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04 December 2013

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PRELIMINARY COMMENTS ON THE PROPOSED DRAKENSBERG CABLEWAY

Vertical Endeavour represents a community of interested people who recognise the immense value of the Maloti-Drakensberg Mountains, spanning South Africa and Lesotho. Among us are hikers, climbers, photographers, adventure racers, mountain bikers, nature lovers, scientists and conservationists. We share a common interest in promoting the Maloti-Drakensberg Mountains and believe that all of its natural and cultural wealth should be understood, respected and preserved for generations to come.

A request is hereby submitted for our inclusion in the list of Interested And Affected Parties with regards to the cableway proposal.

We are aware of preliminary comments and concerns already submitted by the African Conservation Trust (ACT) and the Wilderness Action Group (WAG) in response to the proposal, and add our voice to these.

We express concern about the viability and sustainability of the cableway. The projected number of visitors who are expected to use the cableway, as mentioned in the recent Feasibility Study (July 2013) as well as the Business Plan (October 2013), needs to be looked at more carefully as we believe these are unrealistic. Factors such as weather and the remote location of the proposed site, are just a few of the additional factors which pose a considerable threat to the sustainability of the initiative. We request that further studies should be carefully conducted before consequential decisions are taken which may unnecessarily cost the tax payers significant amounts of money.

It is noted that the proposed site is in very close proximity to the Maloti-Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site (MDPWHS), and that the area where the top station is to be built is already managed as part of the MDPWHS. Furthermore we understand that long-term plans are already in existence to ensure that the MDPWHS extends continuously from Royal Natal National Park through to Cathedral Peak and beyond – thus closing the so-called “Busingata-Mnweni Gap”. The construction of a cable car over this territory could not only disrupt this process but may even place existing World Heritage Status of the park in jeopardy. The very attraction that the cableway is aimed at exploiting would be lost.

We are not convinced that the cableway will be a major benefit to the local people in the Busingata and surrounding areas. It is understandable that the local and district municipalities stand to benefit from the project, but we do not find clarity on how the locals themselves will be uplifted. The meagre figure of 30

jobs resulting from the cableway will do very little for them (even if all 30 positions were awarded to them – which will probably not be the case). Mention of a few more positions to be filled at the associated resort also does not amount to community upliftment – and we have yet to see a clear indication and commitment to the possibility of extra jobs.

We do not believe that the cable car should be considered a better option to the long-standing plans of the local communities to have their land established as a nature reserve, when the existence of a cableway would in fact destroy the very thing that they have been working towards for many years. It is also noted that they themselves have already identified two sites which would be far more suitable locations for a tourism resort.

There is concern over the impact such a structure will have on the environment that goes well beyond the severe visual impact and intrusion it introduces. The idea that a cableway is a way of conserving the environment is not widely accepted, neither here in South Africa or internationally. We believe that the cableway poses a high risk of irreversible loss to the environment, a risk that easily outweighs any potential positive contribution it ever hopes to achieve.

Far more good, with a significantly wider endorsement, could be achieved with much less, at a substantially lower investment risk and detrimental impact.

We would also wish it to be recorded that we are concerned that this project appears to be driven by undue haste. More time needs to be given towards proper and full consultation with the local community living in the Busingata Valley, all Interested and Affected Parties, and in fact the public at large. Not all facts about the proposal are properly understood and known, and the public cannot be expected to make informed responses if so little time and such an incomplete picture is presented.

Furthermore public meetings have been conducted that were announced at extremely short notice and which were not advertised widely enough.

The public has not had sufficient access to the documents relating to the prefeasibility study which was recently conducted, and certainly needs more time to be allowed to respond to the weighty matters they present.

Vertical Endeavour trusts the above comments will be given due consideration and acted upon as requested.

Compiled by Chris Sommer on behalf of Vertical Endeavour