

**ADDRESS FOR THE MEC FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM,
MR MICHAEL MABUYAKHULU, ON THE OCCASION OF THE LAUNCH
OF RHINO RIDGE SAFARI LODGE/MPEMBENI LODGE ADJACENT
TO THE HLUHLUWE-IMFOLOZI GAME RESERVE ON 15 APRIL 2014**

Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Globally, the tourism sector has shown itself to be a key economic driver, capable of stimulating regional growth and development, while also having the undoubted capacity to create new employment opportunities.

Critically, this is especially true of today's emerging economies, inclusive of South Africa.

Within the South African context, we, in KwaZulu-Natal are privileged to profit from the benefits of a vibrant tourism industry and have long enjoyed being the leading domestic tourist destination in this country. Such status is a direct consequence of the enduring strength and diversity of the tourism industry in our Province.

Ours is a destination offering an exceptional array of attractions and experiences, all off-set by our idyllic year-round climate. Importantly, our marketing efforts are paying dividends and South Africa's - arguably - best kept destination secret is also now becoming ever more widely known as a 'must-see-must-visit' location amongst African and international travellers.

However, this is not enough. We must not permit any degree of complacency to cloud the bigger KwaZulu-Natal tourism picture.

Yes, it is true that we have distinct competitive tourism advantages over the rest of South Africa... yes, we do have wonderful weather for year-round holidaying here and an amazing diversity of attractions, and... yes, this is a sector which has shown the most resilience in the face of the 2008/09 global economic crisis, ensuing depression and subsequent sluggish recovery.

It is for these very reasons, however, that we can - and must - intensify our every effort to grow this business sector in KwaZulu-Natal, establishing through it a really meaningful contribution to Provincial economic growth, employment creation and poverty eradication.

In supporting the advancement of this sector - and, by association, Provincial economic growth - the combined and co-operative role of Government, the private sector and, importantly, the community, is essential to creating an ever more competitive environment in which tourism will flourish.

We believe implicitly that within our Provincial tourism sector a need exists for our joint and active promotion of responsibility towards the environment - through its sustainable use - responsibility for the safety and security of our visitors - through vigilance and action to reduce crime - and responsibility for the involvement of local communities in the tourism industry.

In this regard, it is worth noting that tourism activities in KwaZulu-Natal generally occur within communities. However, it is a fact that communities acting alone commonly lack structure and, as a consequence, are often unable to realise the full benefits associated with the numerous opportunities proffered by this lucrative industry sector.

Equally, it is my experience that the continued conservation of the wilds of KwaZulu-Natal, which comprise our natural heritage, is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve without the support of and involvement by members of our community groups across the length and breadth of the Province.

It is only by Government, the private sector and communities coming to recognise the need to join hands that we will make a meaningful impact on effectively conserving the natural areas of KwaZulu-Natal for the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen, tourism development is one of a number of economic growth strategies available to communities.

Many will consider it. A number will discard the ideal. But some will seize upon the prospect of full participation in our economy as tourism role-players and demonstrate very real potential for expanded involvement in the industry.

Community-owned or managed tourism business enterprises are capable of playing a telling role in the re-distribution of wealth and the effective promotion of economic development in areas where this would not otherwise occur. Such enterprises also have the capacity to be sources of employment, transforming limited prospects into solid opportunities.

The launch here today of the R23 million Rhino Ridge Safari Lodge/Mpembeni Lodge is an exceptional example of just such community involvement and commitment.

Here we have a community which has given due consideration to involvement in the tourism sector, a community which has seen the potential and a community which has shown its willingness to roll-up its collective sleeves and become active participants and partners in our tourism sector. This is a community which has looked to strategic partnerships and embraced the principle so as to ensure their efforts to enter the tourism market were not conducted in isolation.

The 22 000-strong community within the Mpembeni Tribal Authority has recognised the potential tourism offers, it has recognised the economic opportunities involvement in this sector would afford its members, and it has recognised that to be a success in this highly competitive sector will demand hard work, commitment and a dedication to continuously deliver world-class service - simply because this is the expectation national and international visitors will have of a top lodge.

The Mpembeni Tribal Authority community and, especially, Nkosi Daniel Hlabisa, together with Durban developer and joint owner, Mr Henry Frencken, are to be roundly congratulated for transforming the dream into reality; a reality with a very real future in conservation and tourism promotion. The strength of this enterprise lies in the fact that it carries with it the backing and support of our own Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife.

Ideally positioned on the boundary of Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park, KwaZulu-Natal's foremost game reserve and the oldest in Africa, the potential of this venture is simply quite limitless.

The launch today of this new game lodge and reserve - with the medium-term possibility of synthesis and union with the massive 96 000 hectare neighbouring Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park - is an historic milestone.

Once complete, this development, as one of the first business enterprises of its kind in the immediate region, will play a significant role in increasing and widening the economic benefits of

tourism in the area and will contribute towards the Provincial goal of increasing tourism's geographic spread, while - most significantly - fostering transformation within the sector.

We, of the Provincial Government of KwaZulu-Natal, are endeavouring to create in this Province an operating environment within the tourism sector which is conducive to the increased attraction and inclusion of the historically disadvantaged.

In Rhino Ridge Safari Lodge/Mpembeni Lodge we have a project which has both attracted and included the historically disadvantaged, providing for ownership, job creation, income generation and the potential for stimulating additional Small, Medium and Micro Enterprise development, while serving tourists from near and far seeking to view game, including our Big 5 and both the Black and White Rhino.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am aware that the site we see today is poised for change, with the establishment of a large four-star tourism lodge, complete with conference facilities, pool and spa amongst other trappings designed to entice discerning tourists into the wild.

This project is set to deliver to KwaZulu-Natal's tourism mix a top-flight community-based wildlife experience, with an authentic Zulu cultural atmosphere and truly African ambience.

I am sure I echo the thoughts of all of us here when I say that I greatly look forward to the day, in the not too distant future, when this lodge is fully complete and operational. I look forward immensely to the day unity with your older next-door neighbour is achieved and the fence dividing the game is removed.

That day, in my opinion, will herald the true beginning of a community-based tourism business which truly epitomises just how tourism development, with community involvement, should be undertaken in the interests of economic growth, community upliftment, employment creation, transformation and empowerment and, of course, co-operation.

Rhino Ridge Safari Lodge/Mpembeni Lodge already has the makings of a shining case-study for community-based tourism development and I must, therefore, take this opportunity to congratulate all those who have played a part in bringing this project to today's launch-pad. With such due diligence accorded to doing the job properly and to ensuring the close co-operation of a host of interested parties, I am confident that the future for Rhino Ridge Safari Lodge/Mpembeni Lodge and all those directly and indirectly involved in the business will be extremely bright.

This is an outstanding development project, led by a group of quite remarkable people and in launching Rhino Ridge Safari Lodge/Mpembeni Lodge today, I am pleased to welcome you all as fully-fledged KwaZulu-Natal role-players and participants in our Provincial economy.

I wish you and your business venture here in the wilds of Zululand every success as you move now into the construction phase and then into business operations.

Thank you.