

Tourism revenue will preserve nature's magic and majesty

By [Joe Cloete](#)

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South Africa faces major challenges and opportunities: develop an inclusive economy that addresses poverty, unemployment and inequality while preserving the resources that sustain us. We must abdicate our unenviable position as the world leader in youth unemployment, while ensuring that future generations have food, energy and water security.



Image via [Shamwari Safari](#)

We must halt and redress the loss of species and natural habitats while embracing the much-vaunted Fourth Industrial Revolution. We must ensure that our economy and our people benefit indefinitely from the natural bounty that makes South Africa a preferred destination for visitors from around the world.

And of course, we need to provide our citizens with opportunities for dignity and livelihood, and to address fundamental and vexing issues of land and rural poverty.

At Shamwari Private Game Reserve I've had a glimpse of how these goals may be achieved, in concert with the magic of Africa's wildlife and the science that can help sustain it, with the all-important power of investment.

Humankind's potential, and our potential as a nation, requires capital. An investment of USD25m by Shamwari's owners, Investment Corporation Dubai, has enabled the refurbishment of Shamwari's six lodges. Importantly, it also enables the full-time employment of 325 people, mostly from the impoverished surrounding towns of Paterson and Alicedale.

Well-managed conservation is costly, but done well, it's also pro-poor. A recent independent study by the Terrestrial Ecology Research Unit at the University of Port Elizabeth has found that the economic benefits of conservation outweighed those of agriculture tenfold. But it also enables – and needs – the personal growth of those who dedicate their lives to it.

One example is my colleague, Frans Kgomontsho, who started working at Shamwari as a barman and seized the opportunity to train as a ranger. He's now one of Shamwari's most sought-after guides, with international guests repeatedly returning and insisting on being guided by him.

Here we see the meeting of the human spirit, our obligation as the planet's dominant species to protect it, and our aspirations for fulfilling livelihoods. Mr Kgomontsho's path is similar to my own: I started working at Shamwari as a trainee ranger in 1992, and knew it was where I wanted to be.

Nature, for all its almost magical resilience and ingenuity, is fragile. We know, for example, that the humble red-billed oxpecker was extinct from this part of the Eastern Cape, poisoned en masse by farmers' cattle-dip. Shamwari's first step was to persuade the local farmers to change the dip they used.

But that wouldn't bring back the oxpeckers, so 49 of them were captured in the Kruger National Park and released at Shamwari. They sought out food and the animals, panicked at the sensation of having birds peck at them for the first time, fled in every direction, with the birds in pursuit.

The experiment was thought to have failed, but then oxpeckers appeared with dark bills and no rings on their legs: juveniles. The conservationists knew the birds were breeding.

It's a small but significant example of what can be achieved. Those who care about Africa's wildlife, and about its benefits to its people are enraged and saddened by poaching, habitat loss, canned hunting and declining biodiversity. But those fighting to preserve and restore its bounty are able to refine and expand their knowledge when they have the resources to do so.

They learn for example that wildlife can be pressured by many things, even by the shape of their range. When Shamwari was rectangular in shape, the black-backed jackals, wild dogs and brown hyena were stressed because they had to cross the range of bigger predators. As the reserve expanded and became square, that stress abated.

That understanding extends to what we humans regard as a little bizarre: leopard tortoises eat the dung of carnivores for calcium; a newborn zebra's first meal is some of its mother's dung, which kick-starts faecal bacteria in the hindgut and enables it to eat grass within two days. Red hartebeest can eat grass as soon as mother frees it after birth by eating its placenta.

It's an understanding that in turn points to humankind's ingenuity and symbiosis with nature: the river euphorbia tree secretes latex, which removes pigment from the skin of animals and humans. Some African tribes use it to mark their livestock. Black rhino and porcupines are the only animals known to eat it.

This ever-deepening knowledge needs to happen in the context of nurturing a love and understanding of nature in young people, with 400 scholars a month visiting Shamwari free of charge. It needs to happen in the context of its surrounding communities, with Shamwari's vets conducting free clinics in local townships.

We've seen how human ingenuity, passion and investment can help address some of our species' most lamentable acts. For example, the Born Free Foundation on Shamwari's land is home to big cats rescued from captivity. So a lion rescued in a pitiable state in Romania, where it was confined to a cage two metres longer than the animal itself, and fed only on spaghetti, can live out its days under the African sun, in the care of Martin Miritiawo and Catherine Gillson.

As a species, we can do better than to ill-treat a magnificent creature so that it is stunted with nutritional osteodystrophy. An example of that effort is Shamwari's new wildlife rehabilitation centre, being built specifically so that injured or orphaned

animals may be reintroduced to the wild rather than being habituated to humans and then handed over to the petting industry, and possibly ending up in canned hunts.

We must see this all in the context of the global economy and our potential as a destination for foreign exchange.

The World Trade Organisation, for example, estimates that South Africa earns around USD9bn a year from tourism. By comparison, New Zealand earns USD10bn, Singapore USD20bn and Italy USD44bn.

Each of these countries has distinct attractions, but can any of them equal the appeal of South Africa? I may be biased, but I'd wager not. For that reason, we must simply do more and do better in marketing our country.

We can achieve this, with professionally managed, high-end black-owned ecotourism that enables employment and sustainable land use in rural areas, in turn, funding conservation.

Conservation is expensive and has never been more necessary. It needs tourists' investment. It needs the passion of humans, for enterprise and for our continent. In enterprises like Shamwari and its ilk, I see how that can work, to the benefit of all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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