

FINAL TECHNICAL REPORT

Development of the Sutherland Succulent Karoo Route: catalysing conservation through eco-tourism and environmental awareness

Project Applicant: GRES (Talitha Venter)
In partnership with Kambrokind Guesthouse (Jurg Wagener)
Grant requested: \$9 850
Time Frame: October 2003 – April 2004 (extended to June 2004)
Report Date: September 2004

(1) INTRODUCTION:

During the Hantam/Roggeveld Action Planning Workshop on the 17/18th March 2003 the need for eco-tourism development for the benefit of biodiversity conservation and local job creation was identified. As an initial phase, the project proposed to CEPF the establishment of the Sutherland Succulent Karoo Route, specifically to promote biodiversity conservation and awareness of the local Succulent Karoo, and to promote/stimulate job creation and strengthening of local economic development. The objective is to establish an eco-tourism route that will link areas of high environmental, cultural and scenic beauty in and around Sutherland. The route will take the shape of a circular route, starting and ending in Sutherland and providing various options regards places to visit and accommodation sites – to suite different needs and time restrictions of the tourism market.

(2) PROJECT METHODOLOGY / OVERVIEW:

Throughout the procedures communities took their own decisions about what should be done and how. One of the purposes of this approach was to allow them to apply their own cultural interpretation of their heritage and environment and to encourage local people to protect that heritage and environment. The route raised awareness of the Succulent Karoo, of the local area and provided much needed structure for the local eco-tourism industry. As part of the initial phase of implementation, some awareness materials were also established – as to assist with the roll-out of the new enterprise. With the route established, the community controls what happens on the route through the Steering Committee. It is up to the Steering Committee to stimulate

improvements to the route, encourage high standards, and to make it as attractive and competitive as possible.

(2.1) COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The Project was initiated through a local conservation champion and guesthouse owner, Jurg Wagener. GRES was asked to act as project applicant and to provide the technical and practical implications of initiating such a routed-approach for this region, based on their experience and involvement in the eco-tourism industry.

The project kick-started through the establishment of an interim steering committee, under leadership of Jurg Wagener. The interim steering committee consisted of three local tourism enterprises. Initial concepts and practical implications were discussed at formal meetings, facilitated by GRES and attended (when possible) by the local SKEP regional representative. Discussions and planning was done around the route lay-out, formalising an effective steering committee, involving key role-players, signboards and awareness materials.

A decision was made to formalise the steering committee and invitations were send out to key role-players to join this initiative. This resulted in the formalisation of the Sutherland Succulent Karoo Steering Committee whom consisted of: Hoogland Municipality (Local authority, include tourism buro representatives); Tankwa National Park (SANParks), four tourism establishments (Kambrokind Guesthouse; Skurweberg, Blesfontein, Tankwa Guesthouse). A chair and secretary was elected at an inauguration meeting.

(2.2) ROUTE LAY-OUT AND MANANGEMENT PLAN

GRES arranged a planning weekend where local role-players were invited to participate in the driving and visiting of all areas of interest to establish the most feasible route(s) from a tourism point of view, with taking inconsideration biodiversity conservation principles. GRES also invited a team consisting of individuals with background and experience in the following fields – tourism, conservation and business, to join the weekend excursion, and to provide input as required by the local role-players. Based on discussion held at this planning weekend – a management plan for the proposed route was developed.

GRES provided the draft lay-out and management plan to the Steering committee as well as suggestions for the awareness materials. Based on this information – the Steering committee devised work plans for their members and tasked them to design the route brochure, developed a route website, comment on the lay-out and management plan provided by GRES, involved wider communities and establish linkages with other development initiatives (especially through the local authority and SALT project), develop road signboards, initiate plant identification and conservation issues, secure additional funds for roll-out of route for next two years.

The final management and business plan was provided to the Steering committee to assist in the roll-out of the Route.

(2.3) ROUTE AWARENESS MATERIALS

To initiate this new tourism route GRES suggested to the Steering committee to provide/develop the following basic marketing tools:

- Route brochure
- Route website
- Route signboards

GRES provided a range of different brochures from different establishments (and with different target markets) to the Steering committee to enable them to make an informed decision about which brochure design / lay-out they want to invest in. Interesting challenges for the Steering committee was to define a common thread among a variety of different role-players, to define the target market at whom to pitch the brochure, to decide how the brochure will be utilised and where it should be distributed. The Steering committee decide to focus strongly on the Succulent Karoo and natural biodiversity of the region through-out the design and lay-out of the brochure.

A website was designed by one of the participating members and will be linked to members and role-players along the Sutherland Succulent Route. Active marketing of the website will be pursued by the Steering committee.

Road signboards are a very important aspect of the Sutherland Succulent Route, due to huge distances, remoteness of the region and the possibilities of getting lost. The Steering committee investigated different signboards, as well as where the most appropriate areas are to erect the signboards. Due to the number of signboards necessary – additional funds were requested from the local authority to assist.

(2.4) CONTRIBUTING TO SUCCULENT KAROO CONSERVATION

This project succeeded in raising awareness of the unique natural environment of the Roggeveld and Tankwa regions among the project partners. Important role-players, such as the Hoogland Municipality, is now involved in stimulating biodiversity conservation projects – one example is the identification of prominent plants among the Sutherland route. This awareness will assist in the future roll-out of other biodiversity projects in this region.

Local role-players are now also involved with regional conservation actions, such as the regional SKEP and Greater Cederberg Biodiversity Corridor processes. Benefits of conservation actions should become visible as the route become more known in the eco-tourism market and would stimulate additional local economic development.

Partnerships between the Tankwa National Park and its tourism neighbours and surrounding local authorities were established.

(3) PROJECT DELIVERABLES:

- (3.1) Establishment of the Sutherland Succulent Route Steering Committee, representing local communities and role-players
- (3.2) An eco-tourism initiative of which the local role-players have taken ownership off and are actively managing the enterprise to ensure biodiversity conservation and local economic development of the region.
- (3.3) A Management Plan that actively informs the Steering committee about the design, establishment and implementation of the Sutherland Succulent Route.
- (3.4) Identification of areas of special interest for tourist along the Succulent Route.

- (3.5) Awareness materials that include a route brochure, website and road signboards. Additional awareness materials and actions were discussed and suggested in the Management Plan.
- (3.6) A general awareness among the role-players about the importance of their region and the need for further information about their region's rich biodiversity and conservation needs.
- (3.7) Linkages to other initiatives such as the Greater Cederberg Biodiversity Corridor, the Tankwa/Roggeveld Vegetation Survey, the Herpetofauna Study within the Greater Cederberg Biodiversity Corridor.
- (3.8) A draft LOI for the second phase of this project (field guide training to key role-players) and some additional marketing/management needs was provided to the Steering committee for consideration and submission to funder for second phase of route implementation.

(4) LESSONS LEARNED

- (4.1) When dealing with a community-based project and where different role-players need to plan together on the outputs of a project – time is needed. The initial timeframe was too short, and fortunately the donors were willing to extend the timeframe to ensure proper collaboration, partnership establishment and project conceptualisation by the various role-players.
- (4.2) There was an inherent “protectionism” among the various role-players regarding the environment and the importance to make tourists aware about their special natural environment. This assisted and ensured that a balance was found during the planning phase between conservation needs and tourism development.
- (4.3) The importance to have local drivers (local champions) is of utmost importance to ensure participative planning and to ensure that local conditions / cultures / challenges are brought to the table as to ensure local ownership of the new enterprise.

(5) CONCLUSION

With the provision of this grant by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, the local inhabitants and tourism role-players of the Sutherland (Roggeveld) and Tankwa regions were able to initiate a project that will contribute to conservation initiatives, biodiversity awareness and local conservation action in the important Succulent Karoo Hotspot. The past months were characteristic of steep learning curves among participants' regards collaborative management, regional conservation and tourism aspects. GRES, as project applicant, was able to see how this learning curve was converted into practical on-the-ground actions, and lots of enthusiasm and dedication, to ensure that the project reach its current phase of implementation. The future of this project depends entirely on the Steering committee and the continuation of enthusiasm and dedication that was visible throughout of this project. Continued support is necessary to ensure that the project reaches its full potential and linkages with other regional initiatives are strongly recommended (notion accepted by Steering Committee).

From the project applicant, the Sutherland Succulent Route Steering Committee and all other role-players we wish to convey our sincerest thanks to CEPF (Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund) for making this project a reality.