

Kruger conservation vs. development flare-up

The Mercury reports that the controversy over "hotels" in the Kruger National Park has flared up more angrily than before, with accusations being flung back and forth among deep personal animosities. Crucially, the debate reveals the gulf between different perceptions of the way nature reserves fit into a democratic SA.

The flare-up was sparked by remarks National Parks (SANParks) chief executive David Mabunda made last year. Noting that parks needed to change to benefit all 50 million of SA's citizens, Mabunda said he agreed with Minister of Water and Environmental Affairs Edna Molewa regarding national parks as "hubs of economic development in our society".

He took a swipe at what he called the sickening tendency by a handful of old-school conservationists appointing themselves as agents of positive societal change, saying they continued to campaign for the retention of past policies and privileges as they had over the past 100 years. Former director of SanParks and Kruger National Park Salomon Joubert took exception to Mabunda's speech and circulated an email in which he charged that Mabunda could surely not be referring to the vast majority of proudly SA white people who had embraced the new SA as loyal and committed citizens and who honoured the national parks. Joubert advocates for preserving biodiversity "in its most pristine state possible" at the Kruger.

The two have been at odds since the so-called "hotel" plans for Kruger (one inside Skukuza camp and the other just inside the park's border near Malelane) became known. Even though the term "hotel" refers to the services to be offered - rather than to the buildings, which could better be described as a "lodge", the word started the controversy on the question whether 'conservation' and 'development' are mutually exclusive. According to *The Mercury*, to harm the ecological integrity of part in the name of development would be to impede the very role parks should play in conservation, popular attraction and economic values. At the same time, a park like Kruger has several million people, many of whom are unemployed, living along its border, many of whom could benefit from the planned development.

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