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Is South Africa's Great Karoo region becoming a tourism destination?

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ABSTRACT

Desert tourism has grown steadily in several regions of the world, due to a post-modern fascination with remoteness, barrenness, silence and solitude. This paper evaluates the trend towards tourism development in South Africa's arid Karoo region. It utilises several methodologies – analysis of discourse, demand and supply – to track the changing profile of tourism in the Great Karoo. The paper concludes that the reputation of the Karoo has shifted profoundly from being hostile, dangerous and boring to being attractive, enticing and spiritual. At the same time, tourists are increasingly expressing favourable opinions of the Karoo as a destination, while accommodation facilities are growing apace. The overview also finds that tourism services in some Karoo towns are developing at a much faster rate than others, so the tourism performance is uneven. A survey of tourists in the Karoo found that the arid environment and small-town ambience offer significant attractions, and Karoo guest houses have a positive outlook for the future. These findings suggest that the Great Karoo is indeed in the process of becoming a tourism destination.

1. Introduction

"A desert is a tough sell for a vacation. 'Come to nothing' is not a slogan ever likely to draw amusement-park crowds" (Perry, 2007:1). Nevertheless, desert regions are becoming popular tourism destinations. The word "desert" does not only refer to hyper-arid areas with sand dunes – although those are certainly important. It also refers to areas which are "deserted", i.e. remote, sparsely populated, and typically, not a mass holiday destination.

"Desert tourism" can be regarded as a form of niche tourism, where specific types of people (usually a minority of tourists, although the numbers are substantial) enjoying visiting unusual kinds of places, which offer location-specific attractions or activities. In fact, many tourists get a kind of special pleasure in going where their friends and peers have not yet gone; they want to be pioneers, and a degree of physical challenge is part of the enjoyment. There has been substantial growth in tourism to deserts or remote localities, such as the Sahara Desert or the Outback in Australia. The Namib Desert in Namibia is now a major attraction, particularly amongst German tourists, who comprised 17% of tourists in that country, based on 2012/2013 data (Namibia Ministry of Environment and Tourism, 2014:6) – by far the largest long-haul category of visitors to that desert country. Desert tourism has become so widespread that the United Nations Environmental Programme has issued a guide to desert tourism management, particularly in the light of sensitive social and environmental contexts (UNEP, 2006).

South Africa has its own desert – the Great Karoo. Located in the middle of the country, this region was – for almost two centuries - seen as a vast, hot, uncomfortable, slightly frightening, and also boring, stretch of empty countryside. This impression of the Great Karoo appears to be changing for the better, with more people finding the Karoo appealing and interesting. The paper will argue that the Karoo is increasingly regarded as a place worth visiting, either as a leisurely stop-over on the way to the sea, or even as a destination in its own right. The paper draws on a combination of methodologies: The changing discourse of several well-known public media (including *Country Life* Magazine, TV Bulpin's travel guides, and *Lonely Planet*); the growth of accommodation establishments since the late 1990s; an opinion survey of a group of Karoo tourists; and the perspectives of a group of Karoo guest house owners. These methods provide data which show a trend towards increasing tourism interest in the Great Karoo.

In recent years, various analysts (such as Ingle, 2012; Atkinson, 2012; Van Staden and Marais 2005 and Donaldson and Vermeulen, 2012) have presented town-based case studies of Karoo tourism; others (such as Nel and Hill, 2008) have analysed general developmental trends in the Karoo; and rather rarely, authors have studied specific types of tourism in the Karoo (such as

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Ingle, 2010). This paper addresses a significant gap: A region-wide analysis focused specifically on Karoo-wide tourism trends.

2. Desert tourism: international precedents

In the last few decades, desert tourism has become a recognised *niche* attraction, with a range of specialised tourism markets. In Israel, desert areas receive thousands of travellers annually, who visit archaeological sites, unique geological structures, and beautiful landscapes. So many travellers undertake a range of more "extreme" activities, such as long-distance hiking, rock climbing and off-road driving, that a special unit of skilled volunteers has been established to help tourists out of difficulties (Uriely et al., 2002: 25). Desert communities' heritage is becoming an important tourist asset, as the case of the Negev Bedouin illustrates (Dinero, 2002). In the Negev desert, natural attractions, including geology and star gazing, have the most appeal (Reichel et al., 2008). Nature-based desert tourism in Namibia is growing apace, and is offering a welcome degree of economic diversification to a mining-dominated economy (Nyakunu and Rogerson, 2014). Tourism is an important revenue generator in Nepalese communities, drawing tourists who like to visit indigenous groups in a montane environment (Chhetri, 2006). In China's Shapotou's Tourism Zone, southeast of the Tengger Desert, tourism activities include dune-sliding, river rafting, sand sculptures, riding on camels and sleeping in tents (Beijing Tourism Review, 2007). Desert Museums, including those in Tucson, Arizona (Allen, 2009) and Alice Springs, Australia (see http://www.alicespringsdesertpark.com.au/), are dedicated to promoting sustainable living and environmental conservation in desert environments. In Australia, 4-wheel-drive tourism in the Outback appeals to tourists who like desert nature activities (such as birdwatching and fishing), or who like to test their driving skills in a harsh environment. Enjoying natural desert attractions may not require rough living; it can be reconciled with luxurious facilities, as in the Dubai nature reserves (Ryan and Stewart, 2009).

Desert tourism has also created a new appreciation of the spiritual dimensions of exploring arid and remote areas, giving rise to concepts of "sacred spaces", a "nature religion" or spiritual pilgrimages (Narayanan and Macbeth, 2009). Desert tourism can be regarded as a sub-set of "frontier tourism", i.e. "journeys to places which currently lie at the fringes or extremes of our world or experiences, both geographically and socially/culturally, in locations which lack a permanent resident population and/or existing tourist infrastructure, and involving a high-degree of pre-preparation and planning, authenticity, high-risk activities and situations, and extraordinary experiences" (Laing and Crouch, 2009: 325). In particular, the quest to be *alone* is becoming important in our overpopulated world, and it is associated with recuperation, regeneration, self-reliance, self-actualisation and spirituality. At the other extreme, there are desert festivals, such as the Burning Man Festival in Nevada (Sherry and Kozinets, 2007: 121), or its off-shoot, the Afrika Burn Festival in the Tankwa Karoo desert in South Africa. Festival-goers rejoice in the remote, harsh, and dangerous arid conditions with which they have to contend.

3. Tracking tourism over time: methodological challenges

Very often, tracking a trend is a *post-hoc* affair. Tourism in the Karoo region is no exception. The growth of tourism was neither expected nor planned; it happened slowly, incrementally, often under the radar screen. Consequently, no data was collected at the beginning of the phase of tourism development, and longitudinal data has to be reconstructed from diverse sources.

This paper uses a combination of research methods. After a brief introduction to the historical image of the Karoo in travel literature, we provide a discourse analysis of several key lifestyle and tourism magazines and books. The paper then provides a supply-side analysis of tourism enterprises: A comparison was done between a detailed traveller's guide (1996/7) and two 2015 travel websites, to assess changes in the number of enterprises offering hospitality and activities. Finally, to determine demand-side dynamics, a survey was conducted of 210 Karoo travellers and 27 Karoo guest houses, in 2010. In each section, there is a comparison between our findings and recent perspectives in the research literature.

These various research methods provide an overview of roughly 20 years of tourism development in the Karoo, from 1995 to 2015. This enables us to answer the question: Is the Karoo desert becoming a tourism destination in its own right?

4. The Karoo: an unpleasant wilderness?

The Karoo is a vast arid region located in the centre of South Africa, comprising about 400 000 km^2 (Dean et al., 1995: 248), which adds up to about 40% of South Africa's land surface. It is a vast inland desert, with characteristic small, hardy, deciduous shrubs, low rainfall (ranging from less than 100 mm *per annum* in the winter-rainfall west to 500 mm in the summer-rainfall east), occasional spectacular thunderstorms, and about 60 towns typically located 60–80 km from one another.

The Karoo in fact consists of two distinctive deserts: The Succulent Karoo and the Great Karoo (sometimes referred to as the Nama Karoo). (See Map 1).

Rainfall in the Great Karoo is highly variable, often with "back-to-back" years of drought and high rainfall (Dean et al., 1995: 249). At times of higher rainfall, the Great Karoo appears quite grassy, but this is typically followed by long areas of drought and extreme heat and cold.

Karoo towns were slowly established from the late 1700s and throughout the 1800s; many were originally "church towns", which served the surrounding farm communities. The Karoo economy was based on livestock, including cattle, goats, and sheep (mutton and wool). The region benefited from the diamond and gold booms in the 1870s and 1880s; but a long-term economic decline began in the early 20th Century, due to drought, over-grazing, economic depression, and the ravages of the Anglo-Boer War (Nel and Hill, 2008: 2268). By the 1970s, the Karoo presented a picture of a static and even retrogressive region, when compared to the rest of the country, characterised by out-migration. In fact, recent data has shown how some Karoo towns have grown economically, while others have declined, showing a relatively uneven developmental profile (Nel and Hill, 2008: 2271). The populations of Karoo towns range from 4000 (such as the village of Pearston) to 35 000 (Graaff-Reinet). Until the 1990s, the concept of "Karoo tourism" would have been virtually unimaginable.

Since 1994, the economic potential of the Karoo has been obscured from view, because of the fact that the Karoo straddles four provinces in the post-apartheid South African political landscape – the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Northern Cape and Free State (Atkinson, 2016). In addition, the Karoo is sparsely populated, which has contributed to its political insignificance, as the various provincial and national governments have invariably given more attention to their more populous municipalities. The Great Karoo is traversed by two important north–south highways which connect the economic powerhouse of Johannesburg with coastal cities. Many travellers never leave the highway. The main economic sectors of the Great Karoo are livestock and game farming, as well as government services. A key question is, therefore, whether tourism is becoming an important economic sector in the Great Karoo.