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MAKING KZN ROAR

Rob le Sueur's Nambiti Private Game
Reserve has a lot of soul

A PLACE WITH SOUL

Rob le Sueur has transformed some old cattle farms into Nambiti, a Big Five reserve that has revolutionised his life, provided work for hundreds of people and delighted thousands of visitors

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As a child, all Rob le Sueur wanted to do when he grew up was start his own Big Five game reserve. So he did.

Nambiti Private Game Reserve is a 22 000-acre area near Elandslaagte, just outside Ladysmith, rich in Anglo Boer War history. Approximately 70 000 guests pass through the reserve's 10 lodges annually to view the 40-odd animal species and countless birds in a magnificent setting of savannah, grasslands, rivers and waterfalls.

Fifteen years ago, Nambiti was nothing more than a couple of cattle farms. Today, alien vegetation and farm fences have been removed, and with the last of the Big Five introduced in 2007, it is a conservation and business success.

Le Sueur, a passionate conservationist, grew up on a farm in Nottingham Road in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands and spent much of his early life fishing in the rivers of Timbavati. He says although he always dreamed of putting this project together, he had no clear plan of how to do it.

"I learned you need to be brave without being stupid. And you need to be prepared to change."

He speaks from personal experience. Initially he planned to generate income by establishing a number of private-use lodges, but he soon realised that even very wealthy people want an asset that can produce.

"That changed a lot of things. The reserve had to be commercial. One of the most important things I have learned is that conservation has to be a business. It can't run on fluffy stuff; it has to run on real things."

Before Nambiti, Le Sueur's life included an agricultural degree, a listed international security company, a handful of business interests and stakes in a couple of game farm syndicates.

With these syndicates a fair distance away (in Botswana and northern Zululand), he rarely found the time to visit and decided to look for something closer to Durban. At the time he had business interests in Ezakheni, near Ladysmith, but never considered it a viable area for a game reserve.

It was a good friend of his who contacted him one day and said he had seen some land for sale that might be perfect. "I drove up on a Saturday morning; it was midwinter, quite cold, and we rode the area on horseback. Immediately, I could feel that the place had a soul. A place has to have a soul to make it work."

This, he knew, could be a "proper" reserve, a place that could sustain the Big Five. But the effort involved was extraordinary – 100km of game fencing had to be erected, conservation research undertaken, stocks of wildlife assembled, and then, out of the blue, came a land claim.

"We had just introduced lion. For two years we were left hanging with all the potential sales of lodges on hold."

In the end, sense prevailed. Instead of fighting the claim, Le Sueur entered into negotiations with the community concerned.

"We sold the land to them and we kept the lodges. Today we run it together. We pay a lease for the land and they look after us."

It's a good community, he says. "We are lucky. They saw the benefit of a game reserve. When we bought the farms only 19 people had jobs. Today we employ more than 475, the majority from communities in the Ladysmith area. These are not construction jobs – they are real jobs, and well paid."

The project took more than seven years and cost about R143-million. The investment by the private lodge owners was more than R246-million.

In the early days of Nambiti the biggest challenge Le Sueur faced was getting potential buyers to visit the site. "Once I got them to Nambiti the place sold itself, but they were busy and the reserve was in Ladysmith, which seemed unlikely."

His solution was enterprising. He chartered a helicopter, picked up the potential clients from their business premises and flew them the 55 minutes from Durban.

"We would land and while we had breakfast the doors would be taken off the helicopter. We would then fly low-level over the farm, up the gorge and over waterfalls, get back in time for a brunch, put the doors back on and fly home. The guys would say it was the best day of their lives."

It worked. Today, the 10 independently run lodges, ranging from three-star to five-star, all have full access to the reserve and run at more than 70% occupancy.

"Nambiti is an incredible success – beyond anything I ever dreamed of," says Le Sueur.

"I learned that while conservation is important, tourism is as important. Running a venture like this costs a fortune. If we didn't have the lodges paying levies we would never be able to do it. If you want to keep communities happy and reserves successful, you need to develop the whole package."

THE NUTS AND BOLTS

"When you manage this sort of enterprise you need to think about every aspect – the animals, the ecology, the lodges. If each does well then we all do well. From the outset we established a board run by an independent (he owns nothing in the reserve) and strong chairman. Each lodge is represented and community members also sit on the board. Everyone gets on well. There is competition, but there is also a larger common goal."

"We have been very lucky with the communities who are now part of Nambiti. We have had challenges from operations trying to set up coal mines. That's been blocked because the community understands we are a long-term benefit. There's also been a lot of upskilling, both in the lodges and on the management side."

"Not only are we creating employment, but the lodges spend a couple of million a month in Ladysmith. Visitors from Johannesburg and Durban fill up with petrol there and probably pop in to the local Wimpy. This was an area that had almost no one coming through it 10 years ago. The economic benefits to the area have been massive."

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