

White Elephants Shouldn't Roam The Berg!

The idea of a cable car in the Drakensberg is not new. It has however recently received fresh impetus and media attention. Various locations for the project have been considered, in particular the Mnweni area situated in the Northern Drakensberg. As a group of concerned people who are very familiar with the Mnweni, and who cumulatively have been exploring the Drakensberg for many decades, we are concerned that this project will become a white elephant should it go ahead. We believe the idea is particularly unsuited to the Mnweni and that it is neither sustainable nor desirable in the Berg as a whole.

The following is a list of considerations supporting our concern:

1) The cable car proposal was already evaluated a few years ago by the Federation of Drakensberg User Groups, and in a detailed report released by them it was shown to be not economically viable ¹.

2) Further to the report mentioned above, we wish to emphasise that the low number of days that the cable car can be expected to operate, or be supported by tourists, will result in major economic loss. In the summer months, mist and cloud typically envelopes the escarpment by mid morning and stays for the rest of the day. The view from the escarpment itself is non-existent on these days. In winter, the strongest winds anywhere in southern Africa, which are part of the circumpolar westerlies, blow over the escarpment. Once the night time surface temperature inversion is removed by the morning sun, the fierce wind mixes down to the surface to produce gusts which are often in excess of 100 km/hr - well beyond the operating threshold of cable ways. Hikers experience this wind routinely and data gathered by climate scientists from this remote region confirms this. Another vital clue to the existence of these winds are the proposed wind farms in the highlands of Lesotho.

3) The safety of the cable car operation and its clientele should be taken into consideration. The extreme weather already mentioned above can close in very quickly and could leave many passengers stranded at high altitudes. Furthermore, lightning strikes occur on the escarpment almost daily in summer, and multiple strikes occur on more than 100 days per year. We also draw attention to the cross-border smuggling in the region. Many tons of narcotics are trafficked from Lesotho into South Africa over the Drakensberg, something which hikers regularly see first-hand. We question the wisdom in drawing high numbers of tourists into such an area, especially where shoot-outs occur between rival bands of smugglers, and where raids and ambushes are undertaken by the authorities at times. Such an influx of people with relative wealth to the area could also lead to the development of theft problems. We cite the long-standing theft problems in the neighbouring Amphitheatre area, and the muggings taking place on Table Mountain, as examples of what can happen.

4) The local community do not want the project - *"The cableway will destroy our community and our wilderness (ihlane),"* said Mkwazeni Hlongwane, in a recent media statement ², where he also stated that various cultural and community activities such as medicinal plant harvesting would be adversely affected. *"There has been no consultation with the community; we are not happy about the process,"*

he said. *“One thousand people survive here because of what the mountains give us. The cable-way will employ 100, but what about the other 900?”*

5) The process of formally declaring the upper reaches of the Mnweni a conservation area has already begun. This is a major mile-stone in the history of the Drakensberg, and the aim is a form of integration with the current uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park – World Heritage Site. This status will require that any present and future planning and development follow the correct environmental and social impact assessments, and may even halt proposals altogether.

6) The escarpment top is a bleak area. It is a far cry from the lush valleys and the fast flowing rivers of the lower Berg. It is extremely cold, damp and wind-swept with a vegetation type that resembles semi-desert in large areas of the region concerned. While this may be appealing to a few, we question if there is sufficient interest to see this kind of landscape to make a project of this scale viable and justified.

It is understood that there may be arguments in favour of the cable car in that it will boost revenue from tourism and create jobs. However, smart, not risky investment is needed in KwaZulu-Natal. There already is a long track record of poorly scoped, failed tourist development, and we believe the proposed cable car could add another white elephant to the list. We would rather see KwaZulu-Natal take it's example from the Waterfront in Cape Town, and not the cable car on Table Mountain. A far better investment would be to start consolidating the Durban Port zone which is a mess of fragmented development between the Point and the Embankment.

We call for wise investment and sensible initiatives for the long-term benefit and sustainability of both the Drakensberg and the province.

This statement was prepared by Chris Sommer, on behalf of the community of Drakensberg user groups represented at Vertical Endeavour, a community-driven website featuring the Maloti-Drakensberg Mountains³.

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1. The report may downloaded here: www.vertical-endeavour.com/public/PreFeasability_Study_Mnweni_Cable_Car.pdf

2. Media article citing concerns by the local community: [www.witness.co.za/index.php?showcontent&global\[_id\]=88966](http://www.witness.co.za/index.php?showcontent&global[_id]=88966)

3. Visit Vertical Endeavour at: www.vertical-endeavour.com