

LUCRATIVE TRAIL DEVELOPMENT IS FEASIBLE, BUT BEWARE..!

IS THERE A NEED FOR HIKING TRAILS?

There is a growing need for urban dwellers to experience the pristine natural environment – clean air, unspoiled scenery, peacefulness and quiet; to see animal life in its natural surroundings, to swim in a river, to sit at night next to a camp fire - listening to the nightlife and admire the stars.

At the same time farmers (and other land owners such as nature reserves) are experiencing financial stress – to make ends meet due to escalating costs.

It is nice to realize that the development of hiking trails (and other nature based trails) is the ideal solution to this two-sided problem: enhancing the quality of life for urban dwellers and at the same time increasing the income of landowners. It is therefore understandable that we expect an increase in hiking in the years to come. *Before warned is before armed ...* or shall we say: *“the early bird catches the worm”*

BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR A SUCCESSFUL HIKING TRAIL

No place in South Africa can boast a Niagara Waterfall or a Grand Canyon – but luckily this is not what ordinary hikers expect. The basic requirement is ... *“just to get away from it all”* and to come as close to nature as possible. Most farms in South Africa can offer at least something of this nature to hikers. It is of course best if there are mountainous topography and perennial streams on the farm. A waterfall and swimming pool will enhance the value of the land for hiking tremendously, but these features are not a necessity in order to have a successful hiking trail. Many examples exist where ordinary farms generate an income of more than R100 000 per year (some on a piece of land barely 250 ha) whilst larger trails' income exceeds R1m. Many farmers have reported that hiking has been bringing in more money to them than their primary farming activities. And this with very little input in terms of time and money – and at virtually no risk!

PLANNING PRINCIPLES

It is however critically important to realize that a successful hiking trail is not merely a path chopped open in the veld to connect two places so that people can effectively walk through the bush. Even less acceptable is the approach often used by farmers to use existing farm roads for hiking trails. A hiking trail should be a true ecotourism experience to urban dwellers; providing them with a sense of remoteness and full of surprises. At the same time the trail should be an ecologically self-sustainable feature – not reverting into a donga in a few years time.

There are two foundation stones on which a successful trail depends: **ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY** and **PSYCHOLOGICAL SATISFACTION**.

ECOLOGY

Before one can hope to create a successful path in the veld, one is to look carefully at the ecology. Knowledge of the various types of soil is required. Soils can create many problems to the developer over time if the trail e.g. crosses a marshy area with clay soils. Vegetation growing on sand is also trampled out very quickly and is difficult to re-establish. For the hikers it is also difficult and tiresome to walk over loose sand. Soils that occur in forests are rich in humus and are easily compacted and displaced by the boots of hikers. Such sensitive areas need to be either avoided or special techniques such as boardwalks put in place. As mentioned, some types of vegetation are very sensitive such as dunes and marshes. Vegetation however can also be a very important asset. Even the desert vegetation of the Richtersveld has a magic of its own. So is the atmosphere created by the bushveld – not even to talk of majestic baobabs of the Northern Province, the Fynbos flowers of the W. Cape, the green hills of KwaZulu/Natal, etc. The presence of edible and medicinal plants can have important value for outdoor education. A trail must provide an enlightening experience to hikers. Walking through patches of invader plants such as wattles, kakhobos, etc. is however not a pleasant experience and need to be evaded.

The developer also needs to look at the gradient of a landscape. Mountain areas are exceptionally beautiful but do pose the problem of steep slopes that are susceptible to erosion. Depending on the type of soil it is not recommended that gradients of more than 8 % be used for trail layout; after which steps are needed. On moving parallel to the slope on gradients in excess of 25% needs a lot of cutting into the side slope of the hill and leaves an ugly scar in the landscape that can be seen from far off. On steep slopes it becomes a tricky business to decide when to use steps or ladders or when to ascend by means of sig-sags. Hikers very often take short cuts in such places and this leads to serious erosion.

Wild animals are of course a tremendous asset to hikers. To see a kudu in the wilds is a great experience. If possible, avoid camps where cattle graze frequently and in notable numbers. But the developer has to be careful concerning dangerous animals because it can be assumed urban dwellers do not have the required veld skills. Rather keep the trail away from koppies notorious for snakes or from habitats where there are buffalo, rhino, bulls, etc. Hikers should be warned beforehand of any dangers that they may encounter and the necessary personal liability forms should be carefully signed. Take care in crossing rivers that it is safe. Although hikers enjoy river crossings, bridges are costly to construct and to keep in good condition. Having said that, a bridge is not always necessary. Having two tree trunks lying over the stream with a rustic hand railing is often quite enough and makes the hike that more interesting – adding to the feeling of excitement that hikers find so attractive.

PSYCHOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

It needs to be stressed: a trail is not merely an effective way connecting places A and B. Hiking needs to be an exhilarating experience and therefore needs to be well planned

from the perspective of the hikers' needs and aspirations. To avoid as much as possible farming activities, and of course development associated with towns, is one of the basic requirements. Stay away from roads, telephone lines and even fences and agricultural lands if possible. Create a sense of wilderness with as much variation along the trail as possible. A trail should resemble a natural game path, winding "imperceptibly" through the bush.

Detail planning "tricks-of-the-trade": Do not take the trail in an easterly direction in the morning because this will cause the sun to shine into the eyes of the hikers and make it difficult to appreciate the surroundings and to take photographs. See to it that the swimming places on the route are reached at midday when hikers are desperate for a drink of water or a swim. While walking in the midday sun, try to place the trail on the southern side of trees to maximize walking in the shade. Why not also rather use southern slopes in stead of the hot northern slopes in hot climatic regions? These and many other small techniques make the difference between an average path and an excellent hiking experience.

Urban dwellers have a notorious lack of sense of direction! Nothing is more devastating to either the trail owner or the hiker, if hikers get lost – especially at night. Make sure that the trail is properly waymarked with footprints. Remember that the hikers' attention is on the scenery around him and he can easily miss a turnoff unless conspicuously marked. These markers however should not approach the appearance of graffiti. Be careful also not to place markers amongst fast growing shrubs and tall grass that can obscure it; nor on loose stones, which can be turned over by baboons. The golden rule: not too conspicuous but unmistakably obvious.

Having said all this, the most important element of a successful trail is variation. Hikers' attention and sense of interest level must be kept high. Walking through an indigenous forest is beautiful, but even this can become tedious after an hour or two. Create constant variation of type of landscape, vegetation, scenery, etc. Be careful not to have too long uphill stretches. Give hikers ample break to regain their breath by following the contour between steep uphill stretches. Make sure that, after having hikers walk up a steep hill, that there will be a beautiful view. ... or a nice swimming pool after a particularly hot stretch. There must always be a "reward" after hard work!

It is important to remember that a hiking trail should have some element of excitement: a spot where the hikers experience some form of, what has been referred to as an "adrenaline rush" – that aspect that hikers talk about after the hike and which is of course of major marketing value for the trail. If a planner can for example incorporate a difficult river crossing or a somewhat risky suspension bridge, it will provide exactly that element.

Ugly places need to be avoided such as dongas and power lines. Keep hikers away from labourers' housing, whose privacy need to be respected, and whose dogs can be a nuisance. One can sometimes "hide" these features by taking the trail behind bushes or on the opposite side of the hill. The same "hiding" effect can be realised by making hikers walk uphill towards such an unsightly place. When walking uphill, hikers let their

heads hang down and they will not even notice such places. On the other hand, if you want them to appreciate a view, let hikers walk slightly downhill towards such scenes.

One of the most difficult planning challenges is to develop a trail that has the specific difficulty rating that you desire it to have. If a trail is too difficult, people will not enjoy it and report back in a negative way to fellow hikers. The same goes for a trail that does not pose enough of a challenge to have warranted the distance traveled to the trail. There is a difficulty rating accepted by the SA Hiking Trail Owners Association (SAHTOA) which grades trails on a scale of 1 – 10, which is recommended. It is well worth the expense because it ensures that a trail needs not be changed again once it has been built. It also has marketing value to be able to tell hikers exactly what level of difficulty your trail is. (For implementing this system, you could contact the writer).

But a hiking experience does not start at the beginning of the path. It starts when the hiker tries to contact you for a booking. If he battles to get hold of you, he will try another trail. If he has to leave his car in the sun for the whole weekend, in danger of veld fires, theft, etc. he will probably not enjoy a carefree weekend on your trail. A list of trail facilities is available from the website www.trailinfo.co.za.

Hikers are not necessarily set on luxury accommodation. They normally opt for basic amenities: a roof over their head, a cooking and washing place and a (pit) toilet. A hot water shower is a bonus. Such information is also available from the website.

Be careful of using experienced hikers who do not have a track record of trail planning to design your trail. A frequent visitor to a farm does not warrant that he will be a good farmer; nor is a nature lover of necessity a successful conservationist. The same holds true for hikers. One needs someone who is knowledgeable of the ecology of your farm as well as the psychology of hikers to do a good job. If you are in doubt, contact the South African Hiking Trail Owners Assn. or the writer of this brochure for further advice.

QUALITY MAINTENANCE – ENSURING SATISFIED GUESTS

Accreditation...

The main secret of having satisfied guests is to provide users with the product they expected to get. If they have been expecting a wilderness trail with rustic accommodation and they encounter dogs and cattle and many other holiday guests on the trail, as well as luxury accommodation, they will feel cheated and will not speak well of your trail. The way to go is thus to implement the GREEN FLAG TRAILS Accreditation System by which a trail is classified according to specific types. Accreditation ensures that a trail is safe and that users are provided with the type of trail as advertised in the trail brochure. If you then market it according to these guidelines, you can be assured of satisfied hikers – and we all know that the best way of marketing is by word of mouth.

However well a trail has been designed and constructed, some form of monitoring will be necessary – especially after heavy rains. In order to qualify for Green Flag Trail status it is thus required that an audit of your trail be done. (See www.trailinfo.co.za).

MARKETING

It is advised that you make use of a professional marketing agent who can do your booking also. It can be done by yourself but will take a lot of dedication. There are such professionals available.

CLOSING REMARKS

Although it is true that an increase in hiking is to be expected, it nevertheless remains a competitive market where only the quality products will ultimately survive. Good planning is the recipe for success. Because hiking matches well with other forms of ecotourism such as mountain biking, horse riding, and hunting, (and even 4x4 if well-planned) it might well be rewarding to have your farm evaluated in terms of its total tourism potential.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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