggling rings (Sommer, 2013). Not much happened subsequently until suddenly, in September 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the MEC asked in the presence of an ambassador from an Alpine country for investors for the cableway to come forward, thus, indicating the proposal may go ahead (Le Guern, 2020).

The proposed cableway site abuts a World Heritage Site, namely the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park, a highly controversial site as current policy precludes the development of cableways in the buffer zone of the World Heritage Site in question (Metroplan, 2001). Additionally, the call for investors raised eyebrows as the consultation process is incomplete and the feasibility study commissioned by the provincial government has been severely criticised. Furthermore, the proposed site is within a culturally sensitive area prone to highly variable weather, including powerful thunderstorms, winds and fierce electrical discharges. This study investigates the opinions of a provincial chapter of a mountain user group in South Africa regarding this proposed cableway. This mountain user group is characterised by people with local and global experience of cableways, as well as prolonged experience in the Drakensberg, and a prior record of making input into policy-making for the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg. The study is significant in terms of sustainable tourism development in mountains as proposed cableway developments usually elicit contestation and strong responses from interested and affected parties across the world, including around the discourse employed (Adkins, Summerville & Barnett, 2004). Research by Brida, Deidda and Pulina, (2014) show that cableways are not always the promised economic 'El Dorados' of mountain tourism development.

Mountain tourism

Due to the tourism potential of mountains, authorities have tried to promote tourism and obtain economic benefits from what some see as unutilised land. As Price (2015: 93) observed, "many governments and communities in mountain areas around the world have come to regard tourism

as vital for economic development, and even survival. Yet its distribution and benefits tend to be spread unevenly at every scale, from the national to the local." Research-wise, mountain tourism, as a viable and well-known tourism activity, was ignored up to the early 2000s (Nepal & Chipeniuk, 2005). Furthermore, most research has been conducted in Europe. Grötzbach and Stadel (1997:33), alongside other writers, have called mountainous areas peripheral regions. They cited six problems associated with the development of peripheral regions, including the opening of valleys by roads and other infrastructure. Of particular interest is their sixth result, that "the socio-economic integration of mountains into the national economy and society often result in new forms of dependence on the lowlands, to a loss of traditional values and ways of life, and to erosion of the cultural identity of mountain peoples". They also mentioned outside interference and intrusion suggesting that "in many less developed mountain regions the indigenous population is not able … to organise and finance adequate tourist facilities … this means that, besides the flow of tourists, a flow of capital and know-how comes into formerly remote valleys from the outside". This is supported by Price (2015:95) who noted that "as tourism becomes dominant in the local economy, the costs of food, goods, services, and places to live tend to rise." Thus, Nepal and Chipeniuk (2005:313) list six key characteristics, alongside attributes and implications, that should determine how mountain tourism development should proceed: diversity, marginality, inaccessibility, fragility, niche and aesthetics (all of which exhibit currency in the study area). They conclude that "tourism planning and management in mountainous regions should consider and incorporate mountain specific resource characteristics."

Importantly, mountain tourism is integrally related to adventure tourism, due to the risks involved. Those risk are part and parcel of venturing into the mountains. Thus, although it must be stressed that a cableway experience is not part of adventure tourism, if the proposed cableway does proceed, there is both inherent risk involved and a strong likelihood of adventure tourism operators establishing themselves both at the lower and upper cableway stations, as has happened at most cableways internationally. Importantly, cable way operators need to note that there have been notable adventure tourism incidents related to weather and risk, for example, the Storms River disaster in March 2000 (McKay, 2018). Thus, all mountain enterprise operators must adopt risk mitigation and safety measures, the most important of which are related to the weather. Bentley, Page and Walker (2004:283), in a benchmark study on risk in the New Zealand adventure tourism sector, found that "the highest rankings were given for environmental factors, with 97% of respondents ranking weather conditions as a threat to client safety, and some 29% of operators ranking this factor as the number 1 threat to client safety." Clinch and Filimonau (2017), writing about adventure tourism instructors' views on risk management, showed that 100% of participants rated weather as a cause of risk.

There are concerns raised in the international literature about the long term and all-year sustainability of cableways. Brida et al. (2014: 10) posited that "overall the empirical findings reveal that this type of transport [cableways] in the Italian Alps can be regarded as relatively economically inefficient and most of the cableways denote decreasing returns to scale" and that "cableway use is prevalently related to skiing and therefore concentrated in the winter season." The authors concluded that cableways are not financial money spinners and are constrained by seasonality. In a study on cableways in the Aosta valley in north-western Italy, which is not far from the wealthy Piedmont region, the authors found that "the success of the cableway system depends mainly on a loyal segment of demand, on middle/high income and on multi-elastic prices policy" (Ferrarese, Loner & Pulina, 2021: 1). It has to be noted that the Aosta valley has almost seven months of reliable skiing and is close to a population with medium to high spending power; this is diametrically different to the region around the proposed Drakensberg cableway. As mentioned before, seasonality is pervasive in the tourist

sector in general, with Price et al. (1997: 258) noting that "the strong seasonality of most mountain tourist activities is a crucial reason for ensuring that tourism is placed in a wider economic and societal context". Moreover, Price (2015: 98) added that "it is essential that its (tourism) development is linked to that of other economic sectors".

In an IUCN booklet, Hamilton and McMillan (2004: 24) have developed guidelines for mountain protected areas including a section on inappropriate development such as infrastructure like cableways. Their guideline 44 states that inappropriate development in a protected area should be avoided where possible: "in preference, develop infrastructure outside the protected area; if development has to occur inside then apply the concept of peripheral development." Guidelines 45 and 46 respectively call for integrated environmental management principles and adherence to a zonation plan. The authors also issued guidelines with respect to protecting mountains and the visitor experience (managing to engage tourists and recreationists, Chapter IX) (pp. 51-60), pollution (pp. 45-46), and water and soil conservation in mountain protected areas (Chapter VII: 37-42), all of which will affect or be affected by the construction and operation of a cableway. In a summary of mountain related literature, Price (2015: 97) details the multifaceted environmental impacts brought upon by mountain tourism. These affect mainly the lower slopes where the bulk of infrastructure will be constructed. This is especially true in the case of cableways, where the lower cable station will have most of the infrastructure in place. The effects Price states are '…the loss of agricultural and residential land; air pollution, particularly from traffic and in inversion conditions; and water pollution from inadequately treated waste and badly constructed roads. Road construction can also lead to increase runoff and erosion." These effects and the damage they do to vulnerable societies in the foothills of the Himalaya and the Andes are also mentioned in Price, Moss and Williams. (1997).

The South African literature reinforces the view that development in mountain areas must proceed cautiously. With respect to research in African mountains, only researchers in Morocco and South Africa are prominent in the literature (Rio-Rama, Maidonado-Erazo, Durán-Sánchez and Álvarez-Garcia, 2019). The African studies "address the management of the destination, determine the tourist potential that the study areas have for the development of new mountain tourism destinations (Linde & Grab, 2008: 141)." Knight and Grab (2015: 53) additionally state that planned developments such as "new tourist lodges, construction of wind turbines, a cableway from the foothills to the escarpment summit and additional diamond mining excavations… are likely to negatively impact on the aesthetic landscape appeal of the Great Escarpment." In this regard, they affirm the view of Stewart (2000: 152) who noted the need for catalyst developments to be initiated in support of general infrastructure development: "Several big 'honey-pot' developments are needed to justify the expenditure on required infrastructure, principally roads. The argument is that major developments such as ski resorts and cableways are essential to kick-start a successful tourism industry. Thus, the challenge is to resolve the conflict between protection of the resources that give the region its attractions and the need for economic development." The same writer (ibid: 150) states that cableways, among other commercial and tourism developments, can be described as "a threat to biodiversity, water conservation and natural beauty." In an unpublished master's thesis, Nsuntsha (2000: 75) noted certain contradictions in policy: "the uThukela Regional Council proposes an approach which tends to contradict that of the provincial government, in terms of the cableway project proposal. In terms of the SCA, there is to be limited development within the sensitive ecological zones (roughly above 1500m), yet the Regional Council proposes a development project which has been rejected on the ground that it will cause cumulative environmental impact." Pearce (2006: 352) noted that "EKZN Wildlife is particularly concerned about collisions of raptors (especially the specially protected and endangered Cape

Vulture and the Bearded Vulture) with the cables – this is an issue for the Bearded Vulture in the Alps – and the possible disturbance at nesting sites by larger volumes of tourists."

The literature pertaining to tourism in the Drakensberg covers topics such as the sustainability of, and obstacles to, rock art tourism (Duval & Smith, 2013; 2014). Vrahimis and Visser (2006) detailed exhaustively how a provincial government department impeded, rather than aided, the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Project in the Free State Province's jurisdictional area of the Drakensberg. There are also articles on mountain route-based tourism concerning the management and marketing, the sustainability and pro-poor centricity thereof (Proos, Kokt & Hattingh, 2017; Mutana & Mukwada, 2017; 2020) and comparative tourism studies between two different Drakensberg destinations (Linde & Grab, 2008). Mazibuko (2007, 2010) details, in two studies, the costs of ecotourism, and pro-poor tourism related to livelihood strategies, pertaining to a particular ethnic group and area in the northern Drakensberg.

Research methodology

The main objective of this study was to ascertain whether it would be wise for the Drakensberg cableway to go ahead and to ascertain the level of expert knowledge of the Mnweni area among respondents. Another two objectives were to establish if the respondents thought that the cableway would go ahead, and to ascertain the level of public participation in the process to date. Regarding ethics approval, a comprehensive process led to this research process being granted ethics approval by the University of KwaZulu-Natal Humanities Research Office (P. Mohun, pers. comm., 20 July 2015). The research paradigm used was interpretive within a qualitative research approach. Two email appeals were sent to each member of the concerned mountain user group and a total of 45 completed questionnaires were returned. Thus, the sampling was purposive. The total number of email subscribers of the user group is 408, so 45 completed questionnaires equates to canvassing the views of 11% of the subscribers. Most of the respondents were KwaZulu-Natal-based but some responses were received from members living in other provinces of South Africa and even one or two from overseas.

The research instrument posed eleven questions concerning the appropriateness and suitability of a cableway system situated between the proposed lower station situated in the Busingatha valley and the upper station situated on Mount Amery (northern KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg). Two questions dealt with the educational background of the participants, and three questions covered the study site (the lower and upper Busingatha valley). One question covered the likely weather conditions to be experienced at the site, and another covered the local and international cableway experience of the participants. A follow-up question tried to ascertain the factors that could lead or not lead to the successful operation of this cableway, according to the respondents' experience of other cableways, both in South Africa and overseas. One question ascertained if participants had contributed to policy statements/ conservation and development proposals for the Drakensberg. Another canvassed opinions relating to if the development would threaten the World Heritage Status of the Ukhahlamba Drakensberg Park. A final question related to the proposed project's overall chances of success. Answers in the questionnaires were grouped into common issues and themes, that were enumerated and discussed. This enumeration led to the proportions and percentages mentioned in the study. Significant quotations of the respondents were earmarked for inclusion in the discussion of results.

The proposed cableway site

The Ukhahlamba-Drakensberg Park is a World Heritage Site (WHS). The proposed site for the cableway is in the Upper Mnweni area, in the northern KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg (the

proposed lower station situated in the Busingatha valley and the upper station situated on Mount Amery) near Bergville (see Figure 1). There is current policy precluding the development of cableways in the buffer zone of the World Heritage Site in question. As the location of the proposed upper cable station (see Figure 2) is approximately 300m from the World Heritage Site border, it is within the buffer zone of the Royal Natal National Park. No activities that would damage the formally protected zone are permitted in a buffer, although farming allowed in the transition zone. This is formally noted in the uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site Integrated Management Plan (Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife, 2012). Although the Mnweni area is an integral part of the Maloti-Drakensberg range, it has, unfortunately, no formal conservation status. As a result damage to the conservation heritage of the area is evident (see Figure 3 showing sheet and gully erosion). Duval and Smith (2014, p. 36) have considered these threats and damages: "As a result some rock art sites have lost their original religious significances (Lewis-Williams, 2003) and are today used for utilitarian purposes (e.g. sheep pens) that have damaged the paintings (Jeremy Hollmann, pers. comm., 2009). This is especially true for the rock art sites in the UDP buffer zone (e.g. the Mnweni area)."

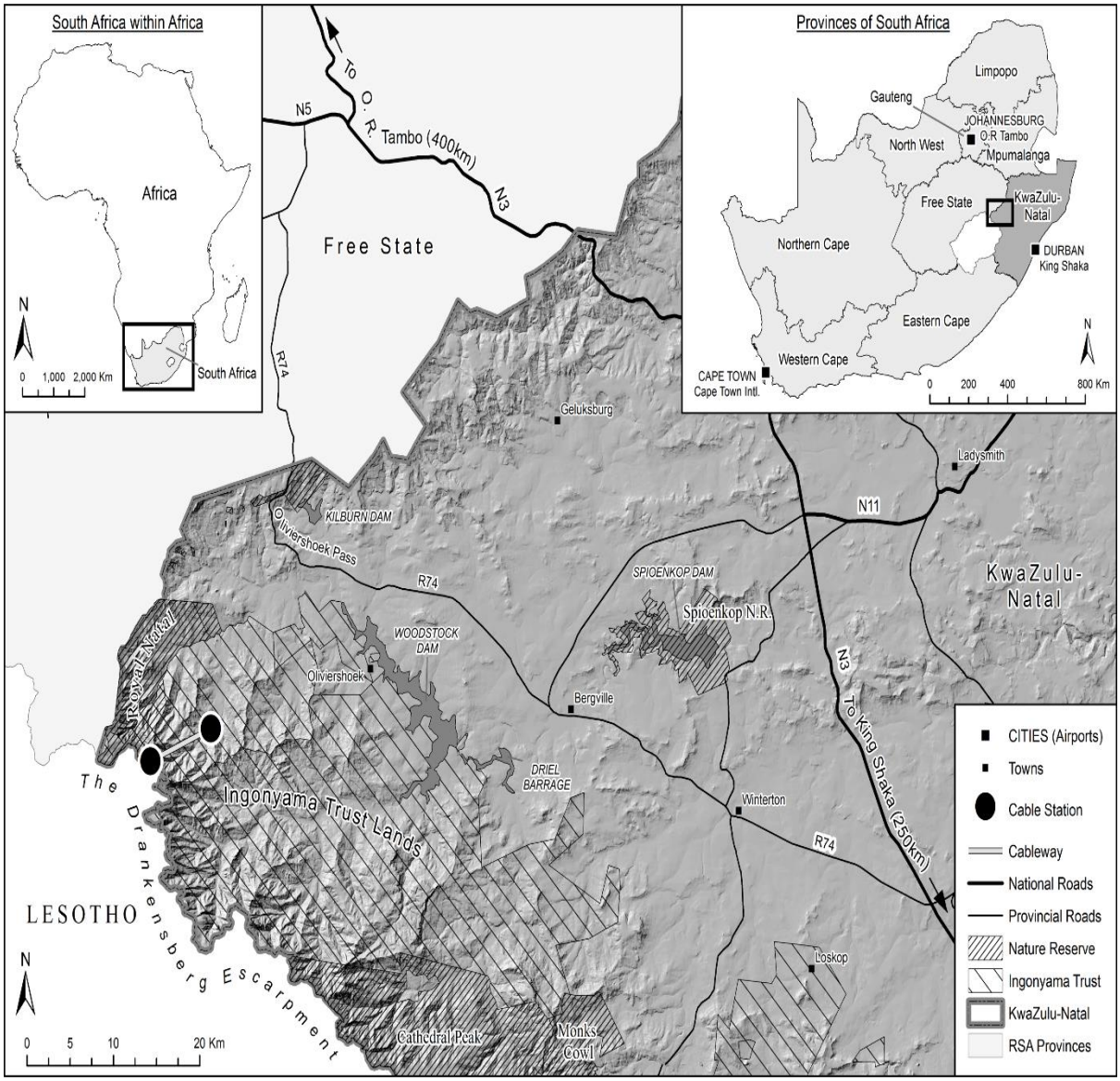

Figure 1. Location of proposed cableway in the Ingonyama Trust area.

Moreover, the area has a long and contested history, with an initial resettlement of surrounding communities into this area during the colonial era (the Upper uThukela Location) (Pearce, 2006). The upper Mnweni area is thus a culturally- and historically-sensitive area (Wright & Mazel, 2007). It is also an area with high potential for payment for ecosystem services (high quality water), which would facilitate economic development, if the natural capital of the catchment were to be restored (Blignaut et al., 2010). The Mnweni area is poor but is also a growing ecotourism node, thus any development will require careful collaboration with its ecotourism neighbours (Linde & Grab, 2008).

Figure 2. View from proposed top cableway station (Mount Amery area). Source: Anthony van Tonder

Figure 3. View of proposed lower cable car station area (the lower Busingatha Valley) (Source: Carl Dreyer)

In the influential Drakensberg Special Case Area Plan study, the Mnweni node (which includes the Busingatha valley [see Figure 3]) is earmarked for local economic development (Metroplan, 2001). The plan certainly makes no mention of massive infrastructural projects, in pursuance of local economic development. Importantly, the local conservation authority's Concept Development Plan explicitly stated that "no cableways, chair-lifts or similar structures will be tolerated in the park and will not be supported in the buffer area around the park" (Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife, 201: 14). In a previous study on a proposed cableway in the Mnweni valley (a region about 20 kilometres southward to the presently proposed cableway), the cableway was considered economically unfeasible (Reineke et al., 2000). In conclusion, the writers (ibid: 28) stated that the "the proposed cableway in the Mnweni is not economically feasible based on current tourism figures even with optimistic weighting given in respect of initial passenger volumes, growth in passenger volumes, inflation and interest rates. Furthermore the extrapolation of this engineering estimate to cope with a 3.5 fold increase in passenger volumes also indicated that the project is still not viable."

Results

Background of participants

Most respondents held postgraduate qualifications with a significant number (40%) holding advanced research degrees. Twenty-one (47%) of 45 respondents hold qualifications in academic fields that have relevance to the proposed development, with 12 (27%) holding degrees or diplomas in the environmental and land management fields. Most respondents were seasoned cableway-users and 44 percent have been involved in drafting policy or contributed towards conservation/ development matters in the Drakensberg area. Some 16 respondents (36%) of the total number have visited the proposed site more than six times, with 13% been more frequently. Thus, half of the respondents were also very familiar with the area in question.

Views of the proposed development: Themes

The vast majority (91%) viewed the area as unsuitable for a cableway. The various reasons for this are detailed below, namely (1) financially unsustainable due to low tourist numbers; (2) clashes between the infrastructural needs of the development and the impacts such infrastructure would have on the natural environment; and (3) the high risk to safety associated with the weather.

Most importantly, it was felt that too few tourists visit the area to make a cableway financially sustainable. Respondent 1: "*The return on investment is not going to be that substantial*" and another Respondent 5 cautioned that "*investment will not be recovered*". This was in part due to the long distance of the proposed cableway from a major urban centre, coupled with the distance from a major national road to the proposed cableway was too long. Another Respondent (8) wrote that "*The region is roughly 300km from the nearest major airport, is more than an hour from the N3, requires driving along a narrow currently untarred road*". Distance was not the only tourist limiting factor. Respondent 10 noted that "*the area has associations with dagga (cannabis) smuggling which acts as a deterrent to visitors … likely compliance with regulations is low due to weak political structures … land tenure is uncertain and can be subject to local power struggles*". Furthermore, another (Respondent 21) noted that "*the Drakensberg does NOT attract typical tourists, but seekers after adventure*".

Many were concerned that the cableway would ruin the wilderness and damage the natural beauty of the area. Respondent 9 wrote that "*defacement of a pristine aesthetically beautiful mountain range*" would result as local infrastructure was poor. In that regard Respondent 31 noted "*the cableway would require a continual power supply, easy access, major infrastructure such as lodges or hotels*". Thus, a cableway on its own is not enough,

developers would have to commit to massive infrastructural investments as well. Respondent (34) also noted that "*the cumulative, synergistic effects of the cable car, which include extending the cableway into Lesotho… and the building of more roads and infrastructure as a result, will surely ultimately ruin the very attraction the Drakensberg is so renowned for*". The threat of effluence from the proposed development was also a concern. Some feared that uncontrolled and informal developments would occur along the access road. Others felt that permanent damage to the landscape would result from the proposed development. A respondent cautioned about the risk of "*environmentally unfriendly tourists*" who would "*leave the access road and drive all over the sensitive wetland areas destroying not only the natural heritage but also damaging the water supply that emanates from there to South Africa and Lesotho*." One felt the tourist footprint would be too high for a fragile ecosystem. Respondent 22 wrote that *"… it would completely change the social environment from deep rural to sophisticated tourism orientated. It's unlikely the locals would benefit much, it's more likely that there would be an influx of 'foreigners' taking most of the (certainly) better paid jobs. The local community have their own different ideas as to how they would like their area developed*." Thus, many saw the proposed cableway as a threat to the ecological environment, contrary to the whole ethos of a World Heritage Site. A respondent (11) even cautioned that "*the governing body for WHS status has indicated it may withdraw the Drakensberg WHS status if the development goes ahead….*" This was because, as one respondent (32) noted,: "*if it went ahead, it would be the forerunner of further development in the areas, and it would no longer be a buffer zone*". At the same time, some predicted conflict with the existing policy. Respondent 18 noted that "*overall the proposed development is an over-simplified, 'short cut'… approach to addressing the complex imperatives related to tourism in SA*". One respondent (34), clearly with a good understanding of the valley, spoke of how "*many of the AmaZizi people are also opposed to it*".

Additionally, most felt that the weather would curtail operating hours. Respondent 40 noted that *"… knowing the weather of this particular area …it will hamper operation and viewing by paying visitors. Frequent mist, thunderstorms and associated cloud activity particularly in the summer months … will mean lots of unsuitable days for cable car operation, downtime and frustration by paying customers/ visitors and the operators of the scheme. The unpredictable characteristic of Berg storms increases risks to clients*." Another Respondent (15) warned of dangers such as "*persons walking off the edge of the Drakensberg*" due to "*how easily it is to be disoriented in cloud*". Thus, the prevailing weather conditions, especially electrical storms and high winds, were a significant risk to the successful operation of the proposed cableway. Respondent 28 wrote that "*the extreme weather conditions that can and do occur on the escarpment are another important factor*." Because of this, one respondent noted that a large full time rescue team would be needed.

Discussion

This article follows the trend of mountain tourism articles in Africa, with a focus on the tourist potential of mountain tourism destinations (Rio-Rama et al., 2019). In relation to mountain cableway tourism in South Africa, the Noome and Fitchett (2019: 2453) study is of great significance. In particular, the authors state that climate change poses a serious threat to tourism in the vicinity of the proposed upper cableway station. Furthermore, Stockigt, Hoogendoorn, Fitchett and Saarinen (2018: 207) noted that "snow and cold temperatures" are in decline and so recommended a diversification of tourist activities." Rising temperatures alongside increased rainfall, can cause soil and rock instability (Jakob, 2022). This would have severe geological consequences for a cableway. In a follow-up study (to Stockigt et al., 2018), Hoogendoorn, Stockigt, Saarinen and Fitchett (2021: 96) found that unpredictable snowfalls,

inconsistent rain patterns and temperature changes amongst other climatic factors, were specifically identified as challenges related to climate change and these extremes have become more unpredictable and severe" (ibid: 96-97). These various studies speak directly to site of the proposed cableway upper station, notably that unpredictability and risk related to weather and landscape stability appear to be increasing, not decreasing, in the area. The geological and climatological risk is, therefore, significant. This proposed cableway development also has the potential to lead to adventure tourism in the area. Potential adventure tourism operators will need to take very careful note of the risk of rapidly changing and unpredictable weather patterns around the proposed upper station of the cableway.

In summary, respondents were vehemently against the proposed development. It is clear that weather conditions are extremely dangerous and potentially fatal on the summit of the Drakensberg. There are too many burning issues, chiefly economic, environmental and statutory/ political, impinging on this proposed development. These issues relate to the six characteristics of mountain tourism which have been mentioned by Nepal and Chipeniuk (2005). The potential environmental damage leading from a massive infrastructural development such as a cableway has to be noted (Price et al., 1997; Price, 2015). The peripheral and neglected nature of the Busingatha valley will make this damage more likely. There is also potential for these issues to form a socio-economic and political imbroglio, something the province of KwaZulu-Natal has experienced in the recent past, which militates against sustainable economic development (Vrahamis & Visser, 2006). The proposed cableway location is also adjacent to known dagga smuggling routes, as one respondent alluded to and which the author has also witnessed. In this, it is not a unique risk as there also drug and contraband smuggling routes in Asia and South America, but it will need to be considered in a risk assessment.

The proposed cableway development could increase the dependence and economic exploitation of an already vulnerable mountain community (Grötzbach & Stadel, 1997). Therefore, the cableway is not a tourism 'silver bullet' and development has to proceed within a wider social and economic context (Stewart, 2000; Price, 2015). The cableway itself may become a money pit as cableways are not necessarily profitable (Brida et al., 2014). Even cableways near prosperous regions have to rely on imaginative pricing systems and loyal customers to remain in business (Ferrarese, 2021). Most cableways in the Alps where the majority are, were built in the economic heyday of the late 1950s to the 1960s where concerns such as climate change and weather-related risk were considered as important as they are today. The rise of the environmental movement and the economic crisis in the 1970s led to cableway development stalling or stopping for good, certainly in European Alpine areas.

Conclusion

This small-scale study showed alignment between the respondents' comments and the literature, both global and local. The mountain user group expressed the same concerns reflected by notable mountain geographers and mountain tourism researchers. The study also continues the trend of mountain tourism papers published in Africa, addressing the tourist potential of mountain tourism destinations. The location of the proposed upper cableway station is not suitable for 'daytripper' tourists, and the potentially dangerous weather conditions at the summit of the Drakensberg would make both the proposed mountain tourism and adventure tourism destinations untenable in terms of risk. Climate change is also becoming more and more an issue at the neighbouring Afriski resort, and this will yet again, negatively affect the proposed upper cableway station. It is furthermore clear that both of the proposed lower and upper cable stations are in areas of very sensitive socio-political and environmental dynamics. Despite this, the project has been mooted three times over the last 20 years, with

expert testimony seemingly disregarded, and no cognisance taken of the finaical unviability of the project. As cablecar tourism development will not work; the provincial government needs to look to other economic sectors and social development to uplift the area. For example, rock art tourism is a neglected tourism attraction at present and if managed correctly, could lead to positive economic outcomes in the area.

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