



Access to the urban national park in Cape Town: Where urban and natural environment meet



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ABSTRACT

This paper reveals the relational, multi-layered constructions and boundaries of park spaces and who the users of the Table Mountain National Park (TMNP) in Cape Town are. Access to TMNP is discussed within its urban metropolitan context and the role Table Mountain has played in Capetonians representations of the mountain through different eras – the colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid. The formidable challenge to the park management, with visitor numbers of around 3 million annually, is to provide a high-quality recreational and tourist experience without compromising the ecological integrity of the park and making sure that the park is accessible to all. However, the December 2007 to November 2008 TMNP survey found that the park is a recreational space for the affluent. Most visitors to the park are from high-income neighbouring suburbs. Issues of use of and access to the park by visitors vary greatly and typically reflect the duality of the legacy of apartheid planning. If most of the South African population is largely invisible in the TMNP (and other national parks), questions arise about the parks' future relevance, meaning, and protection.

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1. Introduction

From Robben Island where political prisoners were jailed for decades during apartheid the view of Table Mountain has been an inspiration and sign of hope. “Over centuries the mountain has stood as a symbol of human capacity for hope and freedom, whether for the Khoikhoi tribes fighting colonial domination, for Indonesian and Malaysian slaves who for generations buried their leaders and holy men on its slopes, or for twentieth century political prisoners. It is ... a sacred and precious place To us on Robben Island Table Mountain was a beacon of hope. It represented the mainland to which we knew we would one day return” (Nelson Mandela as cited in [SANParks, 2006](#), p. 19).

South Africa's national parks attract millions of tourists annually so contributing significantly to the South African tourism economy

([SANParks, 2013/2014](#)). Over the last decade most of the social sciences scholarship concerning national parks in South Africa has focused on the importance of achieving either environmental or economic sustainability ([Ferreira, 2006](#); [Mazibuko, 2007](#); [Saayman, Saayman, & Ferreira, 2009](#); [Spenceley, 2005](#)) as contrasted by a paucity of debate on the under-representation of visitors other than whites to national parks in post-apartheid South Africa ([Butler and Richardson, 2015](#)). Almost 80% of South African citizens are classified black according to the official census, yet they are significantly under-represented in numerous leisure activities and especially at national parks. They accounted for only 32% of visitors to South African national parks' recreational spaces in 2012/2013 ([SANParks, 2013/14](#)). How to deal with these differences has become an important issue of the twenty first century and it has led to the development of diversity management to ensure opportunities for different groups in institutions ([Cox, 1993](#); [Gardenswartz & Rowe, 2010](#); [Gilbert, Stead, & Ivancevich, 1999](#)).

Table Mountain National Park (TMNP) was established in 1998 from a mosaic of land owned by various public authorities and some private land and is unique being located entirely within the

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cityscape of metropolitan Cape Town and functioning primarily as an open-system (most of the park is unfenced) (Ferreira, 2011). TMNP covers an area of 33,000 ha stretching over 80 km from the Cape of Good Hope in the south to close to the city centre in the north. It is bisected by major commuter routes. There are over 2400 landowners (mostly high-income residents) whose properties are adjacent to the fragmented park.

In TMNP's 16 years of operation some major milestones have been achieved, namely ecosystem restoration through land acquisition, clearing of alien vegetation, fire management and path building. Regarding social benefits, the park's poverty-relief programme enabled the park's managers to use over R40 million worth of funds from the then Department of Environment and Tourism's Social Responsibility Programme to upgrade 250 km of the footpath network, build tourist accommodation and provide training opportunities to previously unemployed people (Mgxashe, 2008). The formidable challenge to the park management, with visitor numbers of around 3 million annually, is to provide a high-quality recreational and tourist experience without compromising the ecological integrity of the park and making sure that the park is accessible to all.

The overall aim of this paper is to indicate how class and racial distinctions play a role in shaping park making and park identity and its impact on park usage and visitation patterns in the South African context. The paper reveals the relational, multi-layered constructions and boundaries of park spaces and who the users of the park are. Access to TMNP is discussed within its urban metropolitan context and the role Table Mountain has played in Capetonians representations of the mountain through different eras – the colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid. Three symbolic framings are employed to assist in this contextualization: symbol of identity; symbol of quality leisure, recreational and tourism space; and symbol of exclusion.

2. Methods

The quantitative component of this paper relies largely on data obtained from a year-long questionnaire survey conducted among 3247 visitors to inform the debate on access. In this 2007/8 year-long study a multistage sampling framework was applied.¹ Sites were purposively sorted into four groups based on existing visitation numbers, past estimated numbers, and personal observation and judgement; namely (i) three very-high-use sites (these were the three pay points and major tourist attraction sites of Boulders, Cape Point, Cable Way); (ii) ten high-use sites that would attract more than 50 000 visitors per year (including two pay points: Tokai and Silvermine); (iii) seven medium-use sites that would attract between 10 000 and 50 000 visitors a year; and (iv) sixteen low-use sites that would attract less than 10 000 visitors a year (including the pay point Oudekraal) sampled from 43 low-use sites. To achieve a representative distribution across the year, the study period was stratified into four seasonal cohorts of three months each. TMNP was divided into clusters and interview sites were sampled systematically per cluster. Actual interview days were sampled systematically and there were, in all instances, two interview days per week (high-to low-use sites). The quantitative and qualitative data of the questionnaire survey determined the patterns of usage and

the context and rationale for visitor characteristics and usage patterns. The following quantitative data were obtained from the questionnaire survey: Visitor profile, Demographic variable, Frequency of usage/visits, Usage type, Access, Rating of selected current usage. Qualitative data included comments on reasons for low ratings for certain facilities and services, negative experiences at the Park over the past year, and critical and favourable comments and suggestions to TMNP management on TMNP (Note: given the extensive data collected not all above will be covered in the paper).

2.1. Contextualization of access to urban parks²

The literature on park use is very broad and for the purpose of this paper it is discussed within the context of the aim of the study, namely the race-space, social location and place identity relational contexts. The relationship between people and urban national parks has been closely linked to social location and culture (Gobster, 2002). Leisure research has shown that people value leisure spaces highly and that the value of a space lies “in its potential to facilitate, among other things, opportunities for social interaction and shared cultural values and meanings” (Lloyd & Auld, 2002, p. 43). Social location refers to the position a person or group occupies in society and that position is influenced by factors such as gender, race and class (Taylor, 2009). In South Africa it was artificially enforced by a racist political system since the colonial period up to the scrapping of the apartheid legislation in the early 1990s. The term cultural is therefore politically and socially constructed (Low, Taplin, & Scheld, 2005, p. 15). Cultural hegemony in South Africa (the pre-eminence of one cultural group's ideas and values over another's) is that of middle-to-upper-class white values as well as those of the planners, managers, administrators and designers in service of the (national) park. Leisure experiences of place are socially constructed within the cultural, historical and geographical context of day-to-day life (Farnum, Hall, & Kruger, 2005). Leisure participation appears to offer people a way to negotiate multiple senses of place, home and identity that enhance their sense of well-being (McIntyre, Williams, & McHugh, 2006). According to Byrne and Wolch (2009, p. 744) “leisure researchers rarely consider how ethno-racially formations might configure park spaces themselves – and how in turn ethno-racially inscribed park spaces may influence park use or non-use” which they consider as a “remarkable oversight”. They discuss two themes of park-making as a socio-ecological project of class and race: parks as elitist culture-natures, and spaces of exclusion in parks. According to them leisure theorists have advanced four interconnected explanations for ethno-racially differentiated park use. First, marginality such as socio-economic barriers, living in areas distantly located from parks, and high park fees. Second, race/ethnicity where it is postulated that people of different racial origin have different leisure preferences have developed over centuries. Third, assimilation and acculturation as a process where black people have not yet adjusted to, or adopted the values of mainstream ‘Western’ society. Last, when discrimination occurs it leads people to avoid parks (Byrne & Wolch, 2009). They point out in most studies the “spatial effects of systemic racism have been ignored” in most studies (Byrne & Wolch, 2009, p. 748). Institutional discrimination is another explanation for ethno-racially park use. Institutional discrimination focuses on the ‘behaviour’ of organizations,

¹ A similar study was conducted in 2001 (albeit on smaller scale) and the results did not vary much with the 2007/8 study. The TMNP management were asked whether they are of the opinion that results obtained in the 2001 survey which was confirmed in the 2007/8 survey would according to their opinions vary much should a similar study be held in 2015. According to them the magnitude of visits may have increased due to urbanization of the city as a whole and increase in tourism to the city, but the racial patterns thereof remained intact (Cheney, 2014).

² The literature on urban national parks is scant. Therefore the terms ‘urban park’ and ‘urban national park’ are used interchangeable because in the Cape Town context where the largest part of the urban national park is open-access (i.e. like any urban park) one would imagine that the theory applied to urban parks may as well relate to open access urban national parks.

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