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Municipal caravan parks in South Africa: geography, management and planning

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Abstract. Caravan parks are a largely overlooked theme in tourism scholarship. In South Africa, as in several other countries, local governments assumed an historical role in the establishment of caravan parks. Municipal caravan parks are assets which could be leveraged for tourism growth and local development. The planning and management of caravan parks in South Africa can be understood as an element of asset management by local governments. It is shown that across most of South Africa municipal ownership of caravan parks is of declining significance as compared to the dominance of privately owned parks. The coastal province of the Western Cape is the biggest focus for caravanning and for the location of all caravan parks, including for the largest cluster of municipal owned caravan parks in South Africa. Research interviews were conducted with local stakeholders concerning contemporary planning and management of caravan parks. The results reveal that most local municipalities currently are struggling to manage appropriately and optimally maximise for local development the operations of municipal caravan parks. Many municipalities are considering different options for privatisation through selling off or leasing parks to private sector investors.

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1. Introduction

In most countries central and local governments own or control significant amounts of assets which can exist in multiple different forms (Kaganova and McKellar, 2006; Kaganova, 2010; Wojewnik-Filipkowska, 2018). The assets of municipal governments vary and would include non-physical assets or financial assets as well as a basket of physical, tangible or ‘immovable assets’ in the form of property holdings, infrastructure and even of an array of assets of cultural, historic or environmental significance (Kaganova, 2010; Kaganova and Kopanyi, 2014). During the past decade the management of government assets has come into sharp focus both conceptually and in practice, most especially as a result of the 2008 global financial crisis which compelled local governments to re-examine and re-assess their performance in relation to a search for new revenue sources (Giglio et al., 2018; Kaganova and Telgarsky, 2018; Kaganova and Kaw, 2020). Arguably, the assets of municipal governments represent vitally important foundations for energising local economic development (Kaganova and Kopanyi, 2014) and broader-based place-based planning interventions (Rogerson, 2014; Duranton and Venables, 2019). Improved asset management and planning for local development is thus a critical and vibrant focus for scholarly enquiry (Wojewnik-Filipkowska, 2018). Currently, the richest debates surrounding asset management practices are occurring in the global North (Kaganova and Nayyar-Stone, 2000; Kaganova and Telgarsky, 2018; Kaganova and Kaw, 2020). Phelps (2011: 416) asserts that “Australia, New Zealand and the UK are perceived to be the most advanced driven by strong national governments”. Eastern Europe and Russia are also emerging arenas for policy research work around asset management (Kaganova and McKellar, 2006; Phelps, 2011). Kaganova and Kopanyi (2014: 281) observe that the importance of managing local gov-

ernment assets “is just emerging in most developing countries”.

Within the global South one country where municipal asset management attracts some attention is South Africa. The relevance of asset management in South Africa derives from two major sources. First, is that in terms of the Constitution, local governments in South Africa are mandated to support local economic development futures (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2012). As Venter (2020) stresses among the responsibilities of municipal government are to deliver equitable and efficient services, build local democracy and promote economic and social development. Second, South Africa’s national government has enacted a framework for immovable asset management which aligns asset management with the core objectives of local government for service delivery and economic development (Department of Public Works, 2005; Buys and Mavasa, 2007). Historically, it was observed that “immovable asset management practices in government resulted in immovable assets slipping into disrepair due to improper funding and maintenance” (Department of Public Works, 2005: 2). It is argued therefore that improved immovable asset management processes and principles “can play an important role in attaining government’s objectives of economic growth and employment creation” (Buys and Mavasa, 2007: 82). Among the objectives of the national Immovable Asset-Management policy are those of supporting government’s socio-economic objectives including those for economic empowerment, job creation and poverty reduction, increasing opportunities for partnering with the private sector so as to realise additional returns from immovable assets and “protecting the environment and our diverse cultural and historic heritage, conservation and especially heritage sites” (Department of Public Works, 2005: 5).

Emerging international debates on asset management in local governments are highly relevant for tourism studies as many local assets can be vehicles for boosting tourism growth and destination devel-

opment (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020a). Among others Davidson and Maitland (1997) show that for tourism to be a lead sector in local development the local tourism asset base must be maximised whether around assets of natural beauty, heritage or wildlife. Partnerships with and the engagement of the private sector and of local entrepreneurs are vital in this regard. The role of local government can be critical, however, for sustainable tourism development. Indeed, arguably “local governments are often best placed to support tourism development within a destination due to their local knowledge; something that is often lacking in distant capital cities and among leaders who are less familiar with regional cultures and local conditions” (Ruhanen, 2013: 82). In the case of South Africa Nel and Rogerson (2016) show that tourism is the most widely targeted sector across all the country’s local governments for driving local economic development futures. Tourism promotion is especially significant as a local economic development intervention for many South African small towns (Donaldson and Marais, 2012; Houghton et al., 2013; McEwan, 2013; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2014; Van der Merwe, 2014; Rogerson and Harmer, 2015; Harmer and Rogerson, 2016, 2017; Donaldson, 2018; Kontsiwe and Visser, 2019; Lawrence and Rogerson, 2019; Rogerson, 2019; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2019a).

Despite the imperative for appropriate management of assets linked to tourism the limited available research suggests that the recent record of municipalities in South Africa is unimpressive with regards to impacts on local development (Rogerson, 2020; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020a). In East London, the heart of Buffalo City one of South Africa’s eight metropolitan areas, it was concluded that the municipality was “not fully capitalizing on immovable municipal assets to develop, grow and promote tourism” (Dlomo and Tseane-Gumbi, 2017: 1). Among several challenges was the fact that the responsibility for managing the assets was spread across different departments in the city administration such that the tourism department struggled “to convince those managing the assets to understand the importance of using immovable assets for tourism purposes” (Dlomo and Tseane-Gumbi, 2017: 7). With lack of knowledge of the potential significance of such assets as well as limited budgetary allocations for tourism the city’s many immova-

ble assets were underutilised for tourism purposes and in many cases were neglected or inadequately maintained. In the Western Cape resort town of Hermanus similar disappointing results were revealed (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020a). At one of South Africa’s most tourism-dependent small towns it was concluded that the municipality’s basket of assets for tourism were under-performing and that an historical review shows a number of missed opportunities to maximise the potential of these assets. In addition, the Hermanus study pointed to constraints from the fact that important assets for tourism development in the municipality were controlled by provincial authorities or parastatal organisations which the local authority either was unable to influence or was in conflict with concerning asset development (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020a).

Against the above background the aim in this paper is to examine the challenges of planning and managing one particular form of tourism asset which is in direct municipal ownership in several countries including Australia, New Zealand as well as South Africa. In a recent investigation of municipal assets available for tourism development in South Africa it was shown that alongside nature reserves, museums and heritage sites, harbours, beaches and botanical gardens, caravan parks were among the most common municipal asset (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2019b). The specific focus is on caravan parks, their role as municipal assets and the planning challenges for local tourism development in South Africa. Caravan parks form a constituent part of the broader categories of camping tourism or outdoor hospitality and recreation (Brooker and Joppe, 2013, 2014). As pointed out by Lashley (2015: 115), however, unlike other campers caravanners “combine mobility with accommodation that incorporates many of the tangible comforts of home”. Prideaux and McClymont (2006: 45-46) define the activity of caravanning “as a subset of tourism where the main form of accommodation used during the trip is a caravan”. Lashley (2015: 122) argues that because several of its unique dimension, scholarship on caravanning and caravanners should be disaggregated from the broader literature on outdoors hospitality. During the past two decades caravan parks have attracted only a limited scholarship much of which is located in the contexts of Australia, Denmark, New Zealand, Turkey and the United

Kingdom (Prideaux and McClymont, 2006; Blichfeldt, 2009; Caldicott, 2011; Caldicott and Scherrer, 2013a, 2013b; Gilbert, 2013; Lashley, 2015; Mikkelsen and Cohen, 2015; Mikkelsen and Blichfeldt, 2015; O'Dell, 2015; Patterson et al., 2015; Doğantan et al., 2017; Doğantan and Emir, 2019). Overall, Caldicott (2011: 13) aptly describes the caravan sector as 'the Cinderella' subsector of tourism because of the paucity of research and interest in caravan parks by tourism scholars. Further, as shown by a recent review of international scholarship on camping tourism the 'almost invisible' position of caravanning and caravan parks has remained little altered in recent years (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020b). In the context of the global South only scattered studies exist to shed light on the caravan sector and general planning issues around caravan parks (Van Heerden, 2008, 2010a, 2010b; Jayakody, 2017).

Two major sections of discussion and analysis are presented of the geography, management and planning of caravan parks. The first section provides an overview of the development of caravan parks and caravanning in South Africa. The focus is specifically on the situation after South Africa's democratic transition in 1994. The discussion also offers insight into the spatial distribution of caravan parks in the country, a theme unrepresented in South African tourism geographical literature (Visser, 2016; Rogerson and Visser, 2020). The second section turns to examine a suite of planning-related issues and of how the caravan park as a municipal immovable asset is managed and planned in South Africa. In terms of methods and sources the discussion draws upon a combination of findings from both historical archival research and contemporary industry sources relating to caravanning and caravan parks in the country. The contemporary industry sources include analysis of two national guides on caravanning and camping resorts (Huysamen, 2017; MapStudio, 2018) the listings of which were triangulated with an internet-mediated search on caravan parks in South Africa. In addition, the available scattered official data is brought together on camping and caravanning from several reports variously issued by South African Tourism and Statistics South Africa. Finally, use is made of municipal planning documents, consultancy reports and most importantly a set of structured interviews

which were conducted in 2019 with municipalities in South Africa's Western Cape province about the state of caravan parks as tourism assets and of planning directions for these municipal assets.

2. Caravan parks in South Africa: development and geography

At the time of democratic transition the caravan sector in South Africa was experiencing the effects of a transition which began in the 1980s from caravanning as a budget sector to the growing sophistication of an increasing share of the country's caravan sector. It was observed that the traditional concept of caravanning in South Africa as "roughing it" was beginning to shift (National Productivity Institute, 1990: 23). A major change was taking place with the increased sophistication of the caravan market as part of an economy of "drive tourism" (Prideaux, 2020). In parallel with international trends in the caravan sector, the trend was observed for caravans in South Africa to become more luxurious. Accordingly, "as caravans become more costly to purchase the perception of a 'poor man's holiday' is giving way to the view that caravanning is mainly the preserve of the wealthy" (National Productivity Institute, 1990: 23). From the late 1980s an accelerating trend was for South Africa's caravan manufacturing sector to adjust its production "to meet the needs of the sophisticated and fastidious buyer" (National Productivity Institute, 1990: 23).

By 1994 it was estimated that there were 700 caravan parks in South Africa which include a mix of privately-controlled as well as municipal-operated parks. As was the case in several other countries, local governments assumed an historical role in the evolution of caravan parks in South Africa. The heyday of municipal involvement in the caravan park sector was in the 1960s since when the sector had become dominated by private sector owned parks many of which adjusted their offerings to this rapidly shifting market environment. The activity of camping or caravanning in South Africa was no longer simply a budget holiday option. As Van Heerden (2008: 125) asserts "on the contrary some people choose to enjoy the outdoors in a

tent, caravan or motor home". Furthermore, whilst it was conceded that "camping and caravanning can be a relatively economical holiday but set-up costs are not negligible and investing in a caravan or motorhome can be hefty" (Van Heerden, 2008: 125–126). Evidence of this change is given in a series of works produced in the 2000s by Van Heerden (2008, 2010a, 2010b) which show changes taking place in South Africa which parallel those in the caravan sectors of USA, United Kingdom or Australia. By the mid-2000s it is apparent that South African caravan parks are used increasingly by people who are tenting out of choice as well as by (upmarket) caravanners in what is a re-invented form of camping tourism aligned with drive tourism (Van Heerden, 2010a). Its enthusiasts variously "pack their tents, hitch their trailers or caravans, or start their motorhomes (a motorised caravan) to embark on an annual holiday, a short break (weekend), touring trip, to attend special events (festivals) or go on a backpacking/hiking/sight-seeing trip" (Van Heerden, 2008: 125).

By 2010 it is estimated the numbers of caravans was close to 107 000, a figure which reflects a decline in caravan numbers as recorded in the years of late apartheid. This said, it must be argued that the caravan sector manifests an upgrading in terms of *quality* and that whilst actual numbers have fallen, the market value of the caravan industry as a whole potentially expanded. In an analysis of the hospitality sector in South Africa as a whole Price Waterhouse Coopers (2011: 29) stylise the caravan/camping sector as one that "mainly targets an economy-minded clientele" with nightly rates much lower than other accommodation categories. Nevertheless said, the report noted also that "this category posted the largest annual increases in nightly rates during the past five years" (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2011: 29). The analysis offered by Van Heerden (2010a, 2010b) confirms that a turnaround in the fortunes of the caravan sector and of 'camping' is in evidence. It was stated, as judged "by the increased number of manufacturers advertising camper-trailers it can be surmised that this type of camping is a growing market" (Van Heerden, 2010b: 66). The profile of its participants reveals that on the whole they do not want a "rough experience" and that the decision to 'camp' increasingly is a lifestyle choice (Van Heerden, 2010b: 69). An important observa-

tion was made that caravanners "contribute substantially to the local economy of towns and regions" (Van Heerden, 2010b: 69).

Bednight data for South Africa is dominated by non-commercial bednights which are linked to travel for visits to friends and relatives and stays in the homes of friends or relatives (Rogerson, 2018). Recent official data shows that the segment of camping and caravanning continues to represent 2 percent of all tourist bednights albeit close to 7 percent of paid commercial bednights (South African Tourism, 2016, 2017). The 2015 Domestic Tourism Survey provides information on the use of camp sites and caravan parks by the country's different population groups (Statistics South Africa, 2017). It disclosed that the use of caravan parks remains overwhelmingly (78.7 percent) white-dominated; in terms of camp sites whites constituted 57.6 percent and blacks (Africans) 35.3 percent of the 2015 totals (Statistics South Africa, 2017: 99). The Annual Report of South African Tourism for 2017 describes only the segment of 'camping' (caravanning is no longer mentioned) and suggests that represents 1.65 million bednights or nearly 4.3 percent of total paid bednights which were estimated at 37.9 million (South African Tourism, 2018). In 2019 Statistics South Africa released its survey findings that 'caravan parks and camping sites' represent the most buoyant of all different forms of accommodation in South Africa with a recorded 44.6 percent increase on the previous reporting year (Statistics South Africa, 2019). Other information revealed is that average occupancy levels for the sector are much lower than for either hotels or guest houses with highest occupancies reaching 45 percent in December as compared to less than 30 percent in the winter months (Statistics South Africa, 2019). Beyond significant seasonality issues, the nature of business operations in the camping and caravanning segment was shown to be much different to, for example, hotels in which important income streams exist from restaurants, bar sales and other sources. For the segment of caravanning in South Africa 92 percent of business income derives from accommodation revenues, making it a highly distinctive niche in the country's lodging economy (cf. Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2011; Rogerson, 2013).

As no official data exists specifically about the geography of caravanning sector a broad brush pic-

ture of the national situation can be gleaned from analysis of listings in two national guidebooks which are produced by the private sector and which list opportunities for caravanning in South Africa (Huysamen, 2017; Map Studios, 2018). It should be noted that the entries into these two guidebooks are focussed on successful and operational parks and

therefore that they overlook other caravan parks in states of various disrepair or abandonment. The analysis reveals for 2019 a national total of 629 caravan parks in South Africa (Map Studios, 2018). Table 1 provides a breakdown of the total national distribution which includes private caravan parks as well as municipal public caravan parks.

Table 1. South Africa: Distribution of Caravan Parks by Province

Province	Total Number of Caravan Parks	Percentage	Nature Provincial or SANParks
Western Cape	193	30.7	3
Eastern Cape	80	12.7	6
KwaZulu-Natal	73	11.6	5
North West	59	9.4	2
Limpopo	57	9.1	3
Northern Cape	54	8.6	1
Free State	41	6.5	1
Mpumalanga	37	5.9	4
Gauteng	35	5.6	0
TOTAL	629	100	25

Source: Authors based on MapStudio (2018)

Table 1 shows clearly that the majority of caravan and camping parks in the listings fall within the Western Cape which accounts for 193 parks or almost 31% of the total in South Africa. The next most significant provinces are Eastern Cape and KwaZulu Natal which represent 12.7% and 11.6% of the total respectively. The leading three provinces – all coastal provinces – account for 55% of the national total. The lowest numbers of operational caravan parks occur in the interior provinces of Free State, Mpumalanga and Gauteng. Of the listed parks only 46 were state-owned, mostly by SANParks or provincial nature authorities. A total of 21 municipal operations were listed which is much lower than the actual number in the country and indicative of the fact that the commanding heights of South Africa's caravan sector are in private ownership. Patronage at the municipal parks has a mix of visitors – some top end (including some international) but others – the majority from the traditional lower income family bracket. Arguably, the private sector caravan facilities dominate the top end and most lucrative segments of South Africa's caravan market. It should be understood that the lists of caravan parks includes both dedicated parks for caravans and

camping only (some of which are styled as 'resorts') and others – again often called 'resorts' – in which the major lodging options are chalets or other fixed accommodation and where caravans represent only a minor component of business operations.

The analysis is refined from the national to the provincial and local level by focussing on the distribution of caravan parks in the Western Cape at a local municipal level. Table 1 shows the total number of caravan parks in the province as well as the numbers of municipal parks. It shows the clear dominance of private sector caravan parks and that municipal parks now constitute only 27.2 percent of total caravan parks.

Fig. 1 shows that the largest share of caravan parks occur in coastal areas confirming that caravanning is an important constituent of the coastal tourism economy of South Africa (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020c). Nonetheless, whilst the greatest concentration of caravan park facilities is close to the coast there are also a number of inland locations of Western Cape which enjoy significant numbers of parks. At the municipal level the leading locations, all with more than ten such facilities, are City of Cape Town, Cederberg, George, Langeberg,

Table 2. Distribution of Caravan Parks in Western Cape Province by Local Municipality

Municipality	Total Parks (including Private)	Municipal Parks
City of Cape Town	24	13
Matzikama	6	2
Cederberg	22	4
Berg River	4	4
Saldanha Bay	12	6
Swartland	7	3
Witzenberg	6	1
Drakenstein	5	1
Stellenbosch	3	0
Breede Valley	11	0
Langeberg	13	1
Theewaterskloof	3	0
Overstrand	10	4
Cape Agulhas	7	4
Swellendam	5	0
Kannaland	5	1
Hessequa	11	5
Mossel Bay	12	2
George	16	1
Oudtshoorn	10	3
Bitou	4	0
Knysna	7	2
Laingsberg	1	0
Prince Albert	1	0
Beaufort West	4	0
TOTAL	209	57

Source: Authors based on Huysamen (2017), Map Studios (2018), and data from website of the Western Cape provincial government

Mossel Bay, Saldanha Bay, Breede Valley, Overstrand, Hessequa and Oudtshoorn. Of the 209 facilities in the province these clusters account for 68 percent of the total. Table 2 showed the geographical profile of the municipal parks. It is evident that the most important local municipalities are City of Cape Town, Saldanha Bay and Mossel Bay followed by Hessequa, Cederberg, Cape Agulhas, Berg River and Overstrand which account for 70 percent of the total municipal caravan parks in the province. Nevertheless, as is revealed on Fig. 2 which maps the location of caravan parks *within* each municipality, in many cases a situation of ‘dispersion with concentration’ is observable. The City of Cape Town provides a good illustration of this spatial arrangement.

3. Municipal caravan parks: management and planning

The analysis in this subsection examines the management and planning of municipal caravan parks in South Africa. The discussion draws from two sets of sources. First, is a set of documentary material including planning reports, newspaper reports as well as internet sources. Second are interviews conducted in 2019 with 14 municipal officials and stakeholders who are responsible for managing or planning for over 40 percent of the operational municipal parks in Western Cape. More significantly, given the importance of caravan parks in small towns, the sample is of stakeholders in the caravan

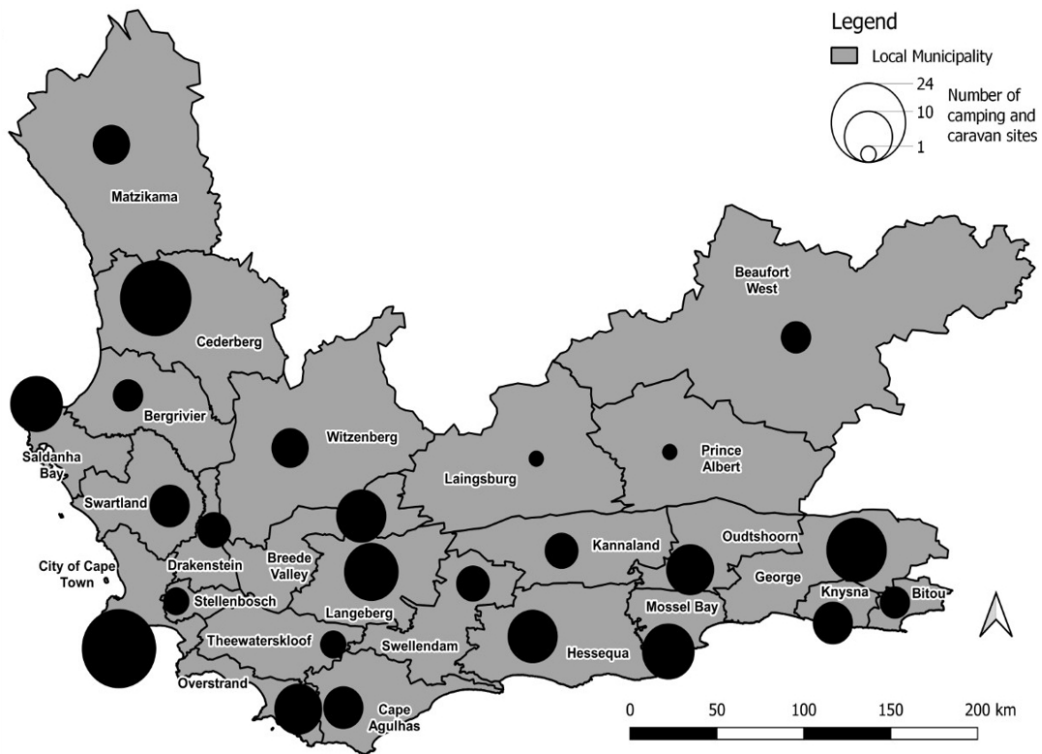


Fig. 1. The Distribution of Caravan Sites by Local Municipality
 Source: Authors based on Map Studios, 2018

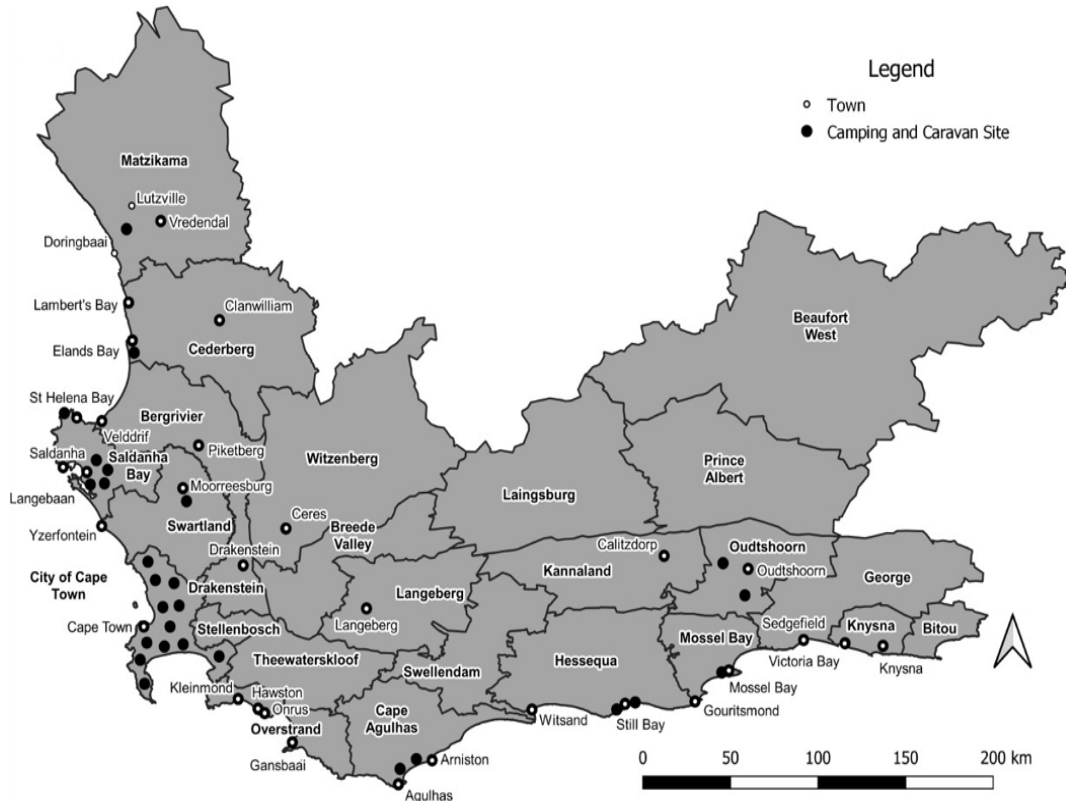


Fig. 2. The Location of Municipal Caravan Parks within the Local Municipalities of Western Cape Province
 Source: Authors

sector who are accountable for 52 percent of municipal parks in Western Cape small towns.

3.1 Asset performance

Across the interviews a generally positive view was expressed towards the performance of the municipal caravan parks and the role played in the local economy. This is evidenced in the following statements extracted from the interviews:

- *“The performance of the camping and caravan sites over the past 5 years had remained relatively stable. Occupancy is seasonal and during the winter months it gets quiet especially in the resorts without any chalets. The off season is often utilised by pensioners. Occupancies have remained stable across all parks although Leintjiesklip is doing great with 97% occupancy in December” (Saldanha Bay Municipal Manager).*
- *“We do make money but that’s not the sole mandate for the municipality. What’s important is job creation. The only real busy times are the December holiday period and Easter. There are times of year when the camp site is empty but the chalets are booked out regularly during the year especially the summer months” (Director Cape Agulhas Municipality).*
- *“Winter is quiet but during that period we take bookings from builders who stay in the park. If builders are working in the local area they stay at the park as it is affordable....No mass profits are made at this park” (Agulhas Caravan Park Manager).*
- *“December is always full. throughout the year it is more empty, but it’s not that empty that you have to close it down. There are always a few campers and there are stands where people stay for up to 3 months. The flower season towards the end of winter is a busier time but generally one night stays” (Cederberg Resort Manager).*
- *“At the moment all of the municipal camping and caravan sites run at a profit with Onrus being the best performer. Some families have been visiting for generations and that relationship with the visitors is what keeps the sites going” (Director, Overstrand).*

In terms of factors impacting the performance of the caravan parks four points must be raised. First, is that the activity of caravanning is seasonal with the December-January summer period the most crucial for the overall operational performance of the parks and for their contribution to the local economy. In certain municipalities, such as Cape Agulhas, a 21 day minimum stay in December is required to book for the caravan park. In terms of job creation caravan parks provide a core of permanent jobs throughout the year. At Saldanha Bay the number of job opportunities created by the caravan sector is not insignificant with 52 staff at the resorts variously for maintenance, managers, cleaning and gardening. It was explained as follows: *“There are mostly permanent workers at the resorts although temporary workers fill in when necessary mainly during the peak holiday season”*. At other municipalities the seasonality of employment linked to caravan parks was confirmed. The Agulhas caravan park manager observed: *“In season we have six to eight workers to help with general upkeep and cleaning and 4 workers in the off season”*. During the seasonal peak season the municipalities usually increase their staffing with the engagement of temporary workers.

Second, is that for all parks no permanent residence is permitted and generally the maximum period for occupancy is three months. The rationale for this was given in one interview: *“We have a maximum occupancy period of 3 months. It used to be longer but they found that long term residents would not pay the higher Christmas season rate and they would refuse to move out”* (Overstrand Director). The three month period of maximum occupancy was a stipulation across most municipalities including for Saldanha Bay, Cape Agulhas, Cederberg and Hessequa.

Third, is that of the off-season role of South Africa’s ‘grey nomads’, the pensioner and retiree market who sometimes are beneficiaries of low season cheaper rates. At Overstrand it was observed that: *“We are looking at ways to overcome seasonality by offering pensioner rates. There are times when the parks are completely empty and maybe only have visitors over the weekends, or irregular overnighters who stop by on their way up the coast* (Overstrand Director). Fourth, and very important, is the role played by events and festivals for boosting the occupancy levels of caravan parks. For exam-

ple, the significance of hosting events was noted at Saldanha Bay where the nature friendly jazz festival – Jazz on the Rocks – is viewed as vital for boosting park occupancy in February as well as for encouraging return visitors at other times of the year. The most visible evidence of local authority acknowledgement of the importance of caravan parks and camping was at Cape Agulhas Local Municipality. Here it was recognised that the municipal caravan resorts form “an integral part of Council’s strategy to promote local and economic development (Siyanda Business Solutions, 2019: 1). Added spin-offs from the caravan sector for the local economy were viewed as follows: “This influx of people, especially during December/January and Easter, provides much needed financial stimulus to the business sector, while it could potentially also lead to future investments within the municipal area” (Siyanda Business Solutions, 2019: 1). At Hessequa also there was recognition of the local multiplier effects on the local economy of the caravan sector. The municipal director for Hessequa views the “*parks as important as they have a direct and indirect investment. Tourism spend within the town is more important than the direct spend with the resorts itself for accommodation*”. Overall, municipal officials expressed positive perceptions of the role of caravan parks in local economies.

3.2 Asset administration

In the sampled municipalities local administrators were responsible for the operations of between four and six caravan parks. At least two different organizational models were applied for managing parks. In the majority of cases the parks fell under their direct management. At Saldanha Bay and Hessequa it was observed that at least one park was not under their direct management as it was leased out to a private enterprise. This option was used as municipal resorts were performing poorly and municipalities considered that savings might be realised if the resorts leased out to a private sector partnership (Seaton Thomson & Associates, 2012). Other municipalities such as Mossel Bay have shifted to a leasing model. In 2018 the Mossel Bay Point Caravan Park was put out to tender for a 15 year lease. The successful bidder is required to upgrade facili-

ties to three star grading and to introduce environmentally sustainable practices. The decision to lease out this facility was due to this park being a significant capital asset and a specialized business function albeit not viewed as a *basic* or core municipal function. It was noted that the “Park was not operated at its full potential and runs on a cash shortage. If the Park is managed by an entity with the specialised skills and experience to properly manage it, municipal losses will be curtailed and the Park could contribute to local economic development of the municipal area” (Mossel Bay Municipality, 2018). The anticipated benefits of this lease agreement for resort management were viewed as considerable. Several anticipated benefits were identified for a successful leasing agreement to the private sector. First, the municipality would retain ownership of the park but it would be properly managed and maintained by a private sector partner. Second, that as compared to the municipality, private sector institutions were viewed as normally able to achieve high efficiencies and could access operating and investment capital. Third, the park would enjoy increased occupancies including in the low season. Four, that appropriate risk transfer would occur from the municipality to the private partner. Five, that upgrading of the local putt-putt course, skateboard facility and resort shop would occur. Six, the local authority would receive a rental income from the park. Seven, enhanced local economic development benefits are expected from expanded visitor numbers to Mossel Bay and expenditures made in local businesses. Therefore, it was maintained that by leasing to a private investor “the local authority will gain by achieving the Municipality’s strategic objectives, including the upgrading, and improved management of the Park and generate additional revenue” (Mossel Bay Municipality, 2018: 3).

Of critical importance for the successful functioning of this administrative model of leasing is the careful selection of an appropriate private sector partner through the tender process. Outside of the Western Cape in certain localities cases where this model has been applied the municipal asset has fallen into complete disrepair as private sector leaseholders have exploited the arrangement because of lack of due diligence in the appointment of the subsequent monitoring of this arrangement. Examples of the multiple negative problems that

have arisen from this administrative arrangement can be given from the Eastern Cape and the experiences of Makana Municipality as well as Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality based around the city of Port Elizabeth. At the caravan park at Makana the local municipality entered into a ten year lease agreement with a private operator for a project to upgrade the existing caravan park which had been funded by the national Department of Tourism. It was found, however, that there was a period when the private resort operator was not trading because of structural deficits in the buildings and the storm water which brought debris into the site thus rendering the caravan park non-operational. As a consequence, the private operator had not paid rental to the Makana municipality as stipulated in the lease agreement (Department of Tourism, 2015). In Nelson Mandela Bay metropolitan area two leases for management of resorts (including for caravans) were cancelled due to corruption, maladministration and fraud (Nkanjeni, 2018). The leases were allowed to lapse as none of the promised improvements by lessee had been undertaken and that resorts described that it “now lies in rack and ruin” (Gillham, 2018). Another resort was described as slowly falling apart with allegations that the business owners were only using the resort for private use (Hayward, 2014).

A key finding from the interviews was of the diverse position of caravan parks within the administrative structure of local municipalities. The management of caravan parks falls under no common department across the various municipalities in the Western Cape. In the case of Cape Agulhas Local Municipality responsibility is with the Department of Public Services. At Hessequa management is within the domain of the department of technical services. At Overstrand Local Municipality the administration of the four caravan parks is within the portfolio of Community Services. The Directorate for Community Services of the Cedarberg municipality has six sections (such as libraries, traffic) of which one is allocated responsible for the municipality’s four resorts. This small town municipality offers one of the few cases where there was a particular sub-department that was responsible for caravan parks. Generally, management of the municipal assets of caravan parks was part of a bundle of diverse responsibilities that would fall within

the portfolio of specific sections of municipal administration. Across the small towns of the Western Cape, however, the broad picture was of the existence of remarkably few linkages between caravan parks and tourism planning in large measure because of the aforementioned location of responsibility for park administration *outside* of tourism and thus within a department which had other more pressing ‘core’ priorities.

Overall, in terms of municipal administration relating to caravan parks the most striking finding was the partial or complete disconnect of caravan parks from municipal tourism planning. For example, at Saldanha Bay, with its seven caravan parks and a long-established focus on family caravanning, the municipal director observed: “*Currently there is minimal communication with the local tourism departments. The relationship can be a lot better as at the moment it is minimal. We want to work towards that relationship as the Tourism Department could help with the marketing of the resorts as destinations*”. In several municipalities the point was made that local tourism committees focus primarily on marketing in relation to the private sector and give little attention to marketing for the municipal assets. For example, in the Cederberg local municipality the tourism committee “*is largely focused on accommodation and is not necessarily too interested in camping resorts. The focus of the committee is generally directed towards private entities and offerings. The Tourism Department is more focused on accommodation options and not necessarily camping. They never market municipal places. They complain if something is wrong but do not assist much or market. They are more like a police force to us*” (Cederberg Resort Manager).

The disconnect between caravan parks and tourism development was further evidenced in the case of the interview with Overstrand local municipality which manages four long-established caravan parks. In this local municipality, where the tourism sector is growing and relatively prosperous, the management of caravan parks is divorced from tourism and positioned in community services. A key issue in terms of the low prioritisation and budget allocation to caravan is that at present caravan parks are not flagged in the local Integrated Development Plans, which are an essential part of local planning

in South Africa. As a consequence of their omission it was admitted that for budgeting and overall planning purposes caravan parks “fall through the cracks” (Overstrand Director). At this municipality the negative implications of the disconnect between caravan park management in a changing market place with tourism were under scrutiny not least as the municipal tourism strategy has no focus on camping. It was stated that “it would make sense to have caravan and camping within the Tourism portfolio instead of just for marketing and bookings. There is a need to redesign portfolios as at the moment it is not sure who caravan and camping really belongs to” (Overstrand Director). As a whole, the need for restructuring of the responsibilities for management and maximisation of the assets of caravans was conceded.

3.3 Asset planning

Several potential pathways exist for future planning of caravan parks (Seaton Thomson & Associates, 2012). First, is a no change situation with municipalities continuing to manage the parks as they have been doing for many years under their direct control. Second, is the option of privatisation and the selling off of assets which usually involves a change of land use often for commercial or residential development. Third, is to consider developing a joint venture partnership with Provincial government and/or private developers/operators to facilitate the development, management and operation of the resorts. Four, there is the option of institutional restructuring and of establishing a unit within the local municipality which would be dedicated to caravan parks (Seaton Thomson & Associates, 2012). Finally, there is the option of the leasing out of parks to the private sector for a defined time period and on a tender basis. The interviews revealed that different options are under consideration and have been in many cases under discussion for several years. The mixed situation is evidenced as below.

At Saldanha Bay privatisation discussions have been ongoing for eight years particularly concerning the municipality’s most successful and best performing resort, namely the Leentjiesklip resort. Although it is observed that this is “the only park to make profits”, the “municipality wants to sell all

of the seven resorts as Leentjiesklip is the only one making a profit most of the others run at a loss so they are trying to sell them all off as they do not want to sell them individually” (Leentjiesklip resort manageress). At Saldanha Bay the municipal director stated: “Privatisation is still an ongoing process. People from the department in January 2020 are assisting the municipal manager with an ongoing report regarding privatisation options such as a lease or conversion to backpackers etc. We are hopeful for an informed recommendation to be made this year as to how they should move forward in order to get greater income. At Cape Agulhas a rethinking of options also is in progress. The Cape Agulhas director stated “We are looking at privatising at the moment”. At the Hessequa municipality the shift to leasing and privatisation is focussed on the municipality’s least successful resorts. The decision to privatise is in many ways seen as a trial for this municipality.

Finally, at Overstrand the issue of enhancing the performance of parks through linkages to the calendar of local events and festivals is under consideration. There is acknowledgement that the local camps are losing their competitiveness with the expansion of more upmarket facilities (including glamping) at private parks and the lack of budget funding that has been available for upgrading of local parks. Indeed, “over the years little in the way of facilities has been added to the caravan sites” (Overstrand Director). The municipality is engaged in a costing exercise looking critically at the profit/loss situation of each of its four parks. Under consideration are possible partnership ventures with the private sector and awarding a 99-year lease including for diversified products such as glamping. No consideration is being given to the option of selling off the assets entirely. In general, it was acknowledged that the municipality needed a better understanding of ‘best practice’ for managing camping and caravan sites and of need for them to offer variety at the parks at all levels from upmarket glamping to affordable and more basic camping for the traditional caravan market.

4. Conclusion

In international as well as local South African tourism scholarship caravan parks have received only minimal attention. The planning and management of caravan parks in South Africa is one facet of municipal local government asset management which is a theme of expanding scholarly enquiry mainly outside of tourism studies (Kaganova and Telgarsky, 2018; Wojewnik-Filipkowska, 2018). Caravan parks are part of the basket of immovable assets that South African local municipalities can deploy for boosting tourism and local economic development. Despite the development of a national framework for the management of immovable assets the available evidence shows most government assets in South Africa are underperforming and, in many instances, are in a state of deterioration and/or in need of upgrading (Buys and Mavusa, 2007; Rogerson, 2020). In common with several countries, such as Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, local governments were historically important actors in the development of the caravan park sector in South Africa. Nevertheless, it is recorded that across most of South Africa the municipal ownership of caravan parks is of declining significance as compared to the role of privately owned parks.

The coastal province of the Western Cape is the biggest focus for caravanning and the location of the majority of caravan parks in South Africa. This province hosts also the largest cluster of municipal owned caravan parks. The research reveals most local municipalities currently struggle to manage appropriately and optimally maximise the operations of municipal parks for local economic and social development. Accordingly, many local governments are investigating options for privatisation through selling-off or leasing parks to private investors. In terms of boosting the performance of parks, it is essential to ensure a higher profile for caravan parks within municipal planning processes for purposes of budgetary allocation. Above all, there is a need for evolving a much tighter institutional relationship between the department which is responsible for caravan park management and with local tourism planning as our findings point to an institutional disconnect. The future role of caravan parks in a post-COVID-19 South African tourism sec-

tor is highly uncertain as, at the time of writing, all municipal caravan parks across the country were closed because of government lockdown regulations as a response to the pandemic.

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