

Crafts and the Spatial Development Initiatives

Eddie Koch

Two years ago, visitors faced a major hazard on their way to the Numbi Gate entrance of Kruger National Park, the country's most famous game reserve. Young boys who spent their time carving birds, giraffes, and elephants from local hardwoods were so desperate to sell their crafts that they would sometimes lie down in the middle of the road, forcing tourists to stop and inspect their goods. That situation has now changed to the benefit of all parties, thanks to the work of an enterprising organization called the Skukuza Alliance, which is headed by craftsman and sculptor Philemon Ngomane.

In 1997, Ngomane and his assistant, Harry Johnson — an artist brought in by the Kruger National Park management to help stimulate quality craft manufacturing in the surrounding villages — realized that the only way to improve the quality of the craftspeople's products, and hence their lives, was to improve the organization of their production systems.

"In those days our members were not cooperating with each other," says Ngomane. "You would find one guy cutting the trees, carving the sculptures, and [also] trying to stop the cars to buy his artworks. In the end, he did nothing well, and the tourists did not want to buy his goods."

One of the first things that Ngomane and Johnson did was to convince the crafters — more than 400 of them in the villages around Kruger's Numbi Gate — that they needed to unite under the umbrella of the Skukuza Alliance and work



The recent growth in tourism in South Africa provides a ready market for the craft industry and increased opportunity to create employment, for example for these roadside vendors in Mpumalanga.

Photo courtesy SATOUR

out a more rational division of labor. Says Johnson: "It wasn't easy, because crafters are traditionally very independent. But we managed to show that if some people went into the bush to collect wood while others concentrated on actually making the sculptures, and another group ran a shop where the goods are sold, then the quality of the product — and the sales — would go up. People could simply concentrate on what they do best."

After a few difficult months, the cooperative system began to yield results, and crafters flocked to join the Skukuza Alliance. As quality and productivity increased, tour buses, which usually shied away from the Numbi entrance to avoid having their vehicles ambushed by crafters, began to use the gate more

often; their passengers expressed a consistent desire to buy local crafts. A study conducted by the South African Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST) found that the Skukuza Alliance has achieved the following since it began in 1997. It has:

- encouraged local craft producers to cooperate with each other and specialize in specific tasks.
- created average monthly earnings of some R330 (approximately \$54) for about 400 members. This includes sales at two outlets along with informal distribution outlets established by members of the association. Although the wage is low, it equals the average for this area of the country.

- trained members of the association to successfully manage the craft shop at Numbi Gate using a simple but highly effective monitoring and bookkeeping system that allows the association to tell how many artifacts have been sold by an artist, measure the traffic flows through the gate, the number of vehicles that stop and

and for many of them it is the only form of employment around here.”

Crafts are one of the few ways that rural people without formal skills can earn money. The average capital cost per job created in this sector is far lower than in the tourism or manufacturing sector, especially in those enterprises designed to be competitive internation-

As part of its new macroeconomic strategy, the South African government has recently begun to stimulate new international tourism destinations in several parts of the country. Most of these high-growth tourism zones are located in areas known as spatial development initiatives, or SDIs. In these corridors or geographical areas, the government is improving transport, security, and environmental protection, and providing other incentives to attract investments in hotels, resorts, and lodges. The Skukuza Alliance is located near the Maputo Development Corridor, an SDI that is already ferrying increased numbers of tourists into the Kruger National Park. Other tourism SDIs are located in KwaZulu-Natal province, along the Wild Coast of the Eastern Cape, and on the Cape West Coast.

Based on its recent successes, the Skukuza Alliance is currently pressing for the right to open an outlet at the far busier main entrance to the park at Paul Kruger Gate. The alliance’s plans include a small training center and lodging for low-budget travelers. A trust called the Mkhabela Foundation is being established to plan expansion of the small businesses set up by the alliance.

Says Ngomane: “If the government can give the kind of support we received to other crafters around the country, I can promise you it will be one of the best ways to prevent joblessness among our people. And at the same time they will make us very proud, because they make us artists — not just workers.”

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Above: Through the sale of their handiwork, craftspeople such as these basket sellers in Durban (KwaZulu-Natal) have been able to raise the standard of living in rural areas.



Left: An entrepreneur from Postmasburg, Northern Cape, fills bottles with colored sand to sell to tourists. Photos courtesy SATOUR

purchase, the purchasing habits of the tourists, etc.

- encouraged tour buses to use this route specifically because of the improved quality of the crafts sold there — without paying a commission to the bus drivers, a practice in many other craft outlets.
- encouraged the management of the curio shops inside the game reserve to purchase crafts from the local associations. This was a major breakthrough, as the management of this lucrative outlet had long relied on imported crafts and curios, arguing that the quality of local crafts was too low to be sold in the shop.
- ensured cooperation between craft associations that have a strong history of sectarianism and internal fracturing.

“Our membership now exceeds 400 if you include the part-time crafters,” says Ngomane. “Many of these people earn more than the average wage in the area,

ally. The recent growth in tourism in South Africa provides a ready market for the craft industry and an opportunity to create employment. Inspired by the example of the Skukuza Alliance, DACST is looking at ways to improve crafters’ production and livelihood in many of the country’s main tourism zones.