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ABELANA GAME RESERVE: COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP DRIVING SHARED VALUE IN ECOTOURISM

Amy Moore and Verity Hawarden wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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On September 6, 2020, Ian Beauchamp (pronounced *beecham*), the chief executive officer (CEO) of Abelana Game Reserve (Abelana), was walking down the path to the front deck at the five-star Abelana River Lodge. Beauchamp was smiling to himself at the sounds of the hippopotamus grunting in the river. As he approached the deck, he could see a broken floor tile that a rather bold giraffe, affectionately nicknamed Gerry, had made shortly before his arrival. The South African government was starting to ease the national lockdown restrictions that had been imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so Beauchamp had met with the other Abelana shareholders earlier in the day to discuss the tourist booking pipeline and expansion plans. Additional topics had included maintenance requirements and the various skills that would be needed for the work. The Abelana shareholders had partnered with the local community to create jobs and provide support to local businesses during the lodge renovations and after its reopening. Beauchamp wondered what other shared value ideas might create more opportunities for employment and growth within the community. Were there other ways to engage with the community and listen effectively to better understand their needs? How else could Abelana support the community?

LAND DISTRIBUTION AND THE MASHIShIMALE COMMUNITY

During the colonial and apartheid[[1]](#endnote-1)periods*,* many black South Africans were forcibly removed from their land by the institutionalized racial system. In 1994, land reform legislation was passed as part of the national Reconstruction and Development Program to create equality and to address some of the injustices of the past. This legislation had three pillars, one of which was land restitution: a policy and framework to return land to black South Africans who had been forcibly removed.[[2]](#endnote-2)

In 1922, the Mashishimale community had been forcibly removed from its land in an area that later became known as Limpopo province. The community received no compensation for the removal, only allocation of a small portion of nearby land for residential purposes.[[3]](#endnote-3) In 1999, the Mashishimale community lodged a claim with the Limpopo Regional Land Claims Commission in compliance with the newly enacted *Land Rights Act*.[[4]](#endnote-4) The claimant community comprised approximately “1,885 households who could trace their ancestry to the original inhabitants.”[[5]](#endnote-5) The property was approximately 15,000 hectares (36,000 acres) in size, located near the Selati Game Reserve (Selati). The property was “valued at a total of R148,920,000.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

In 2012, the previous owners were compensated by the government and the land rights were transferred to the claimants, administered by a community property association (CPA) led by a chief[[7]](#endnote-7) named Audrey Shai.[[8]](#endnote-8) Royal families in South Africa played an important role in the community through the regulation of social behaviour. Chiefs were considered heads of the royal family, whose responsibilities often included providing safety and security, allocating and distributing land, settling land disputes, and administering justice.[[9]](#endnote-9)

According to the *White Paper on South African Land Policy*, CPAs were a “legal body through which members of disadvantaged and poor communities may collectively acquire, hold and manage property in terms of a written constitution.”[[10]](#endnote-10) The role of the CPA would be to work in conjunction with the Tribal Authority (TA), which was a representative body of local chiefs and headmen, and with the chief to provide good governance and to manage land and resources. The CPA’s structure comprised up to 10 people, including two ex-officio members and the chief. Other responsibilities included organizing and arranging community meetings, managing projects on behalf of the community, and creating jobs.

Over the previous 25 years, some parts of the property had been gazetted as a game reserve, whereas other sections had been used for different purposes. The property had been used to graze cattle and grow citrus, and after stocking the reserve with game, it was also used as a hunting destination. When the Mashishimale community first received the property, income had been historically generated through two primary—although differing—sources: the first was a citrus farm; the second was safari trips to observe or hunt wild animals, which included guest accommodation at the reserve’s 14-bed lodge, called Makubu.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Challenges soon surfaced, however. CPA members had received no training on farm management, and some community claimants wanted to use some of the land for cattle grazing. The citrus farm was subsequently deemed unsustainable and was closed down. A new agreement was then signed with a different partner to operate a hunting concession, but that relationship soon grew sour. The community was not convinced that the partner was being transparent about profit sharing. Specifically, the revenue amounts generated and the number of jobs created did not meet the expectations of the community. As a result, the Mashishimale community lost all trust in new partnerships.

A NEW PARTNERSHIP FOCUSING ON SHARED VALUE

Beauchamp had over 30 years’ experience working in the “bush” (e.g., game parks or game reserves). He had trained as a field guide and worked for MalaMala,[[12]](#endnote-12) one of the oldest and largest private game reserves in South Africa. Eventually, Beauchamp became the head field guide. After a brief management trainee course with the French global oil company Total SE, he was recruited back to MalaMala as head of international marketing. For eight months each year, he travelled abroad to promote the destination to tour operators around the world. After having spent 15 years with the company, Beauchamp moved on to the role of CEO of the Thornybush Collection, a network of 12 four-star and five-star lodges located in the Thornybush Nature Reserve and in the Sabi Sand Wildtuin.[[13]](#endnote-13) Both areas were private game reserves adjacent to Kruger National Park.[[14]](#endnote-14)

By 2017, Beauchamp had left Thornybush and pursued an unsuccessful attempt to build a high-end vacation property business based on the time share model of multiple owners with specific time allotments.[[15]](#endnote-15) Beauchamp then learned about an opportunity to bid for the land lease from the Mashishimale community. As he explained, he was very interested in the prospect of trying to build a new offering for tourists on the property: “The community had been in partnership with the hunting concession, but were not seeing many benefits from that arrangement, so were looking at new possibilities.”

In April 2017, on his first visit to the reserve, Beauchamp tried not to show his excitement at the magnificent landscape and natural resources. He recalled, “I tried to have a poker face during the whole drive through the reserve; I could see the potential for ecotourism and building a world class tourism experience here.” The reserve had a rich diversity of flora and fauna*.* Topography varied, ranging from a 10-kilometre stretch of riverine bush in the north along the Selati River, to massive granite koppies[[16]](#endnote-16) in the south formed by erosion that had weathered the land into boulders and dramatic rock formations. Animal life included a wide variety of insects and birds, antelopes, giraffe, and the “big five”⎯buffalo, elephant, leopard, lion, and rhinoceros.

Over several months, Beauchamp spent time travelling to the area, aiming to connect with the CPA and the chief. He had a potential investor behind him, and in September 2017 Beauchamp and two other competitor bidders were given the opportunity to present formally to the CPA and the TA. “It was one of the worst presentations in my life,” Beauchamp reflected. “It was 40 degrees Celsius,[[17]](#endnote-17) and I had put the presentation on flip chart paper which my daughter had helped write because my handwriting is terrible, and the fan was blowing the pieces of paper everywhere.” He tried to incorporate the themes he had heard from the community during previous visits into his presentation. Four pillars were highlighted, including plans for the land, community, business, and investors. Each page in the flip chart had a tag line indicating “added value to your land.” Beauchamp emphasized what he could do for the community, as community members were the ultimate beneficiaries. This vision included a new focus on ecotourism through different activities for visitors, the upgrading of the existing lodge and the building of proposed additional lodges, and the jobs and skills upliftment that could be created through the building phase and subsequently the servicing of guests. Lastly, he highlighted the financial benefit of revenue coming through an annual lease payment as well as the adjacent community businesses that could be used to help service the tourism needs.

The presentation went better than Beauchamp had thought⎯he was selected as the preferred bidder. He heard later that the CPA enjoyed the focus on what he could do for them compared with the other presenters, who had emphasized their impressive business track records. Beauchamp also sensed that his promise that “you would have me for 20 years and I hope the next CEO would be someone from the community” resonated with the CPA. However, funding became a concern for Beauchamp when it seemed his investor partner had different long-term values.

In January 2019, Beauchamp approached Richard Napier, whom he had known as a shareholder at Thornybush, as a potential investor. Beauchamp and Napier shared a deep love for nature and the African bush. Being conservation-minded, both men felt a moral responsibility for preserving this natural resource. Beauchamp also approached Dene Murphy, the founder of the property development company Mirage Leisure and Development, as another possible investor. The three parties reached an agreement, with the Murphy family holding a 67.5 per cent stake and Napier and Beauchamp together holding the remaining 32.5 share. The partnership traded under the name MTH Holdings, which Beauchamp explained stood playfully for “making things happen.” Beauchamp held a salaried CEO position, Napier was chairman, and Lindsay Clur was the financial director representing the Murphy family’s interests.

After consulting a leading branding professional, MTH Holdings proposed a new name for the reserve. Abelana (meaning “to share among each other” in thelocal Northern Sotho language[[18]](#endnote-18)) reflected the shared approach that the partners and the community represented. Final negotiations were conducted primarily by Beauchamp and Napier with the current lease holder at the time. Beauchamp individually facilitated all contact with the CPA and the chief. The remaining hunting lease was settled and a new 25-year lease was signed, with a 25-year extension, registered against the title deeds. Components of the deal included an annual lease agreement with yearly increases linked to the consumer price index for up to six years, when MTH Holdings expected to break even. Thereafter, increases would be linked to increases in turnover or the consumer price index, whichever was greater. As Beauchamp explained, “we wanted the community to benefit from us doing well, and having an incentive for that.” The agreement included 60 commercial beds to be developed by year six and a levy of R100 per night per guest to be paid directly to the CPA, as Napier outlined:

This daily community levy is unusual amongst most game lodges. We wanted the amount to be significant to the community, but not to deter local and international guests. Most other lodges charge a conservation levy which they use to offset their habitat management costs—be it road, land or species management. We wanted a different model and hoped the community would see the value that visitors bring on a daily basis, knowing that this levy would go directly to them.

In addition, 70 per cent of all jobs would be sourced from local community members who had the requisite skills.

BUILDING WORK TO SUPPORT THE ECOTOURISM MODEL

The next step for MTH Holdings was to agree on the overall vision for ecotourism, and on the infrastructure that was needed to support that vision. Building on previous experience, the management team decided to create an ecotourism service that offered three primary offerings: game drives (which took place in open four-by-four vehicles with a certified field guide to search for wild animals), walking safaris, and an equestrian experience in the bush riding alongside the big five. These offerings were expected to be extended in the future to include more activities and guest experiences. The overall target market was expected to be primarily international visitors (estimated at 70 per cent of all guests), with the rest coming from local areas. Given the initial limited density of game and the need to develop an established road network, the pricing per night at the five-star Abelana River Lodge was set at R7,500 per person per night, deliberately positioned well below competitors in the lowveld,[[19]](#endnote-19) whose rates were usually two to five times more expensive. “We can’t compete immediately with the game density of some of our competitors,” Beauchamp said, “but we can offer an experience of exclusivity, where you can drive all day and not see another vehicle.”

The management team decided to renovate the current lodge and expand the footprint to provide 40 beds and offer a five-star experience. The team also identified a new three-star to four-star safari tented camp destination south of the reserve. This camp would be smaller, with 10 beds in total, and offer different activities than in the north. The activities ranged from walking and mountain biking on trails, accompanied by a tracker and armed field guide, to horseback excursions. Marketing was done through a dedicated specialist in Johannesburg in collaboration with a booking agent. Beauchamp and other staff planned to use their contacts with travel agents and tour operators, as well as social media marketing campaigns, to spread awareness of and interest in the reserve.

The horseback safaris were run by Tamlyn Whitebread, a qualified field guide with years of equestrian experience. Whitebread studied nature conservation and had trained horseback guides in southern Africa. Horseback safaris provided a unique perspective for game viewing, but they were logistically complicated. They comprised dedicated pieces of land and infrastructure for the horses, additional running costs to support the feed and horse maintenance, and qualified staff to look after the animals. However, management believed there was an international market of horse riders who would be interested in this experience. These individuals often booked multi-day horse riding adventures in notable locations around the world. They often secured trips one year in advance and typically stayed for longer periods than other tourists. Whitebread was excited about the opportunity of creating a business from scratch and of being only the second operator in the country to offer riding with the big five.

Building work started in March 2019, initially in the south with the development of the new tented Safari Camp. The renovation and expansion of Abelana River Lodge in the north was started in July 2019 and included work on the staff accommodation. Specialists linked to the Murphy family’s company at Mirage Leisure and Development assisted with the planning—from architectural, interior, and landscaping design to specialist implementation involving decking and fireplace installation. Staff accommodation was the responsibility of a local community contractor. Where possible, other local businesses were engaged for additional work, as Beauchamp explained:

We tried to pair local contractors with some of the specialists from outside the community. For example, the stone mural behind the bar was created by a Johannesburg artist—there wasn’t that skill set locally. But we paired the artist with someone from the community who was interested in that type of work, and hope that there has been a transfer of skills as a result.

The structural work took longer than expected. The lodge was expected to open in December 2019, but delays had resulted from some of the specialist installations and from the site closing for a week due to the CPA insisting that the contractor had not hired enough local community members for construction and building work. In addition, the total overall cost for the renovations was higher than expected, particularly at the upmarket Abelana River Lodge.[[20]](#endnote-20) This cost included building work, installation, and soft furnishings, plus a sophisticated water filtration system. But Beauchamp and his team believed that the investment would be worthwhile in the long term, knowing that shortcuts could compromise the overall guest experience.

HIRING AND TRAINING COMMUNITY MEMBERS

To provide a five-star experience for guests, Beauchamp placed great importance on the quality, selection, and training of staff members. Working with the TA, Beauchamp reviewed hundreds of resumes and conducted 260 interviews to create a short list of qualified individuals for a variety of roles. Trackers, who were skilled at interpreting bush signs, were needed to provide support to field guides. Maintenance and lodge workers were required for a wide range of roles assisting with the lodge’s infrastructure, grounds, pool, bar, and kitchen. But the main industry in the area was mining and mining services, which meant that many community members had never before worked in the hospitality industry or had moved away. Beauchamp was unable to fill five tracker positions from the local community, although he did hire 52 people from the community to work on the reserve. Transport to the game reserve was provided for community hires, based on the industry standard two-week-on, two-week-off rotation. Game reserve workers were provided with meals and accommodation.

Thabiso Luthuli was hired as sous chef. Luthuli came from a different part of the country and spoke an African language different from the Mashishimale people, which made it a challenge to earn the trust of all community members employed in the lodge. His responsibility included training the six staff members who worked with him in the kitchen. Luthuli encountered a steep learning curve in his position for various reasons. Most staff members had limited kitchen experience, so he had to help them develop basic skills such as learning the difference between red and white onions, preparing vegetables, and cutting meat. Luthuli also felt that several community members had low self-esteem and were afraid to ask questions or admit mistakes. Patience was something that he focused on through the training—both to remain calm and to repeat instructions multiple times. “It has been wonderful to see how their confidence has grown,” Luthuli said, “and the quality of meals they are able to now produce.”

Several of the waiters echoed Luthuli’s pride in the success and growth of all staff, including their own, derived from training and experience working with guests after the lodge’s opening. As staff member Meisie Malesa reflected, “I used to shake when I took food orders, but now it is fine. I enjoy speaking with the guests. It is a great opportunity. You never know what will happen tomorrow.” Training waiters included teaching them to set a table, serve meals, pour wine, and understand both red and white wines. Training videos and YouTube resources were put to use during training, as Natalie Roberts, the acting lodge manager, explained: “It’s quite a challenge, training a staff member to work in a five-star lodge when that individual might not have been to a high end restaurant or lodge before.” As part of the training, staff were offered a glimpse of a guest’s typical experience by having dinner in the dining room and sleeping at the lodge, for example, or taking part in a game drive.

The process was intended to provide an understanding of industry standards. Regular feedback was part of the process of development. However, when the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the lodge to close in March 2020, shortly after its formal opening, all progress temporarily ceased. Guest visits did resume in August 2020, after the government relaxed lockdown restrictions in the hospitality industry for local guests.

FOCUSING ON AND SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESSES

In addition to hiring local community members, Beauchamp also realized that there was an opportunity to support local businesses. This was a specific focus for him, as he sought partnerships for the entire value chain of servicing guests. Bread was bought from the local bakery, and vegetables and eggs from the local vegetable shop. “But that shop does not have enough cucumbers and lettuce for us when we have more visitors to the lodge,” Beauchamp realized, so he helped local farmers extend their growing season and thus available produce by sourcing wind tunnels (i.e., unheated greenhouses) for farming. Laundry services was another requirement from local businesses to supplement the lodge’s laundry facilities.

When a local entrepreneur approached Beauchamp in the TA office about his interest in starting a waste recycling business, Beauchamp could not contribute funding but he did provide advice on setting up a business and promised a contract for waste management services. Before long, Beauchamp realized the entrepreneur would one day become the community’s next chief.

While exploring new partnerships, Beauchamp decided that Abelana should source its alcohol locally, even though bulk pricing from a major city inland would likely be lower. A local supplier would have the added benefit of assurance during peak periods, when someone would be there to help “make a plan, given the relationship that they would have.” Therefore, Beauchamp partnered with two women in the town of Haenertsburg, a one-hour drive from Abelana, who owned a new gin bottling business called Rhino Beetle Gin. One afternoon, Beauchamp organized a gin tasting outing for a select group of guests under one of the reserve’s large Sycamore fig trees. That event led to conversations with the gin producers about developing a proprietary line of gin with a hint of fig in it, which would be marketed and associated with Abelana.

However, many products could not be sourced locally. Whitebread tried but was unsuccessful in sourcing locally the specific type of feed she needed for her 15 Boerperd horses, which were known for their hardiness and suitability for riding in the bushveld. Most furnishings for the two lodges had to come from high-end retailers in Johannesburg. The lodge’s small souvenir or curio shop also sold items from suppliers located across the country.

CHANGING MINDSETS TO VALUE ECOTOURISM

Community members were appreciative of the employment opportunities provided by the game reserve. However, one challenge of ecotourism was getting locals to recognize the value that wildlife provided. Subsistence poaching, which referred to the illegal seizing of animals for food, had been a problem in the reserve in the past. Members of the maintenance team, who patrolled the fence line daily, often found snares near broken parts of the fence. These activities were likely carried out by members of the local community. “The problem with that,” Beauchamp reflected, “was not what was caught, but the snares that were left behind and the impact they could have for other animals.” For example, a giraffe was found with a snare on its foot, and getting a veterinary team to come out to the reserve to assist with the snare removal was very difficult and expensive. Therefore, the situation was constantly monitored by field guides.

Beauchamp was campaigning with the community policing forum, which included elders and some community farmers, to communicate the value of the game in the reserve. His goal was to inform the broader community about its value. He also established an anti-poaching team of 14 individuals who were rewarded R5 for finding snares, which was very successful, and R500 for information leading to the apprehension of poachers, which did not result in many poachers being caught. The anti-poaching team purposefully comprised Venda-speaking people, to avoid any collusion with the community.

There was also a need to change the mindset of some staff. For example, Martin Niemandt, the reserve manager who had worked on the reserve for 11 years, “needed to make a shift from managing a game farm to managing a game reserve,” as Beauchamp explained. Water sources had to be positioned differently, not just to provide for the animals but also to be aesthetically pleasing to guests. New roads also needed to be built to create more opportunities to search for animals and to redirect existing routes from driving in front of infrastructure. Beauchamp was pleased to report that “the game vehicle now pays for Martin [Niemandt]’s salary. It is a transition to think about what visitors with an ecotourism mindset would like to see and what sort of an experience we want to create.”

Part of the game reserve’s long-term plan included establishing an educational centre where students from the community could learn about the history of the land, flora, and fauna, which Napier was particularly excited about. Many staff members had never seen a wild animal until they came to work on the property. Napier and others were thrilled by the staff’s new appreciation and awareness. “Imagine the opportunity with children. If you catch a child early enough, you have the chance to create a conservation-minded person who will think differently about this piece of land that they will inherit,” stated Napier. He explained:

It is important that the children get to learn about the history of the farm. Also, children are an important source of anti-poaching information; they see and hear things, and if they have a positive mindset about conservation, they will not tolerate poaching from their community.

Napier also hoped that the educational centre would represent a future for the children on the land in terms of opportunities for employment and aspirations for skills development. This was something that Napier hoped to develop in conjunction with the chief, whom he had met for the first time earlier in the year. The land at Abelana also had historical significance for the community; there were areas where healers and diviners (known as *sangomas*) traditionally came to pray for rain and for areas considered sacred.

COLLABORATION AND HOPE

Philemon Shai, the spokesperson for the chief and a member of the royal family, acted as a liaison officer between the staff at Abelana and the chief. Shai spoke about changes seen in the community as a result of the new partnership. Although the community held a 50 per cent share in the hunting concession, fewer than 10 jobs were created, with limited value in terms of skills transfer or revenue to the community. “You could see money coming into the reserve for the hunting, but nothing going back to our people,” explained Shai. Shai reported that the chief was pleased with the quality of Abelana River Lodge. He also was pleased to find that community members who were employed there seemed to be developing contacts and friendships that translated into greater harmony among the community.

One concern among the community was the bulk of jobs in the area being primarily associated with mining from Chinese investments. Shai explained that many employees came from China, where food and supplies also originated, with little associated benefit for the Mashishimale community. He said that Abelana, on the other hand, “represented hope for the future.” Shai believed that funding from the lease and levies would be put back into school development to pay for sports facilities, equipment, school uniforms, and many other needs. Other initiatives, such as MTH Holdings donating clinical face masks to protect against the spread of the COVID-19 virus, were appreciated by the community. “The chief is happy,” stated Shai proudly, “and so am I.”

BROADER ECOSYSTEM FOCUS FOR THE FUTURE

Napier had a broad vision for the future of Abelana, which included conversations with the shareholders of Selati, a neighbouring 27,000 hectare private reserve located in Limpopo.[[21]](#endnote-21) According to Napier, Selati had managed to commercialize game breeding and hunting in the past and had thus been able to operate for 10 years without levying fees from shareholders or paying dividends to members. But all that had changed. Napier explained that breeding no longer provided the same level of income. For example, his own informal research found that a sable antelope that might have garnered up to R50,000 in the past would generate no more than R10,000 in the current market. According to Napier, Abelana’s neighbour had thus shifted its focus more toward ecotourism, which was closer to Abelana’s focus.

“So we have had discussions about dropping the fence line between Abelana and Selati to achieve a larger conservancy in total,” Napier said. The bigger the area, the fewer the fences and the more marketable the whole area would be for both Abelana and Selati. From the context of an ecological habitat, a greater free-roaming area for animals allowed for greater carrying capacity, which in turn allowed for more game. For example, if too many animals resided on one side, dropping the fence would provide a wider area for them to roam. The idea of dropping the fence, which was raised in a memorandum of understanding between the two reserves, was an indication of a shift from hunting to ecotourism, as Napier explained: “The world has changed and continues to change.” Napier believed that there was an increasing global consciousness toward protecting land and wildlife. This was an opportunity for tourism to embrace the rich resources of the land in South Africa. His vision was currently under discussion with the CPA, who still had unresolved land claims on certain properties nearby Selati. Although the CPA was considering the idea of dropping fences, nothing was confirmed yet.

A broader vision included collaboration with the World Wildlife Foundation, which ran the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project (BRREP). The black rhino was a rare and endangered species that had plummeted in number in South Africa from 100,000 in the 1960s to approximately 2,000.[[22]](#endnote-22) Abelana currently had only a few dehorned white rhino on its property, but no black rhino. The expansion program was intended to facilitate partnerships with landowners, whose habitat was suitable for black rhino, with the aim of creating new breeding populations.[[23]](#endnote-23) The team running the program visited Abelana and Selati to conduct an assessment. The study indicated that a specific number of black rhino[[24]](#endnote-24) could be relocated to the area if fences were removed between the two properties. This would give the rhinos sufficient area to roam and breed. Napier explained that the Mashishimale community would benefit directly from this arrangement because any progeny would be owned jointly by the community and the BRREP, if the animals were to be sold or relocated. According to Napier, a black rhino could be sold for R700,000 a few years earlier, which “could be a significant amount for the community in a few years’ time.”

But Napier’s vision did not just include dropping fences between Abelana and Selati. He believed that an opportunity for expansion existed that would benefit the general wildlife. If the two game reserves were able to become part of the Greater Kruger National Park[[25]](#endnote-25) by closing and rediverting part of the road network that currently existed, and by collaborating with other properties in the area, an additional 150,000 hectares of land could be incorporated, as Napier explained:

That would be meaningful for conservation. But that is a 20-year vision. There would have to be a mindset change for people in South Africa. We have this weird idea that wildlife has to be fenced in. Through the rest of Africa, that is not the case. Wildlife is free-roaming; people are kept in.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As Beauchamp sat on the lodge’s front deck overlooking the tranquil Selati River, he thought about the journey the management team and members of the community had been on over the previous two years. He believed that opportunities existed for Abelana to expand in various ways, including by running corporate programs with team and individual development. “How often does such an opportunity arise,” he wondered, “to experience the peace and quiet of the bush and to be at one with nature?” This sense of peace could be combined with individual and team-building training. Beauchamp believed that if these activities were undertaken in a “decluttered” environment, they could provide a renewed sense of purpose for teams. During their building phase, the lodges intentionally tried to create opportunities to be connected and have a “digital detox experience.” A strong Internet connection was intentionally provided only in the main sitting area, rather than in the individual rooms, so that guests could enjoy the noises and rhythms of the bush while sitting on their private verandas without the distraction of phones and email.

As he glanced at a movement behind a nearby tree, Beauchamp could see the giraffe that had broken the floor tile a little earlier. An Oxpecker bird was visible on its neck, picking at the ticks. He felt that this symbiotic relationship, in which trust was a critical element, represented the relationship of the management team with the community—each benefitting from the other. There would always be tension between earning revenue and investing more funds in the reserve’s infrastructure, staff training, and new employee recruitment. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic had come at a difficult time for the business, just after the formal opening of the game reserve and before some building costs could be fully paid off. But the management team had an ambitious and exciting overall vision. Was enough being done to train and develop current workers? Good service was easier to provide during times of low capacity, but would training and development challenges arise after the pandemic? Were the community’s challenges being clearly considered? How could Abelana help address them? To reflect Beauchamp’s slogan of “Added value to your land,” what other collaborations were needed that might ensure sustainability?

Endnotes

1. Apartheid was a policy or system of segregation or discrimination on grounds of race. It was adopted as a slogan in the national 1948 election, and the white regime maintained the system until relaxations started in February 1991, with the first free and fair election taking place in South Africa in 1994: “Apartheid,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed October 1, 2020, www.britannica.com/topic/apartheid. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Stephanus Esaias Terblanche, Joseph Benjamin Stevens, and Mpolaeng Gilbert Sekgota, “A Comparative Analysis of Two Land Reform Models: The Mashishimale Farm Management Model and the Nkumbuleni Strategic Partnership Model, South Africa,” *South African Journal of Agricultural Extension* 42, no. 2 (2014): 81–102. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “Deputy Minister Mr Lechesa Tsenoli to Hand Over Land to Ba Phalaborwa Ba Mashishimale,” South African Government, June 13, 2012, accessed September 25, 2020, www.gov.za/deputy-minister-mr-lechesa-tsenoli-hand-over-land-ba-phalaborwa-ba-mashishimale. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Terblanche, Stevens, Sekgota, op. cit. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid.; R = South African rand; US$1 = R16.62 on September 6, 2020; all currency amounts are in R unless otherwise specified. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. In South Africa, a chief was appointed through lineage and the individual had traditional authority over the people who lived in the area. The chief’s primary role was to regulate social behaviour within the community: “Chieftaincy and Kingship in South Africa,” South African History Online, August 27, 2019, accessed October 1, 2020, www.sahistory.org.za/article/chieftaincy-and-kingship-south-africa. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. “Deputy Minister Mr Lechesa Tsenoli to Hand Over Land to Ba Phalaborwa Ba Mashishimale,” op. cit. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. “Chieftaincy and Kingship in South Africa,” op. cit. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Terblanche, Stevens, Sekgota, op. cit. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. “Marakapula’s Makubu Lodge Masterpiece,” Sun Destinations, accessed October 1, 2020, www.sundestinations.co.za/blog/marakapulas-makubu-lodge-masterpiece. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. “Why MalaMala,” Mala Mala, accessed September 25, 2020, www.malamala.com/about/why-malamala. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The term “Wildtuin” was an Afrikaans word that meant game reserve or, literally, wild garden: “English Translation of the Afrikaans Word Wildtuin,” Afrikaans–English Dictionary, accessed March 5, 2021, www.majstro.com/dictionaries/Afrikaans-English/wildtuin. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Kruger National Park was a national park and one of the largest game reserves in Africa, covering an area of 19,500 kilometres (7,500 square miles) in the South African provinces of Limpopo and Mpumalanga: “Kruger National Park,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed March 5, 2021, www.britannica.com/place/Kruger-National-Park. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Time shares were a shared ownership model of vacation property where multiple owners had the exclusive use of a property for a specific period of time. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. A koppie was a small, often rocky, hill in a generally flat area. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. 40 degrees Celsius = 104 degrees Fahrenheit. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. “First Look at Limpopo’s Newest Safari Destination—Abelana Game Reserve,” *Luxuria Lifestyle International*, June 6, 2020, accessed March 5, 2021, www.luxurialifestyle.com/first-look-at-limpopos-newest-safari-destination-abelana-game-reserve. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. In South Africa, the lowveld was a name given to areas that lay at an elevation of between 150 and 600 metres (500–2,000 feet) above sea level. Climate in this area was typically mild with very hot summers and abundant sunshine from November to March: “Veld,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed March 5, 2021,www.britannica.com/science/veld#ref417815. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Lesley Stones, “All Smiles among People and Animals as Lodge Goes from Hunting to Eco-Tourism,” *Business Day,* September 16, 2020,accessed September 26, 2020, www.businesslive.co.za/bd/life/2020-09-16-all-smiles-among-people-and-animals-as-lodge-goes-from-hunting-to-eco-tourism. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. “Building a Lowveld Legacy,” Selati Game Reserve, accessed March 1, 2021, https://selatigamereserve.co.za. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. The black rhino population had plummeted from 100,000 in the 1960s to an approximated 2,000 in South Africa: “Black Rhino Range Expansion,” World Wildlife Foundation, accessed September 27, 2020, www.wwf.org.za/our\_work/initiatives/black\_rhino\_expansion.cfm. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. The specific numbers have been deliberately omitted from the case due to safety concerns. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. The Greater Kruger National Park referred to an area to the west of Kruger National Park comprised of multiple private nature reserves, which added the equivalent of 330,000 football pitches to the total size of the park: “The Greater Kruger National Park—the Importance of Large Ecosystem Conservation in Africa,” Greater Kruger National Park, blog, April 1, 2019, accessed March 5, 2021,www.conservationafrica.net/blog/the-greater-kruger-national-park-the-importance-of-large-ecosystem-conservation-in-africa. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)