

TOURISM AND THE HERITAGE ASSETS OF THE KAROO OUTBACK

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ABSTRACT

This contribution examines the potential for the rich and diverse cultural and natural heritage of the Karoo to support tourism and to provide a variety of tourism products which could assist in improving the stagnant economies of small Karoo towns. The status quo with regard to tourism in small Karoo towns is discussed and from this, a number of problems have been identified. The range and distribution of heritage categories represented in 56 Karoo towns is discussed and a focus on a variety of themed and/or route tourism products is suggested, based on the distribution pattern. The practical problems and disadvantages and advantages for tour operators wishing to incorporate heritage tourism in the Karoo are discussed and a way forward is suggested. There are, however, many unique advantages and 'Desert Tourism' and Karoo Outback tours could be far more aggressively marketed. There is still time to benefit from the tourism opportunities which 2010 might generate.

INTRODUCTION

Simply stated, the aim of this project is to find ways and means of marrying tourism to the rich and varied heritage and cultural resources of the Karoo. In doing this, the intention is to showcase these unique resources, and to involve local people in providing for the needs of tourists. A strategy based on an analysis of the status quo regarding tourism and formulation of desired outcomes is suggested. Communities need to be prepared for tourism in order that authenticity, significance, and 'sense of place' are preserved because enhanced tourism can easily destroy the very qualities that tourists seek to enjoy.

METHOD

- Define area encompassed by the term 'Karoo'
- Assess *status quo* with regard to tourism and types of tourism within this region, visitor numbers
- Define and identify categories of heritage assets present in the Karoo
- Plot distribution of each heritage category, town by town
- Assess quality of transit experience between towns
- Identify appropriate routes for different themed special interest tours or route tourism
- Reconnaissance and assessment of quality of potential tourist experience
- Consider practicalities— accommodation, presentation of heritage assets, tourist guide availability, accessibility to places of interest, etc.
- SWOT analysis to identify strengths and weaknesses, disadvantages and advantages and problems experienced
- Identify desired outcomes and suggest strategies to achieve these
- Ensure that tourism does not impact on heritage resources

DEFINITION OF THE KAROO AS A REGION

The term 'Karoo' is iconic and conjures up images of wide open spaces washed in sunshine, flat-topped koppies, windpumps and isolated farmhouses, but the area which it represents is poorly defined. There are several variations on this theme such as the Little Karoo, Tanqua Karoo, Moordenaars Karoo, Upper Karoo and Great Karoo. When marketing a product, it is important to define and identify the product – for example, what is 'Karoo lamb', and from which districts might such a product be expected to come?

Analysing what is iconic about the Karoo therefore involves perceptions concerning space, landforms and landscape, vegetation, economic activities and architecture as well as climate. For the purposes of examining the heritage assets of the Karoo, the following regional definition has been adopted, for the accompanying reasons:

- **Limited in the south** by the southern Cape Fold Mountain Belt.
- **Reason:** South of the fold mountains one is in a different geological formation, the Cape Supergroup as opposed to the Karoo Supergroup, there is a concomitant change in the landforms making up the landscape, and also a different vegetation, the Fynbos or Succulent Karoo as opposed to the Nama Karoo of north of the fold belt

- **Limited in the west** by the Cederberg
- **Reason:** as above – Cape Supergroup and a change in vegetation

- **Limited in the north** by the gradation into Bushmanland
- **Reason:** Change of landforms making up landscape, and from karoo bossies to kokerboom country

- **Limited in the east** and north-east by the grasslands of the Free State and different landforms and economic activities of 'Settler Country' and Transkei.
- **Reason:** the rolling grasslands of the free State create a different 'sense of place', as does the better-watered and more hilly country of the eastern Eastern cape province (Map shown in presentation)

The defined area therefore encompasses a vast stretch of country from Calvinia in the north west to Touws Rivier in the south west and from Somerset East in the south east to the Orange River in the north east, a region encompassing only 6 towns which qualify as "Major Towns", 5 Secondary Towns, 27 "Other Towns" and 18 settlements such as Klaarstroom and Vosburg.

More importantly, the Karoo heartland includes substantial portions of at least three provinces: Western Cape, Northern Cape, Eastern Cape and, some would claim, parts of the Free State. This has implications for the planning and support of tourism initiatives that operate cross-boundary.

TOURISM IN THE KAROO HEARTLAND: STATUS QUO

Each of the three main provinces which have territory which can be classified as "Karoo" have different strategies and outlooks on tourism, as far as Provincial governance is concerned, as well as differing budgets and programmes to support this. These have been reported in an important document entitled xxxx by Atkinson and Marais (2007)

Local tourism in the Karoo

Museums, guest house owners, hotel owners and operators of B & B's were interviewed to assess what kinds of visitors and tourists come to their establishments.

The commonest visitor is the 'drop-in visitor who is en route to somewhere else and strictly speaking is not a tourist, although quite often, simply by stopping, they become interested and stay another night or come again.

The following categories of tourist were identified:

Drop-ins who sleep over

Retirees on self-drive tours

Foreign self-drive tourists

Bikers – mixed age group from mature adult to retired – mix of local and foreign

Event-driven tourism, like motor bike rallies, endurance runs, car rallies, festivals, etc. people en route to events extend their trips

Tour groups in luxury buses – most often use hotels and lodges (mostly foreign tourists)

Smaller tour groups in mini-buses (mix of local and foreign)

Clubs and special interest groups on outings to places of interest

Recreational vehicle owners (self-contained) – often use caravan parks or camping facilities

Hunters – most often stay in hunting lodges

Caravanners and campers

Families with children

Backpackers – not common in the Karoo

People interviewed noted that there has been a drop-off in tourist numbers in some towns (see bar graph, Fig 1) and that the winter months of July and August are 'flat' .

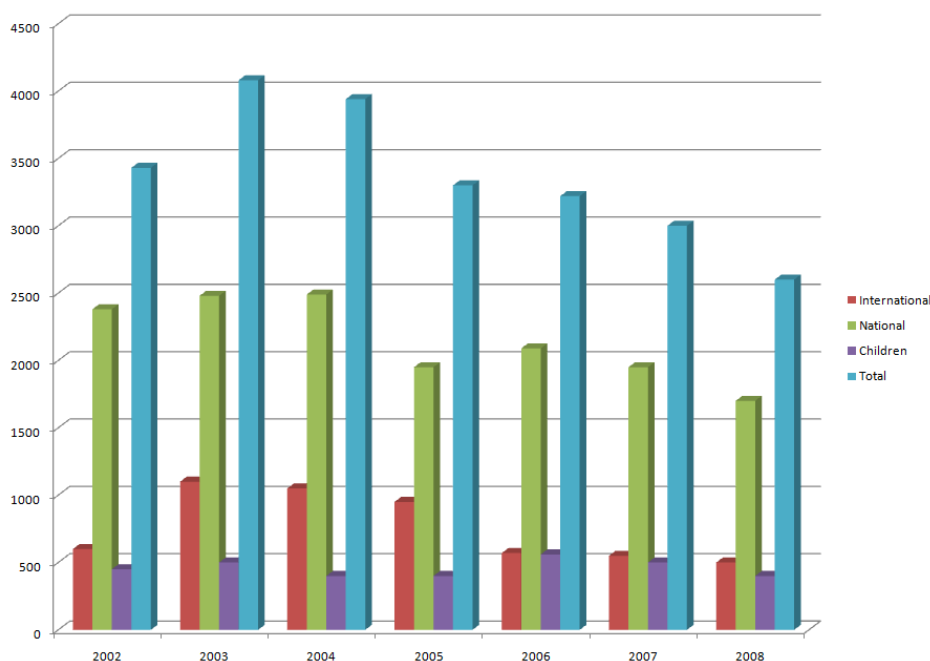


Fig 1: Visitor numbers for the Fransie Pienaar Museum, 2002 – 2008

HERITAGE ASSET CATEGORIES

Geological and landscape assets

The whole of the area defined as the Karoo lies on the suite of rocks known as The Karoo Supergroup. At many places in the Karoo, different portions of this enormously thick succession of rocks are exposed, providing insights into the depositional environments at the time the rocks were laid down, between 280 and 180 million years ago.

The southern margin of the geographical Karoo, the Cape Fold Mountains, show spectacular examples of folding and thrusting by the titanic forces which created the Karoo basin and sea, particularly in the passes that cut through or ascend over the ranges. (Fig 2)

Further to the north, the igneous intrusions that heralded the break-up of the supercontinent Gondwana often give rise to the flat-topped koppies of the Karoo, or to conspicuous dykes cutting across the older sedimentary layers (Fig 3), or they weather into 'woolsack' blocks or koppies of tumbled black rocks (Fig 4).

It is the desert varnish on the latter black boulder koppies that was engraved, pecked or scraped by the San to create the wonderful rock engravings of the Karoo (Fig 5).

Palaeontological assets

Embedded within the thick succession of sedimentary rocks are the fossilised remains of plants which grew at the edges of the Karoo sea and the animals which walked the extensive mudflats and floodplains of the meandering rivers which developed as the sea began to silt up. There is an almost unbroken record (except for a major extinction event) of the radiation and evolution of reptiles, which includes the transition from amphibian to reptile and from reptile to mammal, in the form of many thousands of fossils which occur throughout the Karoo (Figs 6,7 and 8).

Archaeological and Rock Art heritage

There is a scatter of artefacts dating from the Early Stone Age, Middle Stone Age and later Stone age all over the karoo, but few stratified sites because people seldom lived for extensive periods at any one site – they were nomadic, leading and event-driven lives, following rains and (For the Khoe) seeking new growth and new pastures.

One of the greatest heritage assets of the Karoo is its rock engraving sites where engraved, pecked or scraped images of eland, ostriches, zebra and other animals bear silent and unfathomable testimony to the former presence of the culturally extinct San.

The rock art sites are vulnerable to vandalism and great care should be taken when using these sites for tourism.

Architectural heritage

The Karoo is the only place in South Africa where the stone-built corbelled houses and 'kafhoks' of the earliest trekboers can be found.

The Karoo has a rural vernacular architectural heritage which is unique to this area such as the stone walled sheep kraals, stone walled sheep camps, soap houses and outbuildings of the early sheep farms. The farm workers' cottages are an under-estimated and interesting form of architecture.

Many small Karoo dorps preserve rare examples of 'brakdak' Karoo cottages as well as Victorian and Georgian urban architecture. There are a few special and rare Art Deco examples. In many towns, the architectural heritage is at risk.

Many towns have magnificent churches, town halls, and other public buildings. Many towns have Otto Hager or Sophie Gray churches.

Railway architecture has been ruined by plunderers and much of it is in a ruinous or severely neglected state. The same is true of the railway infrastructure that used to support steam trains (tanks, old signals, reservoirs, coal depots, etc).

Anglo Boer War/ South African War heritage

These heritage assets include battlefield and skirmish sites, blockhouses and other military installations, military graveyards, concentration camp sites, memorials and military museums. There is ongoing interest in the South African War and special interest groups and persons wishing to enrich their genealogical researches are often encountered as tourists.

Literary Interest heritage

There is an ongoing interest in such literary figures as Olive Schreiner, N P Van Wyk Louw, A G Visser and many others. Several towns have book fairs and some are seeking to become known as 'book towns'

Steam train and railway history

The numerous 'fossil' steam train installations at the many now derelict railway stations across the Karoo and places like De Aar make the Karoo a favoured destination for railway enthusiasts.

Private steam train safaris (such as Rovos Rail) cross the full breadth of the karoo and stopover tourism is a distinct possibility, run from the luxury trains and back.

The demise of the railways is a great loss to tourism. Bikers report that they like to go some of the long distances by rail (with their bikes), and move out from station stops.

Khoisan Struggle Sites

The Karoo was once a hotly contested frontier and there are many sites where fierce struggles took place. Many of these are recorded in local oral traditions and centenary publications. Several places can still be visited by the public.

Natural heritage assets

These include areas of great scenic beauty such as the Valley of Desolation near Graaff Reinet, the mountain passes which are the gateways to the Karoo, the passes providing access to the Roggeveld and Nuweveld, and the many nature and game reserves. Space, serenity, solitude but particularly the empty spaces of the Karoo that are so fulfilling need to be more effectively marketed.

Agricultural heritage

The Karoo is home to several kinds of farming activity not to be found elsewhere in South Africa. The Karoo is famous for its merino sheep and wool industry, its mohair industry and the rearing of

ostrich chicks (birds are raised to adulthood or slaughter size on the south side of the mountains, in the Little Karoo). Alongside the wool industry go several skills, such as those of the shepherd, stock fence 'draadspanners' sheep-shearing and shearers, the 'Karretjiesmense' and the making of wool and sheepskin products.

Several towns have tried new products such as pistachio nuts, olives and Agave "tequila" as well as olives, which is a growing industry

Hunting (not strictly speaking heritage)

Hunting is a popular and growing form of high-end tourism. The Karoo is popular because it is human disease-free (no cholera, no malaria), which is a significant point to many travellers from Europe. Hunters are usually time-poor travellers and quick access to hunting venues might allow them to explore the surrounding area - for most venues, almost a whole day is needed to get in and out and back to the entrance airport.

Astronomy

Astronomy is an area of scientific endeavour where South Africa is at the forefront. The South African built SALT at Sutherland is the largest single optical telescope in the Southern Hemisphere with a hexagonal mirror array 11 metres across, including 91 individual hexagonal mirrors.

Historical Heritage

Many towns have historical associations and traditions and graveyards preserve volumes of heritage. Genealogy is a growing interest and there are many visitors interested in seeking out their ancestry, and graveyard provide much that is significant.

Food culture

This is a growing area of tourism. The Karoo has a lead advantage over other inland areas in that there are a great variety of local products which can be sourced for such specialist tourists – Karoo lamb, ostrich meat, game and venison, local figs, deciduous fruit, olives and local wines. Traditional food culture and game cookery should not be neglected in favour of attempting to mimic that which can be obtained at any international restaurant. There are a number of Karoo-specific cookbooks recently published.

Mission and Church heritage

Many Karoo towns preserve stunning examples of church architecture, often surprising in its grandeur and scale compared to the communities such buildings now serve. Otto Hager and Sophie Gray churches are popular places of interest. The churches embody and are statement of the culture and beliefs of their builders.

Adventure Tourism (not heritage)

There are many opportunities such as rock climbing, abseiling, river rafting, hiking trails, 4 X 4 trails and horse trails.

DISTRIBUTION OF HERITAGE ASSETS ACROSS THE KAROO

The above heritage assets were plotted for 56 towns across the Karoo.

It was noted that with the possible exception of rock engraving sites which show a loose clustering, heritage assets are widely and thinly scattered across the Karoo. The average distance between

towns is 110 km, making transit experiences between sites very long, and because of the gravel roads, time –consuming.

Heritage hotspots are: - The Fraserburg district, Carnarvon and district, Prince Albert and district, Graaff Reinet, Colesburg and district, Bethulie and district, Sutherland and district, and Beaufort West – see Table 1

TABLE 1 (PART 1, CONTINUES OVERLEAF): DISTRIBUTION OF HERITAGE ASSETS IN KAROO TOWNS

	Geology and Landscape, including passes	Palaeontology	Archaeology and Rock Art	Architecture	Anglo Boer War	Literary interest	Khoisan struggle sites	Nature Tourism	Agricultural tourism	Hunting	Astronomy	Historical interest	Food Tourism	Missionary and Church history	Outdoor and adventure tourism
Aberdeen	●			●								●		●	
Aliwal north	●	●	●		●				●			●			
Beaufort West	●	●		●				●				●	●	●	
Bethulie	●	●	●	●	●	●		●				●		●	●
Brandvlei	●		●				●		●						
Britstown			●	●							●				●
Burghersdorp			●												
Calvinia	●		●	●		●	●	●	●			●			
Carnarvon	●		●	●	●		●	●		●	●	●		●	
Colesburg	●			●	●			●	●			●		●	●
Cradock			●			●						●			
De Aar	●		●		●	●		●				●			●
Deelfontein															
Fraserburg	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●		●	
Graaff Reinet	●	●	●	●	●		●	●	●	●		●	●	●	
Hanover				●	●	●								●	
Hofmeyr															
Hopetown	●				●							●			●
Hutchinson															
Jansenville														●	
Klaarstroom	●			●								●			
Klipplaat												●			
Laingsburg	●	●			●		●								
Leeuw Gamka	●	●		●	●		●					●			
Loxton	●	●	●	●			●	●		✓					
Marydale															
Matjiesfontein	●			●	●	●						●			
Merweville	●	●	●	●			●			●					
Middelburg		●		●	●			●							●
Mount Stewart				●											
Murraysburg	●	●	●	●	●				●						
Nelspoort	●		●					●				●			

PROBLEMS WITH KICK-STARTING KAROO OUTBACK TOURISM

- The Karoo extends over parts of four provinces but thinking stops dead at provincial boundaries. Inter-provincial planning, integration and marketing of tourist routes and tourism initiatives are almost non-existent.
- Many towns are accessible only by means of gravel roads and the roads are in poor condition
- Tour buses cannot or are not prepared to use these roads, and many heritage assets are inaccessible to such groups
- Some heritage sites need off-road vehicles to access – especially fossil and rock art sites
- Heritage assets are widely dispersed and distances between are great – transit experiences could be viewed as ‘boring’ and not worth the effort.
- Travelling between places of interest takes a disproportionate amount of time
- There are no information boards at the entrances to small towns informing travellers about heritage assets, and things to see and do
- Museums and places of interest are often closed
- The curators of heritage assets are often ‘ou omies’ or ‘ou tannies’ – precious ‘living heritage’ but a dying breed
- There are no local guides to interpret local places of interest
- Local guides mainly speak only one language fluently enough to interpret site effectively, and to field questions – Afrikaans. Afrikaans is not understood by many visitors
- Small towns can’t accommodate larger groups all in one venue
- There are no credit card facilities and ATM’s are often out of order
- Some towns do not have 24 hour petrol stations and repair facilities – punctures are almost inevitable (bikers and motorists)
- Rail transport through the Karoo is extremely poor – a huge missed opportunity
- There is no commercial Karoo airport to cater for visitors who are money rich but time poor
- Most internal tourists are ‘destination oriented’ – the seaside or caravan park at a dam is the favoured destination – special interest routes may not be attractive to this market
- Heritage is everywhere deteriorating and nothing is being done to arrest the decay. This is particularly true of the built environment and railway heritage
- Many Municipalities have allowed tourism support infrastructure to deteriorate to a point that it is unusable (swimming pools, caravan parks, ablution facilities, picnic sites).
- Medical assistance is often not first- world standard for all emergencies in small Karoo towns

WHAT IS NEEDED FOR RESPONSIBLE TOURISM?

ACCOMMODATION – clean, comfortable, safe and **affordable** in a variety of price ranges

GOOD ABLUTIONS AND TOILETS – tourists don’t want to fight with taps that don’t run and toilets that don’t flush and cold water in the Karoo winter

CLEAN CAMPSITES AND CARAVAN PARKS

MEALS – square deal at **affordable** prices. B AND B ’S often do not offer dinners and tourists need to know that they must book in advance – Local is Lekker

INFORMATION – where to go and what to see: info boards at entrances to towns, brochures and web sites. Info and Tourism offices which serve the entire community and do not simply focus on putting bodies on beds for priveleged few

TOURIST GUIDE TRAINING: Local tourist guides need to be able to interpret the environment for visitors

EMERGENCY FIRST AID AND PATIENT EVACUATION PROCEDURE – some small towns can't cope with heart attacks, broken hips and asthmatic comas, etc.

Municipalities and other management authorities fail to manage camping grounds , caravan parks, picnic sites, swimming pools and places of interest effectively. Public amenities which do not come up to a standard that is compatible with responsible tourism will mean that tourists will simply not come back. People are not prepared to put up with litter, dirty and damaged non-functional facilities. Visitors who are affronted by a bad first experience usually will never come back, and bad reports will destroy business.

UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES

- Space
- Silence
- Serenity
- Long and interesting prehistory and history
- Spectacular scenery
- Hospitality
- Different cultures juxtaposed
- Many heritage assets – at least 15 categories represented
- Excellent food
- Authenticity – ‘immaturity’ as a tourist venue means that much is unspoilt and non-commercialised, with a rural charm not available in larger urban tourist venues
- Space, silence, serenity and simplicity are all highly marketable – this is South Africa's ‘Outback’ – remote, rural, and rewarding.

WAY FORWARD: WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

- Tourism and tourism-related projects need to become part of Integrated Development Planning (IDP). Such projects might include the upgrading and ongoing maintenance of public facilities such as camping and caravan sites, picnic sites.
- Info and tourism offices should be established in every Karoo town and supported by local authorities. The tourism officer should be tasked with writing brochures about places of interest and heritage assets of the town.
- Municipalities need to undertake skills surveys and identify young people who might benefit from tourist guide training. This would probably best be done by a ‘group effort’ of several

towns pooling their resources and getting tourist guide trainers and first aid trainers to come to a single venue. Alternatively, this could be undertaken as part of a provincial tourist support initiative.

- Heritage assets need to be recorded and placed on an inventory, and planning at the local government level should include their conservation. All buildings 60 years and older have formal protection in terms of the National Heritage Resources Act
- Welcoming and information boards should be placed at the main entrances to towns.
- Museums need municipal support and replacements or understudies are needed for the often elderly curators of such places

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