

DP 54

**REALITY OR RHETORIC?  
ECOTOURISM AND  
RURAL RECONSTRUCTION  
IN SOUTH AFRICA**

**by Eddie Koch**

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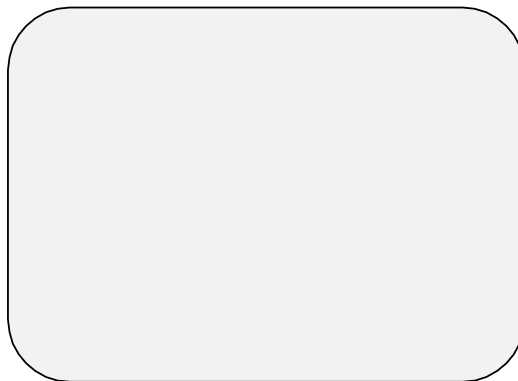
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## PREFACE

Under its programme on Environment, Sustainable Development and Social Change, the Institute is currently focusing on the social dimensions of policies and initiatives for environmental protection. The purpose of the research is to analyse the implications for livelihood and conditions of life, especially of the low-income groups, of a wide variety of projects to rehabilitate degraded resources and protect wild animals and plant species in national parks and reserves. The majority of the research costs under the project are covered by a grant from the Biodiversity Unit of WWF-International. This paper forms part of the work being undertaken under this research project.

The paper first examines the international context and the economics of tourism in South Africa. It then turns to the historical evolution of wildlife conservation and the establishment of game parks and reserves. After a survey of popular attitudes towards conservation policies and programmes, the paper summarizes and evaluates recent efforts by various conservation agencies to overcome the legacy of apartheid, mainly by creating community-based game reserves and implementing other schemes designed to redistribute the profits of ecotourism to improve the livelihood of rural people. It then describes the approaches to conservation of different political parties and concludes with a number of policy recommendations designed to integrate conservation with community empowerment and control over resources and improvement of living standards of the rural poor.

Like the country's history, the conservation movement in South Africa has been associated with violence, forced relocation of people and deprivation of access to natural resources of the inhabitants of protected areas. Recently, attempts have been made to justify conservation in terms of its benefits to the people through generation of employment and incomes. Indeed, the tourist industry has a vast potential in South Africa. It already accounts for a significant proportion of employment and foreign exchange earnings. Many estimates show that returns to investment in game reserves exceed those in ranching or agriculture. However, typically the bulk of the benefits accrue to foreign and urban domestic enterprises and wealthy investors. Given the history of the conservation movement in South Africa, the people are deeply suspicious of any new efforts to create game parks and nature reserves.

The rapid political changes in the country culminating in elections based on universal suffrage have stimulated a wide variety of initiatives to ensure diffusion of the benefits of ecotourism to local communities. These initiatives have resulted in a rich variety of institutional arrangements such as land leasing between communal authorities and conservation agencies, contract parks administered jointly by elected community representatives and conservationists, and tribal and community based organizations participating in decision-making and in revenues from conservation schemes. While some of these schemes have yielded only token participation and benefits, others have resulted in significant flows of income and strengthening of community organizations.

The full potential of ecotourism in empowering local people and generating economic benefits can only be realized if these initiatives are accompanied by wide ranging reforms such as restoration of land rights to local communities; support for new forms of land tenure, including communal arrangements; strengthening and democratization of community organizations; construction of physical infrastructure; investment in technical and managerial skills of local people; and mandatory social impact assessments of all ecotourism schemes.

Eddie Koch, the author of this paper, is a South African journalist and a trustee of the Group for Environmental Monitoring, an organization promoting research and policy studies on environmental impact on the most disadvantaged sections of the South African society. At UNRISD, the project on the Social and Environmental Impact of National Parks and Protected Areas is co-ordinated by Krishna Ghimire.

August, 1994

Dharam Ghai  
Director

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Several of my peers have expressed serious reservations about ecotourism's ability to improve the lives of rural people in South Africa. They are especially concerned that an influx of foreign visitors will undermine the cultures of indigenous people and make the destinies of rural settlements dependent on the fickleness of outside agencies. It is hoped that this paper will stimulate debate about these vital issues. Responsibility for its analysis and conclusions is, of course, entirely my own. The paper was written before South Africa's first non-racial elections in April 1994, but was edited following those elections. Many of the political institutions described in it are likely to change significantly.

Eddie Koch

**Map: South Africa: Homelands and National Parks and Game Reserves Mentioned  
in Paper**

(Map not available in this version of the report)

## CONTENTS

	PAGE
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	1
<b>I. SOUTH AFRICA'S TOURISM INDUSTRY</b>	5
A. The International Context	5
B. The Economics of Ecotourism in South Africa	9
<b>II. THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM AND APARTHEID</b>	17
A. A Brief Journey into History	17
B. Popular Attitudes towards Conservation in South Africa	21
C. Suggested Solutions: The National Level	24
<b>III. CONSERVATION AND TOURISM-BASED DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA</b>	27
A. CAMPFIRE and Other Acronyms	28
B. South Africa	30
C. Evaluation and Suggestions	37
<b>IV. DEVELOPMENT AND DIVISION</b>	39
<b>V. MINING AND OTHER VESTED INTERESTS</b>	41
A. Uranium, Arsenic and Other Cocktails	41
B. The Minerals Act	43
<b>VI. WHITE LIES AND POLITICAL PAPERS</b>	44
A. The African National Congress	44
B. The Former Government	44
C. Inkatha and the Black Homelands	45
D. Fragmentation and Duplication	45
E. Zombies and Other Aberrations	46
F. A New Approach to Ecotourism in South Africa?	46
<b>CONCLUSIONS</b>	48
<b>ENDNOTES</b>	50
<b>ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS</b>	51
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	52

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