

Save water, save tourism

By [James Vos](#)

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The prospect of nations running out of water has become more pronounced due to recurrent droughts and climate change. Water shortages are essentially the 'new normal', and they pose a serious risk to the valuable tourism sector.

Now, more than ever, citizens in our cities and towns need to realise that, contrary to popular perception, tourism does not clog up services and neither is it a preserve for the rich. Available evidence confirms, beyond any doubt, that tourism is essential for economic growth.



James Vos. Image Source: [Stellenbosch 360](#)

According to StatsSA, one in 22 employed people in South Africa work in the tourism industry, representing 4.5% of the total workforce in our country. The [High-Level Panel Report on the Assessment of Key Legislation and the Acceleration of Fundamental Change](#) released last year by former president Kgalema Motlanthe, indicates that 1.4 million people are employed in the tourism industry, with one in seven people relying on the sector for their livelihood. These statistics demonstrate why tourism is such an integral part of our economy, acts as a key driver of income generation and creates opportunities for jobs and entrepreneurship.

A risk to tourism we cannot afford

It is, therefore, no wonder that 'Water Crisis' and 'Day Zero' elicit feelings of fear, not only among citizens but also with visitors and investors. The reach and immediacy of social media ensure that potential visitors to our country become anxious about the prospect of visiting our beautiful country. People who were planning to visit South Africa to enjoy the beauty of our tourist attractions may reconsider and consider other destinations instead.

Travellers sympathetic to our plight might reason that their visit may worsen the water crisis, and as a sign of support will choose not to visit. But these decisions have both short and long-term negative consequences on the tourism sector, which usually take time and money to fix. This is a risk that we simply cannot afford as a country.

South Africa's tourism industry is still recovering from the disastrous visa regulations debacle, which, according to South Africa Tourism Service Association (SATSA), resulted in an estimated R7.5bn loss to the tourism economy. Make no mistake, these regulations, coupled with the superfluous unabridged birth certificate requirement, will continue to hurt our tourism industry if we don't implement measures such as electronic visas that will make it easier and safer for tourists to apply.

According to figures released by the Western Cape Investment and Trade Promotion Agency (Wesgro), the impact of tourists to the Western Cape on the province's water resources in high season is about 1%, and the economic impact on opportunities for employment is far greater.

Exciting times for tourism

Our tourism sector has entered a very exciting period. At several iconic attractions dotted across the country's various regions, record visitor numbers were recorded.

I can confirm that there has been an uptick in activity since my appointment to this exciting portfolio of tourism a few years ago. We're working on exciting projects and agreements to strengthen our tourism initiatives. This involves the development of tourism-related infrastructure that will drive demand and make business sense.

It is common knowledge that South Africa is not only a holiday destination but also a world-class event and business destination. As a result of a deliberate Business Events Strategy, South Africa continues to welcome approximately one million delegates annually to conferences and exhibitions.

SA Tourism confirms that South Africa remains a popular destination for business travellers who spend on average three times more than their leisure equivalents. In most instances, these business travellers end up crossing over into leisure travel through tours before or after their business activities and through return trips. This sector alone contributes over R115bn to the GDP of our country while the entire tourism industry contributes more than R412bn to the GDP.

We must ensure that tourists continue to visit our region and that events and conferences go ahead.

“ ...we need to strike a balance between tourism, the environment and sustainable resource management... ”

We still have a good story to tell

Amidst all the bad news relating to Zuma's state capture nightmare, corruption at the SABC, SAA, Eskom, and Transnet – in Tourism, we still have a good story to tell.

Right now, tourism is one of the best performing sectors in our country's economy. We have a strong competitive advantage in tourism with global growth in outbound tourism and our favourable exchange rate, presenting us with a magnificent window of opportunity.

In particular, the Western Cape is one of the world's leading tourism destinations. This is as a result of a focused approach to growing tourism through facilitating a flow of private sector investment in the hospitality sector. Here again, the

figures provided reveal that tourism supports more than 300,000 jobs and contributes about R40bn to the provincial economy.

For all these milestones, one thing has become quite evident to me: our tourism sector is a vibrant one, thanks in no small part to its people, who have shown commitment to making this industry grow.

#SaveLikeALocal, save tourism

That is why we need to continue to welcome visitors and to implore on them to join residents in saving water while having the best experience possible during their stay. In an effort to encourage water saving, Cape Town Tourism launched the #SaveLikeALocal campaign with the backing of the travel and hospitality sector.

If we encourage tourism during these tough times and highlight the many awesome attractions that exist, particularly the towns and destinations in rural areas with fewer water constraints, and the many guest houses and B&Bs, hotels and conferencing venues in our cities that are water-saving and re-use proficient, we can continue to stimulate growth throughout the entire province and country. We need to do everything to save water so as to save tourism.

This will demonstrate our collective resolve that the Western Cape is open for business while at the same time being mindful of our constrained supply of water.

It would be a massive mistake to lose our tourist income, as it will impact on the entire tourism value chain. Tourism growth potential does not just happen – we have to work together to make it happen. In my view, an important lesson to learn from this occurrence is the necessity to ensure that the tourism sector becomes much more resilient.

To achieve this, we need to strike a balance between tourism, the environment and sustainable resource management. To this end, we are already seeing great initiatives by accommodation establishments in terms of water saving and energy creation. If we could get more tourism-linked establishments to do the same, the impact on our water conservation efforts and the environments could be notable. Perhaps a national approach from the tourism authorities to incentivise such measures by working with the sector would go a long way.

In an age where hashtags have become a way to communicate a challenge or ask a question in a simple and tweetable way, I thought that the impact of tourism for our future as a country and opening our country for all to experience and share along with the lifeblood of water is essentially linked to #SaveWaterSaveTourism.

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