

# *Of Mountains and Money*

## *Bergwatch and threats to the Drakensberg*

The wild splendour of the Drakensberg is under constant threat from a variety of sources. The primary threats come from two opposite ends of the economic scale — poverty-stricken subsistence farmers attempting to eke out a living on the sparsely vegetated and fragile slopes, and avaricious developers attempting to cater for ever-growing demands of the national and latterly international tourist trade. Environmental degradation from poor farming methods is far more obvious to the untrained eye than the damage caused by extensive hotel, resort and timeshare development.

Scarred mountainsides are often the result of decades of overgrazing, particularly by goats. But poor farming methods are not the only cause of soil erosion. Poor road design and overuse of sensitive areas by hikers, horses or motor vehicles, are also contributory factors. Even the destruction of wetlands by the damming of small mountain streams may lead to excessive run-off and thereby contribute to soil erosion.

Resort development inevitably increases pressure on the water resources, firstly by increasing demand and secondly by pollution. It also tends to impair the scenic beauty and to threaten the wilderness nature of the Drakensberg.

With all these factors already becoming apparent, a bold policy statement on development in the Drakensberg was published seventeen years ago, aimed at channelling future development to appropriate zones in order to ensure protection of the vital water-producing areas and other valuable natural resources.<sup>1</sup>

The Drakensberg Policy Statement divided the Drakensberg into four zones: the Wilderness Heart, the Landslide Zone, the Trail Zone and the Drakensberg Threshold.<sup>2</sup>

There is little dispute that the Wilderness Heart and the Landslide Zone should be strictly protected and accommodation limited to caves, tents and mountain huts. The dispute between environmentalists and developers centres on the lower-lying and least ecologically fragile Trail Zone and Drakensberg Threshold, which together are known as the Drakensberg Approaches. According to the 1976 Policy Statement, the approaches to the Drakensberg should be used primarily for agriculture and forestry. The rainfall is high, and this area should also be a source of clean water in the rivers. Recreation should be an important secondary activity where it is compatible with the primary uses. Preservation of the scenic quality of the area should influence the location and appearance of all roads, buildings and other structures.<sup>3</sup> The document recommends that within the Threshold Zone there will be planned recreational development within certain 'pockets'.

The document specifically requires that the *optimum carrying capacity* of each 'pocket' for visitors must be determined through further scientific research.<sup>4</sup>

The document recommends that any tendency towards the development of further permanent residential townships should be resisted — these belong in the established villages like Bergville, Himeville and Underberg.<sup>5</sup>

In 1990 a second major document was published<sup>6</sup>. 'The Drakensberg Approaches Policy' introduced the concept of *high intensity development* areas within three nodes of the Drakensberg Approaches, and pinpointed these as *Babangibone* in the north, *Garden Castle* in the south and *Cathkin* in the Central Drakensberg.

Not only was the concept of high intensity development introduced, but the nodes are not strictly limited to the less sensitive Drakensberg Approaches and edge into the Landslide Zone at various points.

The distinction between *optimum carrying capacity* as envisaged in the 1976 Policy Statement and *high intensity development* as envisaged in the 1990 Approaches Policy, together with the failure of the planners to establish parameters for determining optimum carrying capacity, has meant that nobody has known when to put the brakes on development.

The carrying capacity of the Garden Castle and Babangibone nodes is examined in a report by Willem van Riet.<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of the study, the availability of water was deemed to be the most important limiting factor when probing the ecological carrying capacity of an area.<sup>8</sup>

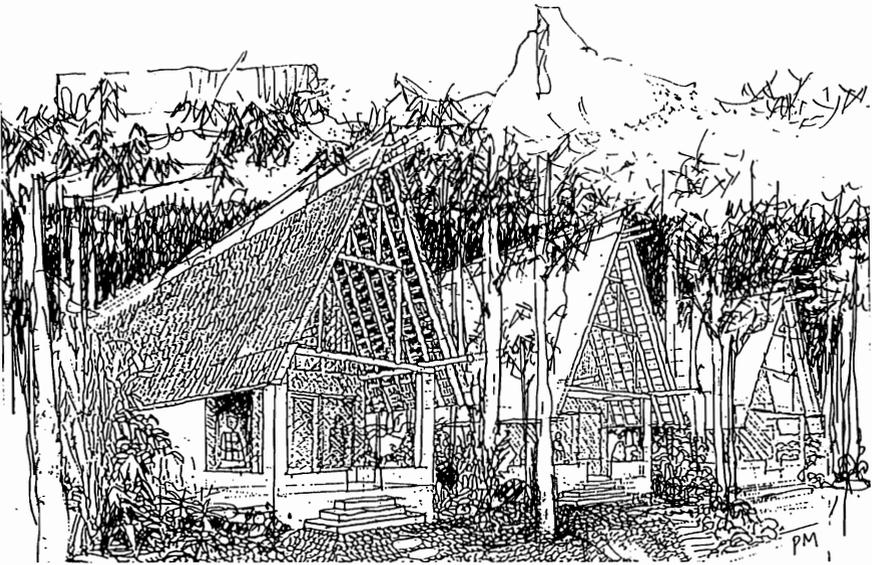
Specifically, Van Riet noted that no provision had yet been made for a hydrological study of the Garden Castle node. Consequently, findings pertaining to the recreational carrying capacity of Garden Castle were incomplete.<sup>9</sup> In respect of Babangibone, he tentatively proposed a total carrying capacity of 760 people.

But even there the report is not conclusive: 'The determination of a definite carrying capacity remains elusive and is further complicated in this case by variables such as bed occupancy levels, and seasonal fluctuations in patronage. A range of carrying capacities has been determined based on physical site constraints and building norms, a deductive aesthetic norm and the ecologically based and pragmatic limiting factor of water supply and demand. The lowest ecologically based carrying capacity could be increased with the construction of water storage dams by the individual developers.'

In the Babangibone node, four privately owned tourist enterprises already exist: Little Switzerland Hotel and Timeshare, The Cavern, Hlahlanati Resort and Karos Mont aux Sources Hotel and Timeshare. In other words, Babangibone, the least developed of the three nodes, has apparently reached its ecological carrying capacity already. One wonders whether hydrological studies of Cathkin or Garden Castle will reveal that they too have already exhausted their carrying capacity.

At this stage we are still talking only of water. The optimum carrying capacity of the Drakensberg Approaches could well take into consideration the wilderness aspect of the mountain range as a whole.

The importance of wilderness cannot be ignored. The time has come, with the brutalising pressure of a spreading metropolitan civilization, to recognise wilderness environment as a human need rather than a luxury and plaything, says noted conservationist Ian Player. Furthermore, he says, it should be considered a public utility and therefore its commercialisation should not be tolerated. With this in mind, the question arises whether optimum carrying



Suggested appropriate accommodation for the Berg region.

(Illustration: Bergwatch)

capacity is a concept that can be calculated on the basis of scientific data alone, or whether the optimum carrying capacity of the Drakensberg development nodes should properly be determined only after extensive public debate.<sup>10</sup>

The policy statements are used as a guide by the authorities in deciding whether to approve or disapprove a proposed development. Section 11 of the Town Planning Ordinance<sup>11</sup> requires a potential developer to submit a Need and Desirability application in respect of land that is not subject to the provisions of a town planning scheme. Such application is considered by the Premier of Natal on the advice of the Town and Regional Planning Commission. Where a town planning scheme exists or is in the process of preparation, the potential developer usually has to make application for the rezoning of his property, in terms of Section 47*bis* of the Ordinance. Although the initial application for rezoning is heard by the local authority, any aggrieved party may appeal to the Town and Regional Planning Commission against the decision. The final say therefore remains with the Commission.

But where does the authority of the 1990 Approaches Policy stem from? The two policy statements were developed at the instance of the Town and Regional Planning Commission. The 1976 document became planning policy at the time when Natal still had a Provincial Council, so it may be assumed that it had the tacit if not express support of the elected representatives of the white voters.

The status of the 1990 document is more questionable. During the early 1980s the Town and Regional Planning Commission established the Drakens-

berg Working Group to advise the Commission on policy for the long-term conservation of the Drakensberg and development proposals for ecotourism in the Drakensberg Approaches. Represented on the Working Group were various state and quasi-government organisation or departments, such as the Department of Agriculture, the Natal Parks Board, the Physical Planning Directorate and the Department of Forestry (prior to the transfer of State forests to the Natal Parks Board). KwaZulu was later represented on the Working Group.

The 1990 document was approved by this Working Group, with no direct public participation or support. By that time, the direct accountability of the planners to Natal's white electorate had disappeared with the demise of the Natal Provincial Council in 1986.

A further problem associated with the conservation/development debate in the Drakensberg is that the Drakensberg does not fall under one planning authority. Most of the higher reaches (the Drakensberg Park) fall under the control of the Natal Parks Board. Lesotho and QwaQwa control vast areas of wilderness. Large areas of subsistence farming fell under the KwaZulu Government until 27 April 1994 when all land formerly under its control was placed under the direct control of the Zulu King.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the Thukela Joint Services Board claims to be the lawful planning authority for the Northern Berg. The Department of Agriculture has the final say over agricultural land.

Laws that are applicable to the Drakensberg include the Physical Planning Act, the Conservation of Agricultural Resources Act, the Subdivision of Land Act, the Water Act, the Environment Conservation Act, the Mountain Catchment Areas Act, the National Roads Act, the Nature Conservation Ordinance and the Town Planning Ordinance.

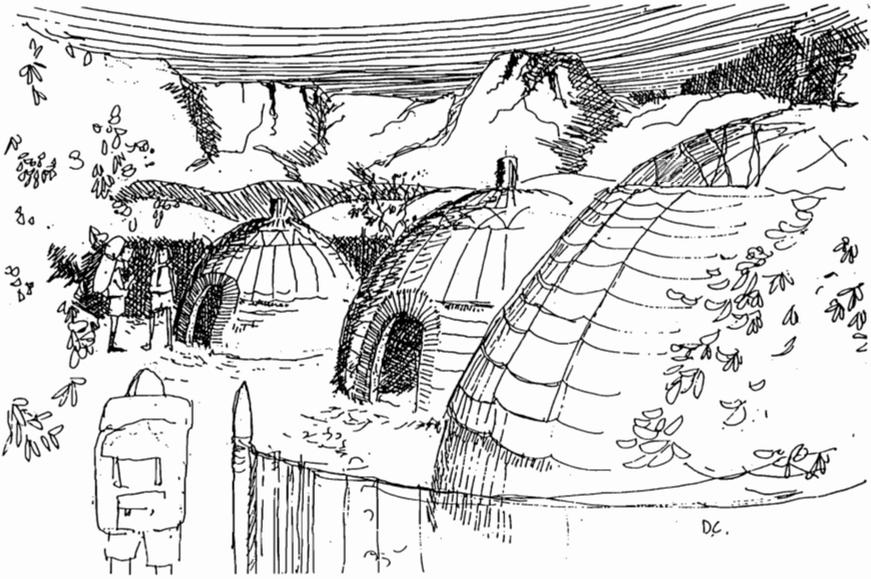
The Natal Town and Regional Planning Commission can therefore operate only to a limited degree in planning and controlling development. Consequently it is not surprising that the planning of the Drakensberg is not always what it should be. For many visitors to the Drakensberg, the plethora of resort and timeshare developments in the Cathkin area is the most striking display of unsatisfactory planning.

Alerted by developments beginning to mushroom at Cathkin, a coalition of individuals and environmental groups formed under the banner of Bergwatch in 1991 to promote the preservation of the Drakensberg. The organisations in the coalition include the Wildlife Society of South Africa, the Wilderness Leadership School, Earthlife Africa, the Drakensberg Resorts Association and the Central Drakensberg Association.

In 1992 Bergwatch presented the Town and Regional Planning Commission with detailed recommendations regarding the two policy statements, and Bergwatch was invited to serve on the Drakensberg Working Group the same year.<sup>13</sup>

The essence of Bergwatch's proposals is that the development nodes should be situated further away from the Drakensberg, thereby reducing pressure on the water resources and the wilderness aspect. Pending a re-evaluation of planning policy, Bergwatch has consistently called for a moratorium on all future development in the Drakensberg, and emphasised the need for a single Drakensberg Authority to promote holistic planning.

The Bergwatch proposals are in summary that the boundaries of the development nodes should be extended further to the south-east and all new



Suggested traditional style accommodation structures.

(Illustration: Bergwatch)

luxury developments should occur there — outside the existing boundaries of the nodes.

Bergwatch proposes that the present threshold zone should be re-designated as a rural or 'buffer' zone allowing for the following activities:

1. Communal grazing for indigenous farmers;
2. Rural-style development which would include upgrading of existing buildings where practicable as well as guest-houses, tented camps, camp sites and Natal Parks Board-type cottages;
3. Farming activities and encouraging the biosphere concept;
4. Wilderness-reliant activities such as photography, hiking, camping, fishing, bird-watching and riding.

Since the formation of Bergwatch, there have been no formal changes in official planning policy on the Drakensberg, but the Commission has briefed a private firm of town planners to prepare controls for the Drakensberg nodes.<sup>14</sup>

The key issues identified by the Commission are: waste disposal, aesthetic control, development intensity, layout and design, recreation provision, environmental management, legislative considerations, economic aspects and administrative considerations.

The last of these issues is perhaps the most important of all, given the changing political situation in South Africa. The brief points out that the

multiplicity of administrative bodies presently undermines effective co-ordination, implementation and monitoring of control measures, and states that it is necessary to investigate an alternative form of administration that would facilitate rather than hinder this.

'The effectiveness of an overarching administrative body along the same lines as the Tennessee Valley Authority should be compared to (a) the adoption and commitment to an intergrated environmental management philosphy by the existing administrative bodies and (b) encouraging local initiative. An appropriate and effective administrative structure in the Drakensberg should be assessed in terms of its accountability, acceptibility and its ability to implement, monitor and review development in the Drakensberg on an ongoing basis.'

The Drakensberg Working Group at the instance of Bergwatch has recommended to the Town and Regional Planning Commission that a conservative approach to all future applications by developers should be adopted, on the basis that any new development at this stage will irreversibly limit the planning options for the future.

Nevertheless, developers are not sitting idle. There are plans to build a cable-car to the top of the Amphitheatre, and to have regular helicopter flights to the top of Mont-aux-Sources. Illegal developments at Little Switzerland were given approval retrospectively; and illegal developments on a farm near Little Switzerland were halted only by the intervention of Bergwatch. Their future still hangs in the balance.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP),<sup>15</sup> the Bill of Rights<sup>16</sup> and the creation of a Government of National Unity after the elections of 27 April 1994 suggest that a new spirit is in the air. Environmental rights are entrenched in the Constitution. Article 29 reads: 'Every person shall have the right to an environment which is not detrimental to his or her health or well-being.' Article 23 reads: 'Every person shall have the right of access to all information held by the state or any of its organs at any level of government in so far as such information is required for the exercise or protection of any of his or her rights.'

The RDP expands on these basic rights, promotes community participation in decision-making, requires compulsory environmental impact assessments for all large-scale projects, and demands the establishment of an environmental ombudsman.

Anyone who cares about the Drakensberg now has the means to do something about its conservation. It will no longer be an excuse to complain that the developers are too powerful and that big money will always defeat the interests of the environment.

## REFERENCES

1. A. J. Phelan, 'Drakensberg Policy Statement' (Town and Regional Planning Commission, 1976).
2. *Ibid.* p. 9.
3. *Ibid.* p. 17.
4. *Ibid.* p. 19.
5. *Ibid.* p. 19.
6. B. F. Martin, 'Drakensberg Approaches Policy' (Town and Regional Planning Commission, 1990).
7. W. Van Riet, 'Development Control Scheme for the Natal Drakensberg Babangibone Development Node; (Town and Regional Planning Commission, 1992).
8. *Ibid.* p. 28.

9. Ibid. p. 80.
10. Ian Player and Jim Feeley, 'Fundamentals of the Wilderness Concept.' (Unpublished adaptation from 'Wildlife Management' by Trippersee, an American publication).
11. Natal Town Planning Ordinance No. 27 of 1949 as amended.
12. KwaZulu Ingonyama Trust Act No. 3 of 1994.
13. 'Bergwatch Recommendations Regarding Existing Drakensberg Policy Statements' (Unpublished, 1992).
14. H. Epstein, 'Project Brief for the Preparation of Development Controls for Drakensberg Nodes' (Physical Planning Directorate, Natal Provincial Administration ref. R2.8.5/R7.3.9 (D) 17/2/3/8, October 1992).
15. The Reconstruction and Development Programme (African National Congress, 1994).
16. Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act No. 200 of 1993, Chapter 3.

JON WHITE