

SATSA MEMBER PROFILE – published in the Tourism Tattler July 2007.

Storms River Adventures — growing niche tourism on the wilder side

Stormsriver Adventures was founded in 1998 in the rural village of Stormsriver in the heart of the Tsitsikamma, in the eastern part of the Western Cape. Tsitsikamma is a rural area with pristine natural beauty including indigenous state forests, mountains, fynbos and a spectacular rugged coast. Founder Ashley Wentworth felt at the time that there was potential to develop unique eco-adventure activities on a sustainable basis with a two-fold objective, namely, to protect the environment and to embrace the local community and introduce them to eco- adventure tourism.

Ashley says that consultation with all the role players, the community, Forestry, SanParks and the then sibling Tourism Forum was very positive towards his vision, and at this point in July 1998 he formulated the company's ethos statement, defined as The Ten Point Commitment Statement, which still today drives their principles. This Commitment Statement is fundamental to the principles of Responsible Tourism and was adhered to long before the formulation of guide lines for Responsible Tourism were formally presented by the DTI.

Stormsriver Adventures started recruiting and training their first community members in 1998 and to date have trained, developed and qualified in excess of 650 people from the local community in various facets of Responsible Eco Adventure Tourism. Many of these staff have moved on and progressed to take on senior guiding, operations, managerial and administrative posts in the industry. Some have gone on to positions in Dubai, USA and other European countries.

A strong core of our trainees have progressed to become senior managers and directors of Stormsriver Adventures, which has become a training and development ground, particularly for the youth, teaching them life skills. Since 1998, more than R1.8 million has been invested in training alone , mostly self-funded by way of bank loans.

Ashley was the founder member of Stormsriver Adventures. The company is now run by a small Board of Directors, all of whom have moved through the ranks. Forty per cent of the Board is women, and our Administration Director is a young Xhosa woman, Regina Majola, who started with the company in 1999. The company's equity plan makes provision for the advancement of black women, who make up 58% of the total staff compliment. This is particularly significant in the adventure industry which is traditionally male dominated.

The company has grown significantly, having started in 1999 with 2000 clients, and now catering to upwards of 36000 clients every year. The staff complement has grown from just four in 1998 to 40 in 2007.

Community development

More importantly, the community-based small business development initiative started in 2000 supports a Catering Company that has a staff of 10 women supplying all meals to Stormsriver Adventures guests; a DVD company contracted in to supply action footage to clients employing eight community members, and a Backpackers', running independently, but supported by SRA, employing five community members. So 22 additional people are thus gainfully employed supplying goods and services to us.

Awards

Over the years Storms River Adventures has garnered a number of prestigious awards, some of which we list below.

Imvelo Responsible Tourism: 2003 Finalist Best Economic Impact and Finalist Most Improved. 2004 Winner Best Practice, Finalist Best Social Involvement, Finalist Best Practice Social Involvement, Economic Impact, Environmental Management.

Proudly South African: 2007 Company of the Year Winner SMME, winner CSI corporate social investment

Accreditations: Fair Trade accredited in 2002 as the first Eco-Adventure Company to attain this in the world.

Experiences offered

These include the now world-renowned Tsitsikamma Canopy Tour, a three-hour aerial tour of the indigenous forest over 10 tree stations, 15 to 30 meters up in giant yellowwood trees many of which are 600 years old. The Canopy Tour is possibly the most unique activity, and the most exciting.

The Woodcutters Journey, an interactive land-based forest tour on a specially designed 4x4 unit down the old Storms River Pass, through the pristine indigenous forest, culminating with a lunch on the banks of the Storms River.

A team building facility defined as high ropes/low ropes, with 13 different challenges. Guided Forest hikes.

All activities are hosted and conducted by professional community guides.

Setbacks

No adventure company that really offers adventurous activities can hope to avoid accidents entirely, and they had an unfortunate tubing accident on March 25th 2000. However, the company was totally exonerated from blame in the judicial enquiry. It was a shock to all of us, and experience from which, hopefully we all learned, and from

which we have recovered.

External community projects

These include a School Feeding Scheme, whereby 185 primary school kids receive three meals per week from SRA.

An Animal Welfare and Education initiative which includes education of kids; the dipping of 130 dogs three times a year; a sterilisation programme, in which 100 animals were sterilised as a free service to the community; the supply of dog and cat food to the really needy, and assisting with animal trauma cases with the assistance of two local vets[50 trauma cases a year are dealt with]. They also sponsor two free sterilisations per month, and treat 20 dogs per month for mange.

1200 needy kids are treated free to our adventures each year.

Clothing is collected and distributed to the poorest of the poor.

There is an HIV Aids outreach programme offering support, counseling and educating is a new initiative driven by our staff to tackle the pandemic in our community. Two hundred Aids orphans are also entertained free on our excursions every year.

Supporting and sponsoring the local crèche by way of books etc.

Supporting and sponsoring local environmental awareness programmes.

Mentorship of a township Bed and Breakfast establishment by assisting with marketing and product development.

Development of local crafters and providing a sales outlet for their crafts

R4.5 million of our turnover is ploughed back into the community by way of salaries wages , local outsourcing and purchasing and community projects. This represents approximately 60 % of our total pre-tax turnover.

Ashley Wentworth

Ashley was born in 1952, and grew up in the then rural village of Irene, obtaining a formal qualification in agriculture. He was in the Pharmaceutical Industry for 28 years in various marketing and sales management positions with ethical multinational companies, where he gleaned extensive marketing experience and was also involved in training and development. He also had the opportunity to travel extensively to Europe with multinationals. Ashley then spent two and a half years in the computer industry, as Marketing Director for a software company.

Ashley left industry in 1998 to move from Cape Town to Stormsrivier village with the vision of making a tangible difference to the community's lives by way of poverty alleviation. He was particularly interested in developing youngsters. He took the very brave step of selling up everything at the age of 46 and established SRA with very limited capital.

Vision for the future

Ashley's vision is to extend this model to other rural areas. He has already made progress in this direction with Magaliesberg and Karkloof Canopy Tours now operating as independent companies, both of which have created new sustainable job

opportunities for communities in these respective areas. A further three Canopy Tours are now in the pipeline. All will operate on the same principles as SRA involving communities.

Tourism stars

Ashley has two staff members in particular of whom he is very proud. They have been with him from the beginning.

Stanford Skosana started work as a gardener in 1998, and is now Operations Manager and Senior Training Officer.

Regina Majola started as a boat ticket sales lady, and has progressed to become Administration Director.