

Conference to be held to promote the Karoo

The Karoo Development Foundation, in partnership with the University of the Free State, is hosting its second Karoo conference, this time focusing on Creative Tourism in the Karoo, as part of its Arid Areas Research Programme, in December 2009.



The primary aim is of forging new partnerships in the Karoo, Kalahari and Namaqualand. This conference follows hot on the heels of the first conference, which was the Karoo Development Conference and Trade Fair, held at Graaff-Reinet in March 2009.

The focus of the conference is on promoting tourism in the Karoo, Kalahari and Namaqualand - the challenge of developing and marketing a signature "Karoo brand", as a key desert tourism destination in the world. The diversity, sophistication and quality of accommodation and activities in the Karoo offer exceptional value.

Major implications for World Cup

This holds major implications for the FIFA 2010 World Cup. Football fans will need to travel by road between host cities, such as Cape Town, Bloemfontein, Port Elizabeth and Gauteng - through the Karoo, Kalahari and Namaqualand. The conference hosts have, therefore, highlighted six major Karoo Highways that need to be marketed for this keynote event. The challenge is how to maximise the developmental spin-offs for Karoo communities.

With a common goal of working towards the Karoo Highways' "Drive the Great Karoo" pay-off line, this trans-provincial border initiative is encouraging the four neighbouring provinces of Western Cape, Northern Cape, Eastern Cape and Free State (all of which lay claim to a portion of the Karoo region) to brainstorm the most creative ways forward that can stimulate the business sense of trans-provincial border collaboration.

Sponsored by AUSAID

Set to take place at De Stijl Hotel, Gariiep Dam, from Thursday, 5 until Friday, 6 November, the conference sponsored by the Australian government fund AUSAID and is a project of the Karoo Development Foundation, in partnership with the University of the Free State-based Centre for Development Support.

According to Professor Doreen Atkinson, a specialist in rural development, tourism is a key component of holistic rural development strategy.

"We need a partnership between universities, government and the private sector to identify and promote the niche tourism advantages of our local desert: the Karoo," she noted. "Desert tourism is increasingly popular internationally, and we need to build on this type of destination marketing in order to truly maximise the promotion of the Karoo as a destination."

The Karoo offers phenomenal richness: endless desert landscapes, mountain ranges, game reserves, working Karoo farms, charming villages, Karoo architecture, fossils, geological heritage, Khoisan artefacts vibrant rainbow of cultures, adventure tourism, arts, crafts, cuisine - and more besides.

The conference is based on the following principles:

1. Research and development must be promoted hand in hand. Research adds value to development, and development gives meaning to research. The conference provides academic presentations, but the ultimate value will be in the developmental outcomes achieved. This is referred to as a "Scholarship of Engagement".
2. At the conference, it is hoped to create inter-provincial task teams on various themes to guide new ideas towards implementation.
3. Tourism development is a key component of rural development, and regional development needs to focus on holistic economic and environmental regions. Tourism promotion is a subset of regional development.
4. Partnerships are encouraged between government, business and civil society.
5. There exists a need to engage stakeholders from national, provincial, district, local and community level. Effective development requires intervention ranging from broad sectoral policies and regional strategies to municipal plans and community-level mobilisation.
6. There exists a need to link heritage, environment, craft and tourism, which will require inter-sectoral and inter-disciplinary thinking and practice.
7. Given South Africa's economic divide between rich and poor, we need to promote the "second economy" as well as the "first economy". There therefore exists a need to include "pro-poor" interventions in Karoo tourism.

The conference is aimed at the following sectors:

1. National and provincial government: tourism, arts and culture, heritage, economic development, environmental management
2. Municipal government
3. Tourism product owners
4. Tourism marketing agencies
5. Special-interest organisations promoting rural development.

Further information on the Karoo region can also be gleaned at the website www.aridareas.co.za. The Centre for Development Support's website can be viewed at www.ufs.ac.za/cds.