



# Rural tourism hampered by national marketing

During the past decades, tourism has begun to find much wider recognition as an economic sector with the potential to make a contribution towards development. JOHAN VILJOEN looks at one of the most intriguing sustainable development themes, rural tourism.

RURAL TOURISM consists of leisure activities carried out in rural areas and includes different types of tourism activities, such as community-based tourism, ecotourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, guest farms, backpacking, riding and agri-tourism. Developing tourism in rural areas increases participation of the poor and brings wider benefits, for instance, involving ownership and management.

The economic potential of tourism as a key driver of growth and development in South Africa is based on the competitive advantages that the country has in its natural and cultural resources. South Africa's fast-growing tourism industry also complements a worldwide trend towards alternative tourism, signalling a break away from the perception of sun, sea and sand as representative of the ideal holiday.

The White Paper on the Promotion of Tourism in South Africa contends that the prime tourism attractions are not located in the city centres but in the rural areas. Many rural tourism types are indeed ideally suited for developing tourism in rural localities with the necessary environmental qualities and provide rural inhabitants with the opportunity to participate and share in the benefits of tourism development.

However, many rural areas, despite having attributes that would favour tourism development, fail to compete with established urban tourism destinations such as Cape Town and Johannesburg. A number of reasons have been offered for this phenomenon. One reason is that the national marketing efforts by South Africa Tourism supports contemporary tourism patterns that benefit top tourism destinations with little benefits flowing to other regions. Placing emphasis on major tourism draw-cards in international marketing campaigns makes sense in growing international tourism arrivals per se but contributes little to developing lesser known tourism regions.

Despite the hurdles that inhibit tourism development in rural areas, some small towns and locations have managed to buck prevalent trends with tourism growing in significance as a lead sector for local economic development (LED). Stilbaai and Clarens are examples of particularly successful small-town LED's, where tourism represents the main sector of development. Route tourism is another example of emerging LED strategies, where the collective marketing and promotion of a grouping of adjacent tourism facilities takes place in order to compete more effectively with established

tourism destinations. The Midlands, Highveld and Magalies Meanders are examples of successful route tourism initiatives that supported enterprise development and employment creation. These initiatives are well supported by domestic tourists, but still have some headway to make with wooing international customers.

Remedies for the unequal distribution of tourism benefits in a free market system is not a simple task, but should start with a change in the mindset of key tourism role-players that promotes established tourism draw-cards to the detriment of other locations. Certain types of tourism, such as budget tourism and backpacking, have been known to bring benefits to remote and otherwise marginalised regions that international mass tourists seldom visit. Further investigation and more support is undoubtedly warranted for these and other tourism types that will directly benefit other regions with a high tourism potential. ●

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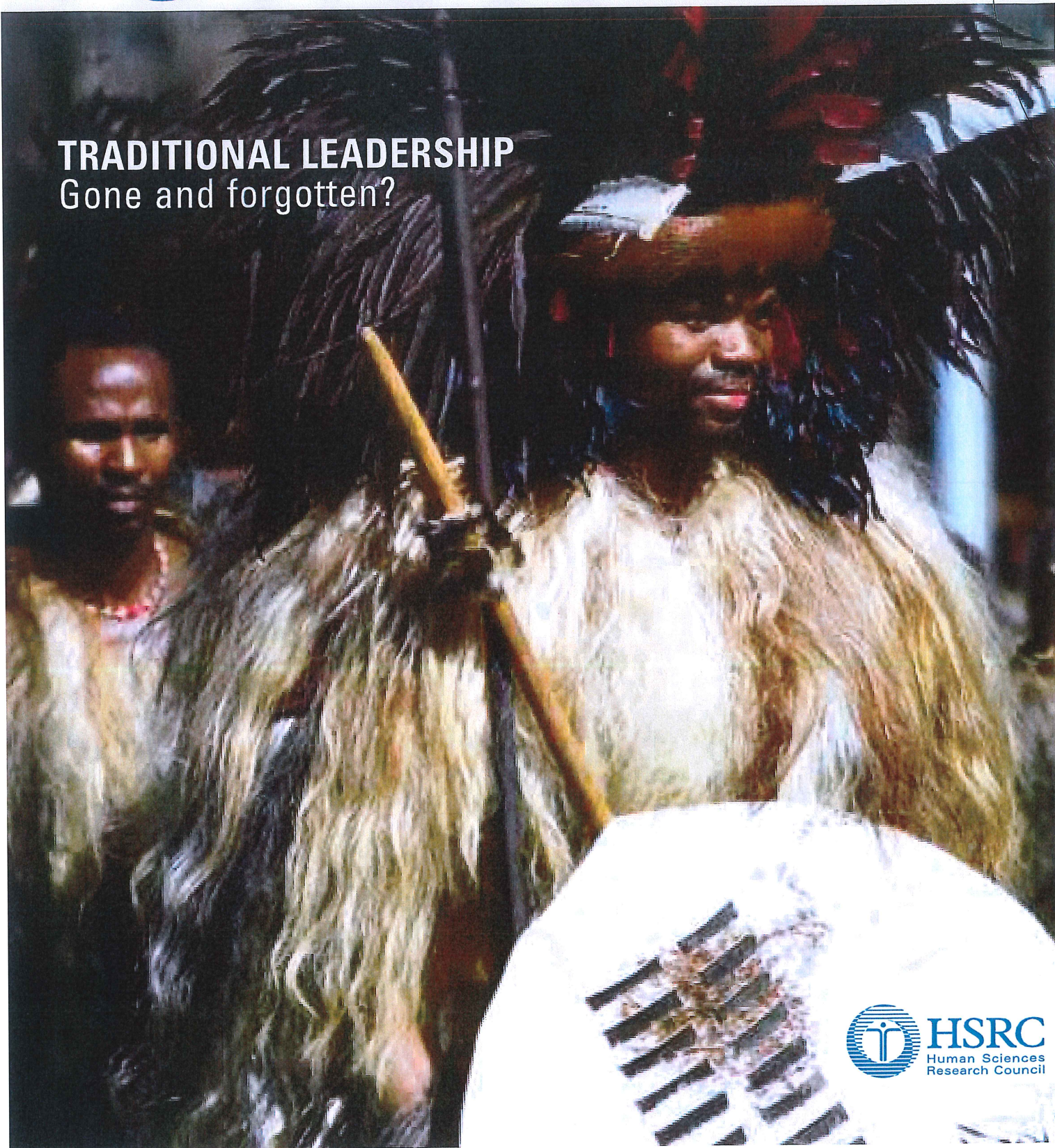


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**5** VOLUME  
No. 04 | NOV 2007

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