

Performance Management in an Interpretive Setting: Tour Guides in South African National Parks (SANParks)

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Abstract: The aim of this paper was to explore performance management methods used by South African National Parks (SANParks) to evaluate the effectiveness of interpretive tour guiding. Effectiveness of interpretation impacts on tourist enjoyment and sustainability of natural resources in national parks and other protected areas. The study reported in this paper was exploratory and used descriptive stance to seek views of both park managers and interpretive tour guides in six of the 12 SANParks that offer interpretive tour guiding. There was no agreement among park managers and tour guides regarding performance appraisal methods adopted by SANParks. SANParks have some form of performance appraisal mainly through its website which offers tourists an avenue to air their views on the effectiveness of interpretive guiding. However, the internal customers, the employees and park managers are either unaware of its existence or are not using it effectively. The researchers recommend that SANParks should develop a performance management system in consultation with both park managers and tour guides.

JEL Classifications: M5, M1, J5

Keywords: Performance evaluation; Interpretation; Tour guiding; South Africa; National parks

1. Introduction

Tourism is one of South Africa's fastest growing sectors with potential for local development. South Africa has a well-established network of national parks. Parks under the authority of South African National Parks (SANParks) are distributed across many South African provinces (See Figure 1 for the location of parks). The Protected areas, including national parks are one of the major attractions to tourists visiting South Africa (Saayman and Saayman, 2010; Turpie, 2003). In 2008/2009 for example, 4, 374 739 people visited South Africa's national parks (SANParks) protected areas which resulted in the generation of ZAR 664.14 million in revenues (Strickland-Munro, Moore and Freitag-Ronaldson, 2010: 664). Tourism in national parks provides nature-based tourism which comes with a variety of opportunities for tourists that include interpretation of nature, and cultural attractions (Orams, 1996:9) and SANParks is not an exception.

The importance of national parks to the overall growth of tourism in South Africa is important. Management of such resources for sustainability and visitor enjoyment is critical. This therefore requires strategic leadership in the management of these resources. At the forefront of such leadership are the parks managers and tour guides who spearhead not only sustainability of the flora and fauna in the parks but also visitor education and enjoyment of the visit so that there is guaranteed return visits. The aim of the study reported in this paper was to establish performance management strategies of interpretive guiding in SANParks. In particular the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What performance appraisal systems are in place to enhance visitor experiences?
2. Are there differences between the views of tour guides and those of park management regarding performance management systems operational in SANParks?

2. Research Methodology

The study adopted a triangulation of techniques whereby qualitative and quantitative data were collected. Qualitative data was collected through 5 telephonic interviews and one direct interview with six park managers/officials. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants of the study. The interviews lasted on average 40 minutes each. The interview guidelines covered the following areas:

- Methods used by SANParks to monitor tour guides performance;
- Effectiveness of the performance appraisal methods used.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and categorised into themes.

The quantitative research method used for the study was a survey. Twelve of the twenty-two national parks provide interpretive guiding activities. Six of the 12 parks offering interpretive guiding were selected (Kruger National Park, Marakele National Park, Kgalagadi National Park, Mapungubwe National Park, Table Mountain National Park and Addo Elephant National Park). A convenience sampling was used to identify respondents. Only those tour guides who were willing and had time to participate in the study were given a questionnaire to complete. Of the 98 questionnaires that were distributed to tour guides, 46 questionnaires were completed and returned. This represents 47% response rate.

Quantitative data was analysed through the use of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 18.0). Data was analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics analysis techniques. Descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, measures of central tendency and dispersion (mean, mode and median) were used to describe, summarise and compare data.

3. Literature Review

Communication competencies are the lifeblood of effective interpretation (Goh, 2008:10; Carbone, 2006). It is generally accepted that interpretation is concerned with providing information to tourists in an educative, stimulating and entertaining manner about the places they visit, in order to promote the economic development, environmental quality and conservation and socio-cultural sustenance of such places (Moscardo, 1999; Luck, 2003). Interpretation therefore shapes the experiences of the tourist and knowledge of the features of the place as well as their awareness of inappropriate activities they should avoid (Hu, 2007; Ap and Wong, 2001;). Interpretation does not only educate visitors about the cultural and natural resources it also helps modify the behaviour of visitors to be more sensitive to the environment (Tubb, 2003). Interpretation is therefore seen as a major component of achieving sustainable tourism development (Skanavis and Gianoulis, 2010). In SANParks one of the key tourism objectives is to develop and grow a sustainable nature-based tourism business (SANParks, 2008:13).

At the forefront of interpretation are the tour guides. The role of tour guides has been of interest to researchers for a long time (Cohen, 1985; Weiler and Davis, 1993). They are the frontline staff in tourism. They offer interpretation to tourists. It is therefore important to examine how effective guides are in interpretive delivery. How effective or ineffective guides are in delivery of interpretation should be of concern to park managers similarly, performance measurement of their

effectiveness in interpretation should also be of concern to both managers and decision makers in protected areas.

For the guide to be effective during interpretation, she/he should organise and convey information in ways that capture and maintain the audience's attention, while at the same time entertaining and inspiring them (Ham & Weiler, 2005). Communication competency of tour guides is essential if the guides are to carry out their duties effectively in national parks (Oschell, 2009).

Management is important for successful implementation of appropriate interpretation systems. They spearhead the recruitment of appropriately qualified and experienced personnel to carry out the interpretation function professionally. Recruitment and training of personnel are the key functions which are the backbone of interpretation. Either you source already qualified staff, for example in interpretation, these could be local people who have lived with the flora for generations and therefore have indigenous knowledge to educate the tourist as it is the case with the Masai in Kenya (Okello, 2005). Recruitment of local people with indigenous knowledge can be complimented by sending such staff for further training to upgrade their skills like communication to enable them to impart their knowledge to the tourist.

Quality management in interpretative guiding is critical. Several management mechanisms have been developed to guide, regulate, monitor and even control tour guiding performance (Hu, 2007). The importance of performance management has been acclaimed in the literature (McCarthy and Garavan, 2005). It is argued that performance evaluation as a management tool gives feedback to the employee regarding where she has excelled and where she can improve her/his performance (Kavanagh, 1997, 147). Kavanagh (1997:147) proposed that feedback on employee performance should be timely so they know where they need to improve their performance.

Effective monitoring and evaluation of the performance of tour guides improves programme quality so that appropriate measures can be taken to improve the work of the tour guides (Ap & Wong, 2001; Munro et al., 2008). Like any other management of performance, there are controversies regarding the utility of the process and whether or not it should be undertaken and who should undertake the process (Ward & Wilkinson, 2006).

There are a number of methods used to assess employee performance, for example, self-assessment, peer assessment, supervisor's evaluation. One of the common methods that has been popularised in the literature is the 360degree. Yukl and Lepsinger (1995: 45) described it as "performance appraisal which relies on the input of an employee's supervisor, colleagues, subordinates, sometimes customers, suppliers and/or spouses." This therefore means that an employee does not only rely on the assessment of the supervisor but on other people who make an input into the assessment using a standardised assessment instrument (Turnow, 1993). Whilst 360 degree performance management strategy has been criticised, it is clear though that employees must receive feedback on their performance (Meyer, 1991; Taylor et al., 1995). The problem though is that most organisations lack the resources and the expertise to carry out effective review of performance of tour guides (Ryan & Dewar, 1995; Munro et al., 2008). The next section discusses interpretive tour guiding in SANParks.

4. Parks and Tour Guiding in South Africa

South Africa has an established network of national parks which showcase the diversity of flora and fauna of South Africa as well as the unique cultural heritage which makes South Africa a truly multi-cultural society. In South Africa, parks and protected areas are classified as national, provincial, local and private sector –owned parks (Myburgh and Saayman, 1999: 260). The national parks are managed by a parastatal body known as South African National Parks (SANParks)

authority which is a government-funded body. These will be the focus of the paper. The SANParks administers 22 parks as shown in Figure 1.

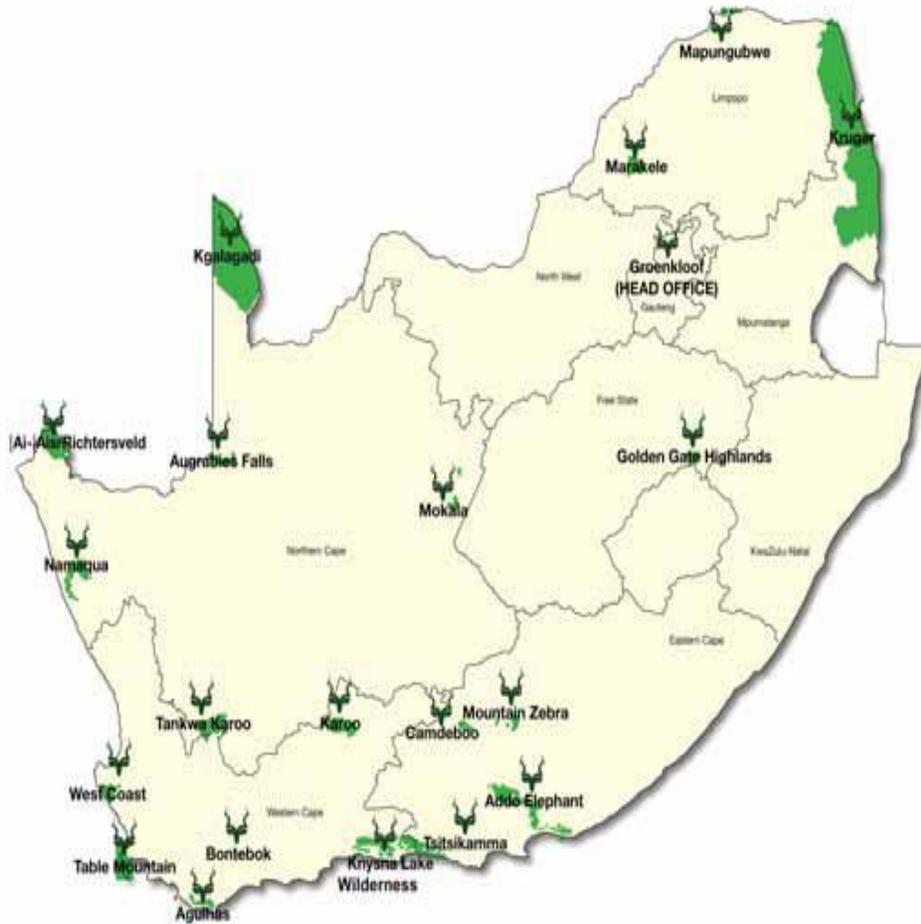


Figure 1. Map showing national parks of SANParks (Source: SANParks)

The second level is the provincial parks administered by provincial governments, for example, the well-known Madikwe National park is administered by the North West Provincial government. At the local level, local governments administer parks under their jurisdiction, for example the Mafikeng Game Reserve is under the jurisdiction of the Mafikeng municipality. The last category is private parks which are privately owned. SANParks hold the view that competitiveness of the national parks can be enhanced through “creating a unique, holistic and meaningful tourist’ experience and creating an awareness of ecology, natural wonders and cultural heritage (SANParks, 2008:3).

The Responsible Tourist Manual for South Africa (2002:51) stipulates that local guides should be employed and empowered whenever and wherever possible to participate in the tour guiding of both cultural and nature-based tours. Furthermore, the South African Tourist Guide Bill stipulates that people are allowed to use indigenous knowledge rather than formal education as the basis for becoming a tour guide. The Bill adds that the gap in tour guides ‘professionalism should be filled by affording the previously disadvantaged individuals access to training opportunities as tourist guides (Spenceley, 2003).

There has been limited research investigating challenges facing tour guides who join the profession without formal training equipped only with indigenous knowledge. The study attempted to fill this gap by investigating perceptions of both tour guides and managers of selected SANParks on their perceptions of the performance appraisal techniques used to evaluate performance of interpretive tour guides in SANParks.

5. Research Findings

5.1 Results from Interviews with Park Managers

We noted variety in performance management practices in the SANParks. Two park managers said that there were no performance management systems in place to evaluate guides' performance. They instead rely on questionnaires distributed to tourists. They then act on complaints raised by tourists. This contradicted another manager who stated that they do not rely on feedback from tourists in the form of a questionnaire because "in most cases tourists are in a rush to go somewhere or join another activity after a 2-hour game drive. Tourists do not therefore bother to complete the questionnaire (personal interviews)." Another park manager claimed that his park has an evaluation system in place whereby they join game drives to observe and monitor guides' performance especially newly recruited guides. This gives them an opportunity to identify interpretive problems so that corrective measures can be instituted immediately through, for example, in-house training. The park official concerned felt satisfied with this form of evaluation.

Other forms of evaluation alluded to by one park manager was by establishing from the tour guides themselves (through self-evaluation) what problems they have with regard to interpretive guiding. Then the park official organises a workshop based on the areas of concern as indicated by the tour guides.

Other managers stated that they use a combination of appraisal systems- they distribute a questionnaire to tourists. They also give a questionnaire monthly to field guides to enable them to pinpoint guiding problems. In addition they mentioned that SANParks has an interactive website (SAParks forum) where tourists can air their views.

5.2 Results from Tour Guides Survey

The results show that, among all the effective 46 respondents, the majority of tour guides (57%, N=26) have matriculation (high school diploma) as their highest academic qualification; 17% (N=8) have diplomas and 20% (N= 9) have degrees. Those with university degrees mentioned degrees such as Bachelor of Environmental Science, Bachelor of Tourism Management and Bachelor of Technology in Nature Conservation. The majority of respondents (85%) had more than 3 years' experience.

Table 1 below outlines the perceptions on evaluation by tour guides.

Table 1. Evaluation methods used by tour guides (*Some respondents gave more than one answer)

Type of evaluation	Number (Total N=81)*	Percentage
Informal evaluation	34	42.0
Self- evaluation	19	23.5
Formal evaluation	16	19.6
Peer evaluation	12	14.8

The majority of tour guides mentioned informal evaluation (N=34, 42%). These include observation of verbal or body language of tourists. The second method of evaluation used by tour guides was self-evaluation (N=19, 23.5%). The third mentioned method of evaluation was by

tourists through the use of a questionnaire (N=16, 19.8%) and the least mentioned evaluation method was peer evaluation. (N=12, 14.8%). It should also be noted that some tour guides used more than one method of evaluation.

It was interesting though that none of the tour guides mentioned receiving or visiting SANParks website to get feedback from tourists. These results differed from those of park managers. Formal evaluation which was mentioned by the majority of park managers was not mentioned at all by tour guides.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed at exploring performance management methods practised by SANParks. The results show that there is disagreement among parks managers on performance evaluation systems in place in the park. There is also a divergence of opinion between park managers and tour guides on the methods used to evaluate tour guides' performance. Tour guides rely mainly on their experiences to know whether or not they are effective in their interpretation. Managers on the other hand either do not evaluate performance or rely on the SANParks' website to solicit feedback from the tourists. The feedback, however, is not disseminated to the guides to improve their performance.

7. Recommendations and Concluding Remarks

The researchers make the following recommendations to SANParks management:

- Involve all stakeholders to develop a performance management system;
- Encourage informal performance appraisal currently practised by some parks/tour guides;
- Peer review is another very innovative performance appraisal method used by tour guides which should be nurtured and encouraged (Ackerman, 2007);
- Training programmes in performance management should be developed.

SANParks can only succeed if it transforms itself into a learning organisation. Moorhead and Griffin (2004: 201) define a learning organisation as: "one that works to facilitate the lifelong learning and personal development of all of its employees while continually transforming itself to respond to changing demands and needs".

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