

# Local tourists lift KZN's private game reserves



Visitors at the Phinda Private Game Reserve viewing giraffe.

Support from domestic tourists has been key to the recovery of private game reserves in KwaZulu-Natal.

The Covid-19 pandemic has seen the number of foreign tourists plummet, forcing many businesses in the sector to reach out to local residents.

"It's not all doom and gloom," Clarke Smith, chairman of Nambiti Private Game Reserve outside Ladysmith, told *The Witness*.

"We have weathered the storm, and it's wonderful how people have come together to help get us through the lockdown.

"Luckily we are not geared exclusively at the overseas market. We have a range of lodges, from high end to more affordable accommodation which suits the South African market. Having this spread has allowed us to do okay."

"At Phinda, staff wages have continued to be paid, with lower income earners receiving full pay and tiered salary sacrifices up to management level."

Kevin Pretorius, &Beyond regional director

At Phinda Private Game Reserve, which lies between the Mkuze Game Reserve and the Greater St Lucia Wetland Park, the hard lockdown marked the first time ever that they had no guests.

Kevin Pretorius, &Beyond regional director, South Africa, said: "Once leisure travel reopened in South Africa, we saw a gradual but steady increase in the number of bookings coming in. There has been a period when we have had mainly local guests travelling, and we are extremely grateful for the support the South African market has shown for our industry."

Pierre Delvaux, chief executive officer at Thanda Safari in Hluhluwe, agrees, saying: "Since we opened on July 3, we have had almost all of our guests from SA, with most coming from the affluent areas of KwaZulu-Natal."

The loss of hundreds of thousands of tourist rands has also made it hard for those in the sector to ensure staff are paid, while having enough money to keep their businesses running.

"At Phinda, staff wages have continued to be paid, with lower income earners receiving full pay and tiered salary sacrifices up to management level," said Pretorius.

"Jobs were saved by opening earlier and as we have been very busy, we have continued to focus on saving jobs wherever we can."

Pierre Delvaux, chief executive officer at Thanda Safari

“Staff members who have been unable to work as a result of lodge closures have been receiving 50% of their salary in the interim.”

Thanda, meanwhile, has ensured that its anti-poaching unit and game reserve staff have remained fully employed.

“Jobs were saved by opening earlier and as we have been very busy, we have continued to focus on saving jobs wherever we can,” Delvaux said.

Nambiti also ensured its anti-poaching unit was at full strength, while reducing staffing at lodges. Non-essential employees have been working two weeks on and two weeks off.

The different lodges at the reserve have helped provide funding, as has the sale of excess animals.

Game parks have also reached out to help their local communities, who have struggled during the pandemic.

Hundreds of people depend in some way on tourism and without visitors many of them have seen their incomes reduced or lost completely.

“Travellers in general are not inclined to part with their money if the future of travel is uncertain and that, of course, impacts our forward bookings dramatically.”

Kevin Pretorius

Phinda’s owners, &Beyond, and its community development partner, the Africa Foundation, have worked together to provide clinic support, water access, food assistance, business support and personal protective equipment to those living in the area. At Thanda and Nambiti they have provided food parcels and masks.

“We also got involved in educational and information sessions through our NGO Star for Life programme [and] we continued to buy locally and employ local contractors to undertake improvements,” Delvaux said.

The ongoing uncertainty around international travel and lockdowns in key markets, like the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, remain a concern, however.

“Travellers in general are not inclined to part with their money if the future of travel is uncertain and that, of course, impacts our forward bookings dramatically,” said Pretorius.

Smith added: “We all want to be able to welcome back foreign visitors, but only if it’s safe to do so.”

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