

CHAPTER FIVE: GUIDELINES FOR A STRATEGY FOR RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT FOR THE LIMPOPO PROVINCE

5.1 Introduction

After reviewing literature and conducting interviews, the following key issues were identified. These key issues form the basis of the proposed guidelines for a strategy for Rural Tourism Development. These guidelines suggest, whom the participants should be, what programmes and activities should be run, as well as what the vision and mission of the strategy should be. Key issues that require action by participants or stakeholders were not only identified through international and national literature review, but were also verified by the interviewees who emphasised that indeed these are real key issues as far as Rural Tourism Development in the province is concern.

On the other hand, impediments towards Rural Tourism Development are described and practical measures to address the impediments are suggested. The key issues are:

- product and enterprise development;
- accreditation and industry standards;
- education and training;
- image branding and marketing;
- market analysis and research;
- industry and community leadership;
- transport and infrastructure;
- effective provincial and local government; and
- policy and supporting strategies.

The proposed vision, mission, participants, programmes and activities as well as the impediments will be discussed in detail in this chapter.

5.2 Vision

A vibrant, sustainable Rural Tourism sector for the enhancement of the quality of life of rural communities and satisfaction of the tourists.

5.3 Mission

Thriving to develop, maintain and promote tourism resources (both natural and cultural heritage) in the province in a co-ordinated and integrated way for the benefit of all participants, namely: host communities, tour operators/industry and tourists in the Limpopo Province.

5.4 Rural Tourism Participants/Role Players

In formulating a strategy for Rural Tourism Development, it is imperative to note the various role-players and how they interact. The interests of the tourists, tourist operators and their host communities are undeniably interwoven with the interests and efforts of a larger number of other parties such as local and provincial government. Although the responsibility for developing rural tourism lies largely with industry, government, at all levels has a crucial role in Rural Tourism Development. The roles of various governments will be explained further in item 5.4.8.

The participants, or rather stakeholders in rural tourism are many and varied. The degree to which they participate in, and benefit from the industry reflects the extent and diversity of the product

itself. Today's tourists have greater spending power and are increasingly becoming travel literate, and are environmentally conscious. They want to identify with the people and culture of the country. In developing rural tourism, it is important to ensure that visitors, when making their travel decisions, are aware of the full range of rural tourism products and experiences available. Likewise, it is important for the industry to be aware of the factors that influence domestic and international tourists in their choice of a holiday destination and that rural tourism products are developed, packaged, managed and marketed to take account of these preferences.

5.4.1 Private operators

Private operators have a prime responsibility of supplying suitable tourism products. Operators range from the big inbound tourism businesses to the smaller specialist rural tour groups; the rural accommodation sector which includes farm host, bed and breakfast, sheeben owner, country motel, hotel, caravan park and rural resort operators; the rural tourism attraction and adventure tour operators; organisers of traditional and cultural event and festivals and African or cultural villages operators.

To succeed in the industry, operators and entrepreneurs need to consider factors such as the uniqueness of their products; their suitability for tourism purposes; their development, packaging, management and marketing; their prices; the markets (both domestic and international) that can be targeted most profitably and their needs; and the competitive advantages that can be achieved and maintained over other suppliers, including overseas operators. It is important that the tourism industry is co-ordinated, particularly at the provincial level to ensure adherence to a set of standards of structures and services. Operators feel that they need more business skills in order to run the business accordingly.

5.4.2 The host community

The support of host communities can be crucial to the successful development of rural tourism. Community involvement is seen as particularly important with the integration of tourism into local and provincial development programmes. Also important is the fact that the host community itself is indeed a vital part of the rural tourism 'product'. All respondents alluded to the fact that unless local communities are part and parcel of tourism development, its chances of success are very low. There was a feeling that some progress is being made in this regard, although not yet satisfactorily.

Community involvement in rural tourism should go beyond the sharing of economic benefits and actually empower locals. Through participatory approach, which empowers people rather than the beneficiary approach, the chances of rural tourism prosperity become high. Local community members should also be trained to take initiatives and grow into management positions and be empowered. Jobs such as cooks do not necessarily empower the locals.

5.4.3 Tourism industry bodies

Tourism industry bodies, which operate at local, regional, provincial and national spheres, are important players in the development and growth of the rural tourism sector. Issues such as industry leadership and organisation, product development, education and training, marketing, accreditation and standards are best managed and driven by the industry itself. The tourism industry bodies involved in tourism include: Tourism South Africa, The Business Trust, The Tourism Business Council of South Africa, the Limpopo Province Tourism Board, the Soutpansberg Tourism Association, Tzaneen Tourism, the Warmbath Tourism Board, as well as tour operators. It was encouraging to note that all tour operators are members of the Tourism Association of the area. Perhaps what is needed is a more effective and efficient tourism body through training.

5.4.4 Transport operators

All respondents indicated that there is a need to improve transportation facilities. Airlines, coaches, rails and road transportation facilities stand to gain from, and can assist the growth of rural tourism. The provision of an efficient and quality transport which gives easy access to rural tourism markets is therefore, essential to meet the high travel demands of tourists, particularly those from abroad.

5.4.5 Academic institutions

Academic institutions such as universities and technikons have an important role to play in developing rural tourism through both research and coursework. The province is blessed with two universities and much more satellite campuses of other institutions of higher learning. These institutions and other education and training service providers are crucial in the training of tourism role players. In fact, education and training was identified as one of the keys of success in rural tourism. Some tourists even suggest that academic institutions may offer training to tourism role players as part of their social responsibility and outreach programmes for their surrounding communities.

5.4.6 Financial institutions

Young entrepreneurs need financial assistance to kickstart businesses as rural tourism operators. Banks therefore, have a role to play in this regard. All tour operators lamented the fact that funding is one of the biggest problems and that it hinders tourism growth in rural areas. Financial institutions are not willing to finance businesses in remote areas.

5.4.7 The media

Although the media is not necessarily a stakeholder, it however, plays an important role in presenting the case for rural tourism and the opportunities it offers communities and tourists alike. There is a need for media to treat the tourism industry as a serious undertaking, which is on par with other industries.

5.4.8 Government

Although development is primarily an industry responsibility, all different levels of governments are involved in research and planning, assistance schemes, facilitation, infrastructure supply, regulation and accreditation, and awareness campaigns. Provincial governments should concentrate on implementing national policies and strategies appropriate to their conditions as well as develop, promote and market tourism products as unique in competition with other provinces. The role of local government role could mirror those of the provincial government, but should concentrate more on planning, development and management of many specific aspects of the tourism product. It is the role of the local government to ensure policy implementation, proper environmental and land-use planning, product development, marketing and promotion. However, local government should not provide services that can be provided by the private sector.

5.5 Key issues, strategies and actions

5.5.1 Rural products and enterprise development

"Product" refers to the actual attraction (or service) being offered. In the case of rural tourism, it refers to the total 'rural or countryside experience'. Product development is essential for a healthy, sustainable and vibrant industry in that it lifts industry standards, and increases the range of attractions available to visitors. Given the nature of the tourism industry, what the Limpopo Province offers tourists must be unique and different. Except for policymakers, all other

respondents agreed that tourism in the province could be branded along rural tourism enterprise. Only then would the province have capitalised on its competitive advantage. Good product and enterprise development could be achieved through measures such as:

- the identification of major and ancillary attractions and their inclusion in provincial packages by all stakeholders;
- the recognition of the expectations and needs of tourists and the appropriate creation and modification of products and;
- competitiveness

In addition, cooperative networks amongst operators with similar products or operators in the same geographic areas can result in access to larger markets. Interaction with other businesses in assembling suitable tour packages incorporating accommodation, attractions, transport, restaurants and retail outlets can provide a better product for inbound tour operators. It is in this spirit that tour operators in the province normally take tourists to all places of interests, regardless of whether they are nature-based or culturally focused.

The majority of operators in the rural tourism industry are small businesses. As a result, the concerns of, and constraints to small business are also relevant to the rural tourism industry. Macro-economic issues such as interest rates, inflation and taxation continue to be the areas of concern for all small operators. Advice on business matters is however, available from the departments of Trade and Industry and Environmental Affairs and Tourism, the tourism boards, tourism associations and academic institutions. But there is a need to further broaden access by tour operator to the services of these organisations.

Strategy: Encourage the sustainable development of high quality product and product variety in rural areas.

Actions

- Support diversity and quality in rural tourism product development through measures such as developing and disseminating 'how to' information material and examples of best practice, and conducting enterprise best-practice workshops for all stakeholders (all spheres of government, industry associations, regional tourism associations, academic institutions, private companies, marketing organisation and tourism operators).
- Encourage individual operators to work cooperatively to develop multi-product packages.
- Encourage the adoption of ecologically sustainable development principles by rural tourism operators and tourism bodies.
- Encourage individual operators of small accommodation businesses to form cooperative networks to cater for bigger tourist groups.
- To ensure that small businesses in rural areas circumstances are taken into account when regulatory bodies formulate regulations.
- Encourage operators to join industry associations to access associated benefits such as networking, information dissemination and lobbying strength.
- Encourage tour operators to take part in competition such as 'Tourism Entrepreneur of the Year' events.

Source: Adapted from Getz and Page (1997) and Australia's Commonwealth Department of Tourism (1994)

5.5.2 Accreditation and industry standards

At a time when international competition for tourism is growing, and when many countries already have firmly established rural tourism industries, it is imperative that the Limpopo Province be able to compete effectively in attracting visitors to rural areas. This is the essence of this study. South African Tourism and Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism are responsible for the accreditation and setting of the industry standards.

In working to improve the capacity of the rural Limpopo Province areas to attract international and domestic tourists, the development of service excellence and professionalism should be a priority. This, therefore calls for the establishment of an accreditation body specifically for the rural tourism sector that could help create the reputation of rural areas as high quality tourism destinations.

In establishing such an accreditation body, be it through the modification of established bodies or procedures to encompass the special requirements of rural tourism operations or through the introduction of the bodies or procedures, a number of factors need to be considered. These include:

- the need for procedures that assist operators to reach minimum standards and identify improvement opportunities in their business;
- the importance of consumer feedback as part of the quality assurance process and as a means of ensuring that operators respond to the changing demands of the market;
- the need to cater for increasing environmental awareness of rural tourism consumers through the introduction of environmental standards and conservation practices;

- to encourage the development and implementation of industry standards for rural tourism and examine options for developing provincial rural tourism accreditation body;
- to encourage the establishment of recognisable logos for use by accredited rural tourism operators. However, tour operators indicated that such practices should not be used to exclude new and young operators.

Source: Adapted from Getz and Page (1997) and Australia's Commonwealth Department of Tourism (1994)

5.5.3 Education and training

In terms of research findings, many small business tourism operators in rural areas have little or no experience in hospitality or small business operation. The majority of cultural village operators have less than five years of service. This calls for the education and training of those involved, if the vision to have a vibrant, sustainable rural tourism that could enhance the quality of life of the people is to be realised.

In planning for tourism training, the characteristics of the industry have to be taken into consideration. Small businesses often lack the staffing flexibility of larger operations. Insufficient time could be the main reason why owners and /or operators fail to attend training. Tour operators indicated that teaching materials such as radio cassettes, videos and self-study kits could help in overcoming some of the barriers to training. Such packages also recognise that small tourism businesses are seven-day-a-week operations and allow training to be self-paced and flexible. It is widely accepted that the current skill base in the rural tourism industry may not be sufficient for rural tourism to reach its maximum potential return. Education and training could help in turning things around. Academic institutions could provide such training, provided trainees are prepared to work and stay in these remote areas.

Strategy: Ensure that the educational and training needs, with regard to tourism and the needs of tourists, rural tourism operators, rural communities, local government authorities, tourism associations and development organisations are known and met.

Actions

- Encourage industry training for rural tourism operators. All respondents view education and training as crucial to Rural Tourism Development in the province.
- Establish education programmes to increase the tourism skill base of local government and Economic Development Officers.
- Continue to work with academic institutions in developing relevant training materials and their effective utilisation.
- Develop appropriate training courses to encourage adherence to best practice principles.
- To make rural tourism operators more aware of benefits that could be gained through training.
- Encourage rural tourism operators to participate with industry groups so that they may benefit from sharing experiences and learn by attending organised seminars and conferences. Concerns that interpretations should be considered during seminars for the benefit all were raised.
- Develop and distribute a simple code of conduct for visitors to the rural tourism destinations.

Source: Adapted from Getz and Page (1997) and Australia's Commonwealth Department of Tourism (1994).

5.5.4 Marketing and marketing analysis

Marketing can be defined as analysing consumer's needs and desires, and developing and promoting products that will meet these needs at prices that are mutually acceptable to both the producer and the consumer. In the tourism industry, people are important role players. This is particularly relevant in the rural tourism sector where the enjoyment of a rural holiday can be strongly influenced by the nature of the personal contact between guests and hosts.

Global and regional competition for the tourism dollar is such that being able to target a potential consumer market skillfully, develop an interesting product that meets that market's expectations, and then promote widely and creatively to the specific market, will determine how successfully the province's tourism industry performs against others. This requires all stakeholders to work together.

Rural tourism is an industry segment that has the capacity to add to the variety of products and as such play an integral role in making the Limpopo Province more competitive in the world tourism market. However, rural tourism needs cooperative or joint marketing by the informal and often small groups of operators. It is through cooperative marketing that objectives could be met in a more efficient and cost-effective way. Cooperative marketing complements individual marketing efforts of the rural tourism operators, which are usually less effective at a competitive level. As such, rural tourism operators who rely solely on individual marketing efforts and fail to take advantage of co-ordinated marketing strategies may deprive themselves of additional customers and therefore, profitability. Tour operators conceded to the fact that cooperative marketing is the way to go, particularly in the rural tourism business.

Regarding market analysis, where rural tourism enterprises have been developed on an *ad hoc* basis without reference to relevant data, research on market trends and related strategic issues,

there is a danger that the full potential of this industry segment cannot be realised. Planning for sustainable rural tourism should include market analysis. Reliable visitation data is essential for informed policy formulation, the planning of tourism strategies and product development.

Strategy: Promote co-ordinated and cooperative marketing of rural tourism opportunities as well as marketing analysis.

Actions

- Continue to support the development of a co-ordinated and cooperative marketing approach and encourage regional marketing cooperation. All respondents emphasised the need to work together in a complementary, rather than a competition fashion.
- Encourage the rural tourism industry to ascertain and focus on target markets, which are most likely to demand the product, and the services it has to offer.
- Encourage research on market trends and related strategic issues.
- Encourage visitation to rural areas for reliable data collection, which will be used for analysing market trends.
- Encourage the provision of reliable data to be used for Rural Tourism Development.
- Rural tourism operators should make themselves available for research purposes, hence they at least cooperated very well in this study.

Source: Adapted from Getz and Page (1997) and Australia's Commonwealth Department of Tourism (1994)

5.5.5 Industry and community leadership

Leadership, both for the industry and for the community, is crucial for the success of any project. Strong leadership, which consists of a group of committed people drawn from all parts of the community, can favourably influence the local rural business and investment environment, thus

generating growth and new jobs. Rural tourism fits well into this framework and while it has the potential to contribute to the diversification of both the tourism industry and economic activities, it can only do so if there are people in the industry and the host community who are willing and able to direct its growth and development.

Industry leadership, no matter how committed and progressive, cannot work effectively without community support and involvement. Community leaders working together with a strong-shared vision of what a region can become are essential to the successful development and management of tourism in rural areas. Without strong industry and community leadership, rural tourism may not develop to its full potential. The industry's decentralised nature, its small business-like and diversity of its product highlight the need for a cohesive leadership structure which can represent the interests of rural tourism operators as a distinct tourism industry sector. A strong leadership representative body could, on behalf of its members:

- market rural tourism products provincially, nationally and internationally;
- develop and monitor accreditation standards;
- communicate with government and liaise with tourism and non-tourism bodies on rural tourism issues;
- act as a contact point for rural tourism information; and
- assist with issues such as sponsorship, insurance, as well as education and training.

Strategy: *Encourage and support industry and community leadership as a means of developing tourism in rural areas and contributing to rural development.*

Actions

- Develop industry and community leadership as media for the progression of interests of rural tourism. Encourage tourism industry associations in their endeavors to make people aware of their existence.
- Support industry initiatives which focus on Rural Tourism Development

Source: Adapted from Getz and Page (1994) and Australia's Commonwealth Department of Tourism (1994)

5.5.6 Transport and infrastructure

Rural tourism products are often found in relatively remote regions with low population densities. The availability of reliable and competitively priced transport infrastructure is therefore important for the development and maintenance of rural tourism. Lack of transport facilities contributes to tourists' reluctance, particularly international visitors to travel on bad roads to reach rural attractions. The provision of proper and reliable transport facilities could therefore help in the full realisation of the rural tourism potential in rural areas. However, access to rural tourism regions is being enhanced in recent years in the Limpopo Province. The 1999 destructive floods had a negative effect on the transport infrastructure. Research findings show that transport infrastructure development is largely a government responsibility.

Strategy: *Encourage improvements in rural transport and infrastructure.*

Actions

- Examine the potential for increased transport demand to specific regions in the light of expanding tourism opportunities to convince local transport operators of the commercial opportunities available to them as a result of tourism growth.
- Liaison between government and relevant bodies concerning licensing laws pertaining to the transport of tourists.

- Ensure that the economic benefits of rural tourism gain appropriate attention in the consideration of road and infrastructure funding needs and planning.
- Provide funding for rural tourism infrastructure development.

Source: Adapted from Getz and Page (1997) and Australia's Commonwealth Department of Tourism (1994)

5.5.7 Provincial and local government

Provincial and local governments are significant players in influencing the development of tourism in any rural place. In many rural areas, like it is the case in Limpopo, local governments are the main providers of services and infrastructure essential for tourism and general economic development. Local government involvement in, and support for Rural Tourism Development can take many forms. They include:

- The flexible regulation of development and land use zoning controls such that tourism projects can be accommodated;
- The identification of the tourism potential of an area and capacity to cater for new and emerging markets;
- The extensive consultation with, and provision of advice to, the local community and operators on how best to plan, develop and promote tourism in the rural areas;
- Formulation of local area policies to facilitate the establishment of tourism businesses, infrastructure and effective signposting; and
- The promotion of tourism through support for local tourists associations and information centres.

Strategy: *Further enhancement of local government understanding of the benefits and requirements of tourism, and the value of integrated planning approach.*

Actions

- Encourage local councils and authorities to consider tourism as a viable income producing sector for rural areas, and as a means by which to raise the quality of life for all in these areas, and to integrate it into overall economic and rural development frameworks.
- Consult with local communities and the private sector on how, and to what extent should rural tourism development take place.
- Support and encourage up and coming rural tourism operators

Source: Adapted from Getz and Page (1997) and Australia's Commonwealth Department of Tourism (1994)

5.5.8 Policy and support strategies

The absence of the rural tourism policies in most countries has been highlighted. Australia seems to be one leading country in pursuing Rural Tourism Strategy. Developing countries, South Africa included will have to formulate Rural Tourism Strategies. However there will always be impediments that need to be looked at.

5.6 How to overcome impediments to Rural Tourism Development?

There are a number of impediments towards Rural Tourism Development that need to be addressed. According to the research findings, impediments range from community inexperience to the low level of education, lack of professionalism and business expertise amongst operators, industry fragmentation, distance, lack of infrastructure, and lack of proper research on rural tourism matters.

5.6.1 Host community participation

Community participation and support are important elements in considering the suitability of tourism as an industry for an area. Community members' involvement in any project is increasingly receiving more and more recognition. The participation of community members should indeed go beyond beneficiary levels, where participants become passive recipients of jobs that do not necessarily empower them. Community participation should mean not only low-level jobs for the host, but also managerial positions. The cultural village concept and its integration with nature-based tourism can further improve community participation.

In some areas, communities may not wish to pursue tourism development. Other communities, however, will wish to assess what their areas have to offer tourists and, in return what tourism has to offer their community. Once the community agrees to engage in a tourism business, then various participants' roles should be defined and adhered to. There is ample evidence to suggest that projects which focus on generating economic benefits without effectively encouraging local participation in the identification, design, implementation and monitoring of the development activities, are less likely to provide widespread community benefits, let alone to succeed.

It is necessary to compare an area's tourism appeal with that of other regions. Should a community decide to promote tourism, it must find ways to help itself establish and develop this industry. In developing rural tourism, communities should:

- take advantage of existing assets(scenery, historic features, arts);
- maintain any competitive advantages; and
- target suitable markets.

It is essential for communities to ensure the provision of suitable leadership for rural tourism to succeed.

5.6.2 Operators and the rural tourism industry

It is generally agreed that small business makes up to 70 to 80 per cent of businesses in the tourism industry, and more than 90 per cent in the rural tourism in particular (Butler *et al*, 1998). The majority of small businesses are scattered across the Limpopo Province, sometimes as members of an umbrella industry organisation. However, experience have shown that small businesses have a high failure rate: some 80 per cent of the new small businesses fail in their first two years of operation. In order to keep rural tourism operators in business, their overall business skills should be improved through training as well as proper financial support. Present financial institutions are not well suited to service rural tourism operators. Financial institutions are not willing to lend money for rural tourism ventures. If they do, loan repayment agreements are not compatible with the cash flow and payment ability of rural tourism operators (Butler *et al*, 1998).

On the other hand, the small, diverse, scattered nature of rural tourism operations makes it difficult to have a united industry presence. To overcome this fragmentation, there should be a strong cooperation and collaboration across all levels of government and industry sectors in forming and carrying out tourism plans. This type of study could help therefore bring these issues to the forefront of debate.

Whatever the impediments, it is important that a holistic approach be considered for Rural Tourism Development, and this should involve integrated planning. Essential to achieving the sustainable Rural Tourism Development is the 'bottom up' approaches, where communities participate in the planning process, implementation and monitoring stages. This ensures that development is not imposed from outside and that those who live in rural places are committed to, and participate in the development of rural tourism.

5.7 Conclusion

The information given in this study suggests that a number of opportunities exist for rural tourism, both in terms of tourism business potential and destination development. Key issues and impediments concerning Rural Tourism Development as well as actions to address them have been discussed. Rural tourism is indeed a special quality product, both from the supplier's perspective, and in the perceptions and desires of consumers.