Catering for large numbers of tourists:
the McDonaldization of casual dining in Kruger National Park

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Abstract. Since 2002 Kruger National Park (KNP) has subjected to a commercialisation strategy. Regarding income generation, SANParks (1) sees KNP as the goose that lays the golden eggs. As part of SANParks' commercialisation strategy and in response to providing services that are efficient, predictable and calculable for a large number of tourists, SANParks has allowed well-known branded restaurants to be established in certain rest camps in KNP. This innovation has raised a range of different concerns and opinions among the public. This paper investigates the *what* and the *where* of casual dining experiences in KNP; describes how the catering services have evolved over the last 70 years; and evaluates current visitor perceptions of the introduction of franchised restaurants in the park. The main research instrument was a questionnaire survey. Survey findings confirmed that restaurant managers, park managers and visitors recognise franchised restaurants as positive contributors to the unique KNP experience. Park managers appraised the franchised restaurants as mechanisms for funding conservation.

Contents:

1. Introduction

The world's tourism domain in the last decades of the 20th century was characterised by widespread interest in nature-based tourism, with visitation to parks and protected areas dramatically increasing (Eagles, McCool, 2002; Hall, Hall, 2006; Newsome et al., 2013; Ferreira, Harmse, 2014). As an alternative to industrial economic development, nature-based tourism represents an instrument for the preservation of natural landscapes, cultures and senses of place. Unfortunately, tourism as an economic development strategy also constitutes a major factor contributing to the transformation of this conservation directed features by turning them into commoditised objects to be consumed by tourists (Healy, McDonagh, 2009). Parks have become 'commodities, something to attract and captivate, and essentially sell' (McIntyre et al., 2001: 434), leading to the commodification and homogenisation of natural areas (Cloke, Perkins, 2002; Saarinen, 2004; Zegre et al., 2012). MacCannel (1992) has observed that parks have become little more than extensions of the city transposed onto a scenic background. Monetary concerns, politics and power are often the driving forces of the development of tourist *honeypot* destinations (Healy, McDonagh, 2009).

Since 2002, Kruger National Park (KNP) has subjected to a commercialisation strategy (SANParks, 2012). The strategy aims to reduce the cost of service delivery and to improve service levels to expand tourism products and generate additional revenue to fund conservation (Taylor, 2012). Regarding income generation, SANParks sees KNP as the goose that lays the golden eggs (National Parks Board, 1997). As part of SANParks' commercialisation strategy and in response to providing good services and quality tourism products for large numbers of tourists, SANParks has chosen to introduce well-known branded restaurants to certain rest camps in KNP. This innovation has raised a range of concerns and opinions in the public domain (News24, 2013).

This paper investigates the *what* and the *where* of casual dining experiences in KNP; describes how catering services have evolved over the last 70 years; and evaluates current visitor perceptions of the introduction of franchised restaurants in the park. The paper comprises three parts. First, the appropriate literature on standardisation and commodification of tourism products, in the context of nature-based tourism spaces, is reviewed. Second, KNP is introduced as a case study along with an explanation of the main research instrument (a questionnaire survey) used to determine tourist response to the innovation. Thirdly, the findings of the questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews are discussed. Last, recommendations are made for further research and the appropriate planning measures for eating (or restaurant) facilities in KNP.

2. Commodification of tourism products and services in national parks

Tourism destinations are spaces where various tourism products are offered by a multitude of suppliers (Peters et al., 2006). Buhalis (2000: 97) has described destinations as 'amalgams of tourism products, which offer an integrated experience to consumers' and they encompass all the necessary amenities for a stay, including accommodation, catering (gastronomy), entertainment and leisure activities. According to Page and Connell (2009: 648) a tourist experience is influenced by the 'overall impression, understanding and meaning' visitors attach to their encounters with a specific tourism space. Visitor ex-

perience can be defined as the 'overall impression, understanding, rating and meaning' visitors attach to their encounters with a specific place, event, holiday or activity (Page, Connell, 2009: 648). When catering for large numbers of visitors at specific types of destinations, services must ideally be delivered effectively, smoothly and as fast as possible to ensure tourist satisfaction (Zegre et al., 2012). Urry (2000: 38) refers to this phenomenon as the 'McDonaldization' of the tourism industry – a process that produces tourist experiences which are 'calculable, homogenous and safe' wherever tourism products are consumed. The McDonaldization thesis (Ritzer, 1996; 1998) provides a conceptual lens to view changes within society or sectors of society, such as recreation and tourism. The thesis states that the principles of the fast-food industry – efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control – dominate many sectors of society around the world (Ritzer, 1983). Mass tourism commodifies tourist experiences and is characterised by a handful of producers which are often multinational corporations that dominate world markets, such as franchised restaurant outlets (Torres, 2002; Shaw, Williams, 2004; Janson, 2008). The great increase in visitor numbers to nature-based tourism destinations makes mass tourism inevitable so; creating more standardised and rigidly packaged tourist experiences (Saarinen, 2013; Vainikka, 2013). Concerning the management of large numbers of tourists to protected areas Saarinen (2013: 6) argues that 'the tourism industry has become a significant user, stakeholder and element of change in wilderness environments.' The commodification, packaging and homogenisation of landscapes, nature, tourist destinations and tourism experiences are well documented in the literature (Cloke, Perkins, 2002; Saarinen, 2004; Zukin, 2010; Richards, 2013). This commodification process converts certain elements or dimensions of tourism *spaces* and *experiences* to be the *same* everywhere. Consequently, making provision for *mass tourism* produces a homogenised and standardised tourist experience. Each service *experience* within a destination affects the image of a tourism destination and eventually the holistic perceived service quality of the destination.

There is inadequate understanding of the changes and challenges accompanying the expansion of commercial tourism services in natural areas

(Brooks, Haynes, 2001; Newsome et al., 2013) and its impacts to inform decision making by resource managers and commercial operators. Concerning government-owned recreation and tourism spaces – such as national parks – the rise in visitation numbers is creating formidable challenges, especially because budgets for managing national parks are limited. Public land-management agencies have responded by looking to private commercial operators as alternative sources to offer recreation and tourism products and services (Quinn, 2002). These operators provide products and services such as maintenance and management, guided tours, food services, equipment rental, interpretive programmes, educational materials, transportation, accommodation, policing and safety (Parr, 2000; Weaver, 2001; Absher et al, 2003). Private operators typically apply for and may be granted permits, leases or contracts to conduct these activities on public lands (Weaver, 2001; Quinn, 2002).

South Africa is a well-known nature-based tourism destination offering tourists a wide choice of more than 7 000 game farms and 22 national parks (Kruger, Saayman, 2011). Each of these has its own individual setting, services and products (Mendoza et al., 2007). The success of these nature-based tourism spaces depends on appropriate levels of environmental quality and suitable levels of visitor services. If national parks aspire to provide unique and memorable experiences for tourists, they need to maintain high levels of tourist satisfaction (Manning, 2001). The decision by SANParks managers to invite franchised restaurants to operate in KNP must not be taken lightly, given the close relationship between tourism and gastronomy (Hjalager, Richards, 2002; Hall, Mitchell, 2005) and the critical role of memorable food and drink experiences in influencing how tourists experience a tourism destination (Ritchie, Crouch, 2000; Wolf, 2006; Gupta, Arora, 2014). Tourist satisfaction is vital in the tourism industry as it ensures both visitor loyalty and repeat visits (UNWTO, 2012). According to UNWTO (2012: 8), the quality of food is a decisive factor in achieving tourist satisfaction as 'it produces a lasting memory about the experience lived by the tourist.' The purpose of this article is to apply the McDonaldization thesis to examine one element of the commercialisation strategy of KNP, namely the introduction of franchised restaurants. This case

study aims to contribute to theory and practice by applying principles of the McDonaldization thesis to food and catering services in the context of a national park.

3. Case study: catering for casual dining by large numbers of visitors in the Kruger National Park

In the following subsections the study area is introduced (Fig. 1), followed by a brief discussion on tourism's role in the financial sustainability of SANParks and the evolution of restaurant service since 1931.

3.1. Study area

KNP stretches 350 km from south to north along the Mozambique border to where South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe meet (SANParks, 2012). KNP is subdivided into four management regions (Nxanatseni-North, Nxanatseni-South, Marula-North and Marula-South (Fig. 1)). This case study focusses on the two Marula regions that boast many opportunities to view the best of African fauna. The Marula region of KNP is extremely popular during winter, school, public and Christmas holidays (Ferreira, Harmse, 1999, 2014). The popularity of the region is attributable to its accessibility and relative proximity to the major source market (Gauteng province). Moreover, the region owns its popularity to its well-established superstructure – dense road networks and amenities such as picnic spots – that surpasses the superstructure and facilities available to visitors in the northern areas of the park.

3.2. Tourism's role in financial sustainability

Tourism is the primary and preferred internal mechanism to attain financial sustainability for SANParks, but this 'financial driver should never become an end in itself, and should never erode the conservation values' of the organisation (SANParks, 2009: 22). According to Glenn Phillips (TimesLIVE, 2013), national parks in South Africa are facing ma-

jor funding problems and the only recourse is to develop additional products and services that lend themselves to the natural attributes of each park. SANParks has estimated that its profit from tourism will exceed R800 million by 2022 (On the 9 of February 2016, one USA $ = 16 ZAR), but running costs will be about R1.4 billion a year (Blaine, 2013). As part of SANParks commercialisation strategy and to increase the organisation's tourism revenue franchised restaurants were invited to tender to operate within certain parks from early 2014.

3.3. Restaurant services in KNP (1931–2015)

Restaurant operations have been in KNP for many years. In 1931 they were run by private individuals in the Skukuza, Satara and Letaba rest camps (Joubert, 2007) where they were responsible for all other tourism services (administration of accommodation, catering and retail services) too. In 1945 the individual operators were replaced by a company called Kruger Park Services and whence services remained outsourced until 1955. From 1955 to 2001 catering services were provided by SANParks themselves. The decision to once again outsource services was based on a McKinsey report (McKinsey South Africa, 2002) that endorsed strategic value of outsourcing loss-making non-core operations. The report also laid the foundation of the SANParks Commercialisation Strategy (Mabunda, 2003). Thus, since March 2001 SANParks has again outsourced restaurants services in KNP. The first operator was the Nature Group (2001 to 2007) which was replaced by the Compass Group in 2007 until 2013 (SANParks, 2001, 2007). The General Manager of Strategic Tourism Services of SANParks, Joep Stevens, stated that since 2001 'it became evident that from a service level and value-for-money point of views, the latter model – of using a single large catering operator did not produce optimal results' (Stevens, personal communication, August 29, 2014). SANParks has continuously monitored food quality, value for money and service delivery to restaurant customers. They found that all three were not being met and after concerted efforts to rectify the relationship with the service provider was ended. James Daniels, Manager of the Business Development Unit of SANParks, explained that the decision to intro-
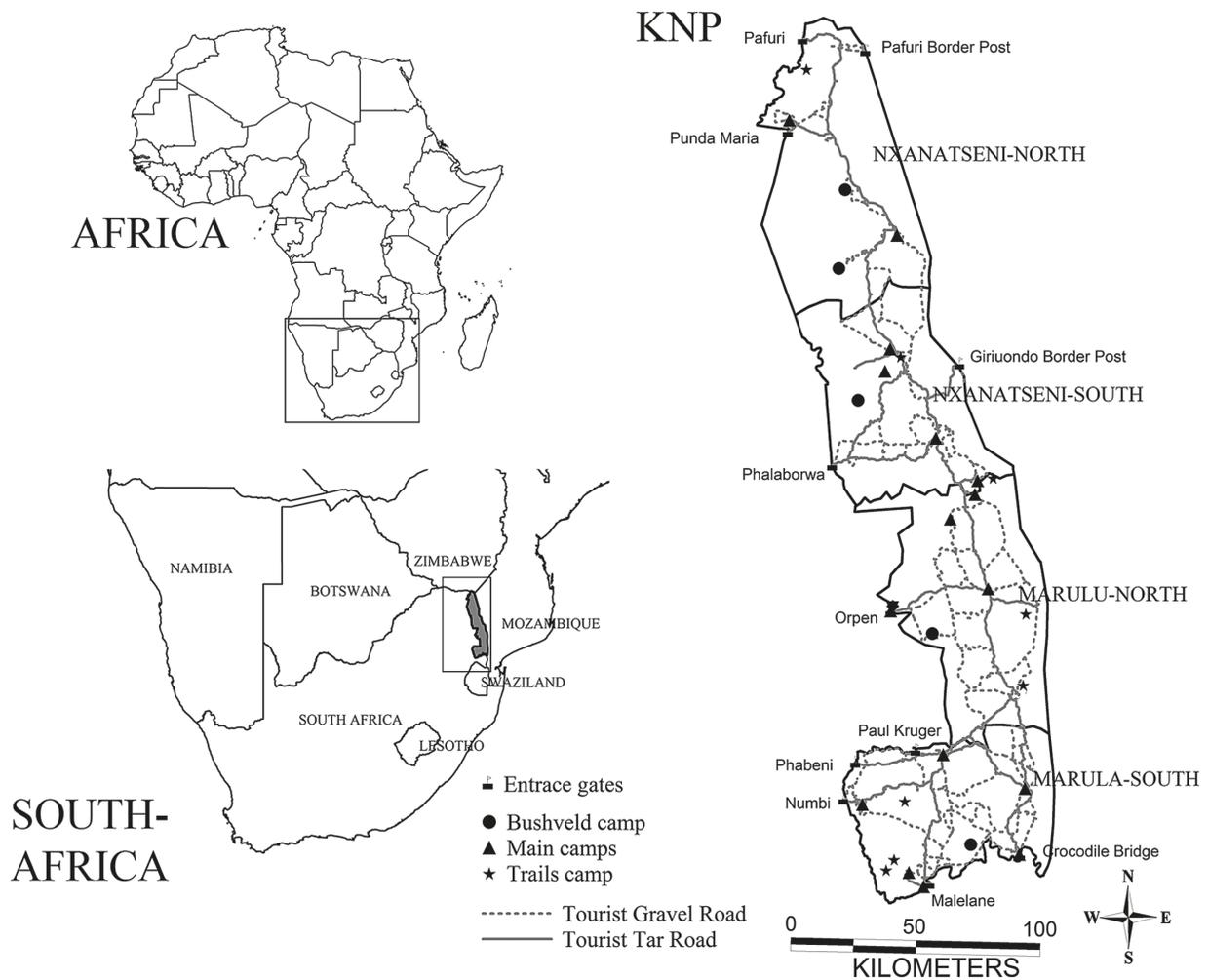
Fig. 1. Location and regions of the Kruger National Park

Source: Ferreira, Harmse, 2014: 17

duce franchised brands was made on three grounds. First, more than 70% of the SANPark's customer base is South Africans who are accustomed to the fare of franchised restaurants (growth of the franchised brands is testament to this). Second, franchised brands give the customers the comfort of knowing what to expect regarding product, portion size and service delivery. Third, customer surveys conducted by SANParks revealed that the public regards franchised brands as a solution to restaurants provision in our national parks (Daniels, personal communication, September 5, 2014).

Based on complaints from visitors about the restaurants, two failed contracts with private partners and a survey conducted by Kruger and Saayman (2011) on the opinions, needs and preferences of their loyal customers (65% Wild card holders [2]), SANParks opted to invite tenders from successful franchise restaurant brands to operate in KNP (and other parks managed by SANParks). Stevens (Personal communication, August 29, 2014) mentioned that the aim was to get operators that were 'hands-on, had the required technical experience and who were owner operated.' Since March 2014 four franchised brands – Cattle BaronÔ, DebonairsÔ, Mugg & BeanÔ, and WimpyÔ – have been established in six of the 12 main-camp restaurants in KNP. Five of the park's six franchised restaurants are in the Marula region, only one in the Nxanatseni region.

This article investigates the perceptions of park managers, restaurant owners and tourists that have first-hand experience of the newly established res-

taurants to distil out the extent to which the elements of McDonaldization exist in *casual dining* experiences in KNP; the ways these experiences enhance or distract from an overall *traditional* experience of the KNP; and the implications of McDonaldization for other services in this setting.

4.   Research method

A self-administrated questionnaire was the primary research instrument used for data collection. The visitor questionnaire comprised three sections: visitor's experiences of franchised restaurants (16 questions); use of the park and patronisation of franchised restaurants in general and in KNP (16 questions); and demographic information about respondents (six questions). Within the constraints of time and funds, a convenience sampling approach with a quota of 150 completed questionnaires was followed. The survey was conducted from 7 to 9 July 2014. Day visitors and overnight visitors leaving or arriving at the franchised restaurants at Satara, Lower Sabie and Pretoriuskop were asked to voluntarily complete questionnaires. Supplementary qualitative information was collected through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, namely the Manager of the Business Development Unit of SANParks; General Manager, Strategic Tourism Services, SANParks; Franchise Managers of Mugg & Bean, Debonairs (Satara); Mugg & Bean (Lower Sabie) and Wimpy (Pretoriuskop).

5.   Eating facilities and restaurants

Most of the superstructure supporting catering services in KNP is situated in the main rest camps. However, picnic sites – located at strategic locations adjacent to the main road network – in KNP are also popular venues for enjoying refreshments, patronising eating facilities and visiting public toilets. Breakfast and lunch are the main meals enjoyed at these sites. Fig. 2 illustrates the spatial distribution of 12 picnic sites and all other food services (restaurants and takeaway facilities) in the park.

6.   Profile of respondents and their visitation patterns

The sample of 150 respondents is small given that more than 1.6 million tourists visited KNP in 2014. Nonetheless, the respondent profile of the respondents corresponds well with the general KNP tourist profile, except for the percentages represented by South African population groups (SANParks, 2014). The gender split indicates slightly more men (54%) than women (46%). Most of the respondents (43%) were aged between 16 and 30 year. Most (89%) respondents were white; black respondents were not well represented (8%) and coloureds, Indians and Asians constituted only one per cent each. SANParks (2014) determined that black visitors represented 26% of the total having increased by 10% since 2012. Most of the respondents were quite well educated with 38% having obtained a diploma or graduate degree. Although 31% of the respondents had only completed a high-school education, a significant portion (16%) had postgraduate qualifications. The respondents were overwhelmingly South African (92%), the remainder being international guests from Belgium, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Most (68%) respondents had visited the park more than five times. Nearly 70% of respondents were overnight visitors and 30% were day visitors. The average number of nights respondents stayed in the park was nine, the longest 20 and most (50%) stayed between six and ten nights. The significance of these visit frequencies of overnight stays is that accommodation and entrance fees generate 80% of SANParks' revenue. KNP revenue is essential to SANParks' for exercising its primary mandate, namely conservation.

7.   Results and discussion

In the following three sub sections we report on the visitor's responses to the questionnaire survey on the introduction of franchised restaurants in KNP, the views of other important stakeholders on this innovation as expressed during the interviews and
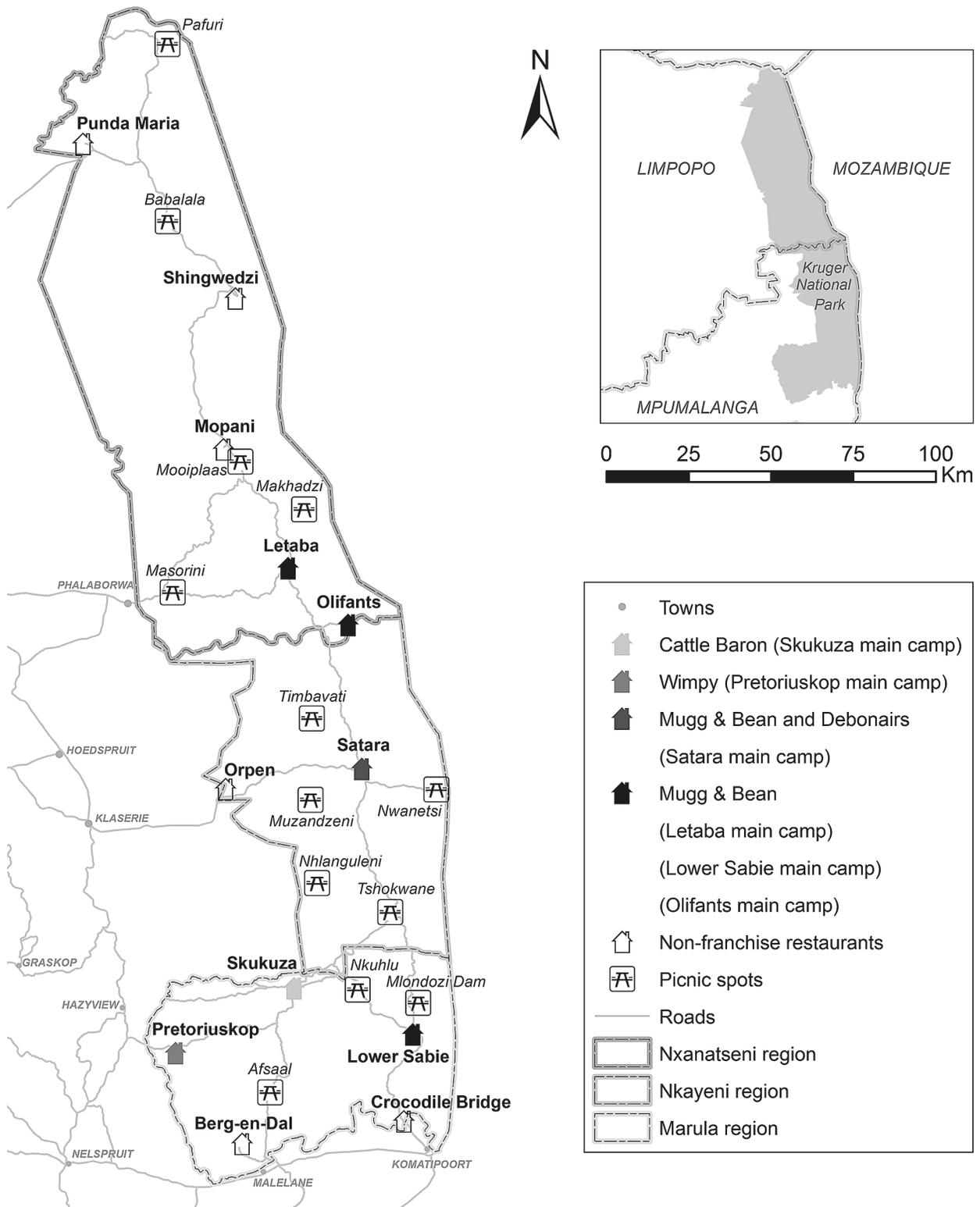
Fig. 2. Eating facilities and restaurants in Kruger National Park

Source: Authors

lastly, some final discussion, conclusion and recommendations for further research are made.

KNP visitors' responses on the franchised restaurants

Respondents were asked whether dining at an eating facility (restaurant or picnic site) in the park makes part of the KNP total experience. Seventy-one-percent either agreed or strongly agreed that it does add to the experience (Fig. 3) and only 13% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. This low degree of disagreement can possibly be ascribed to respondents' preference for preparing their own food and eating at picnic sites in KNP – doing things the *traditional way* in the park (3).
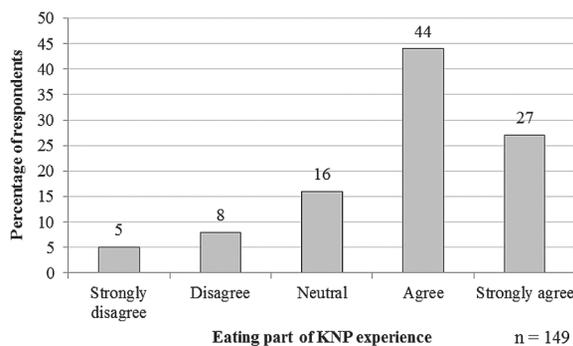
Fig. 3. Agreement or not whether eating at a park facility or restaurant is part of the Kruger National Park experience

Source: Authors

To further examine whether eating in the park is part of the total tourism experience of KNP, visitors were asked whether the restaurants that were replaced by franchised restaurants had offered a unique experience for visitors in KNP (Fig. 4). It is noteworthy that 57% either agreed or strongly agreed that they did. This tacit support for the former restaurants is quite likely attributable to the phenomenon Shaw and Williams (2004) call *heritage experience* that is when visitors affirm authenticity through 'empathy and critical engagement in relation to past experiences' (McIntosh, Prentice, 1999: 598). Regarding KNP, the previous restaurant system may have significant personal meanings for visitors most of whom are repeat visitors.
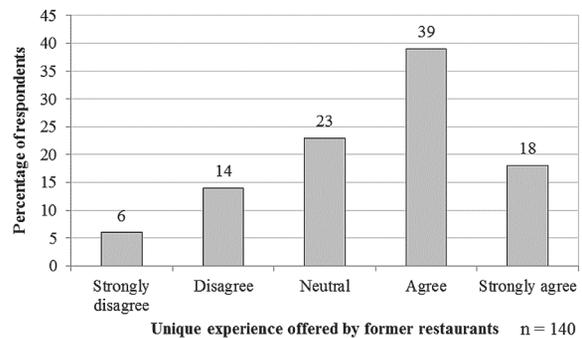
Fig. 4. Agreement or not whether former restaurants offered a unique experience for visitors to Kruger National Park

Source: Authors

The announcement that KNP was to open franchised restaurants in the park created a flurry of positive and negative responses on News24's (2013) web page. Disapproval was voiced as 'Atmosphere killer' and approval as 'Improvement on current restaurants' and 'Great move on SANParks.' Yet, when the survey respondents were asked whether they were pleased about the introduction of franchised restaurants in KNP, most (72%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the innovation. Respondents' disapproving comments about the presence of franchised restaurants reflect two related themes: *commercialisation* and *bringing the city to the park*. Respondents concerned about the former felt that: 'It isn't original'; 'It's become too commercialised', 'Brought commercialisation to the bush'; and 'It has taken a uniquely South African experience and commercialised it'. Those concerned about bringing the city to the park observed: 'Can't break away from the city'; 'Because these restaurants can be found anywhere, putting them in KNP brings a *city experience* and not a *wild experience*'; 'It's more of a city atmosphere, less like being in the bush'; 'Might as well be Johannesburg'; and 'Reminds of malls, not the KNP'. Other notable responses were: 'Kruger should be wild and not have any outside franchises or restaurants'; 'We looked forward to Buffalo Pies and the franchises with standard menus took away any hope for a Buffalo Burger'; and 'Franchise restaurants do not *add* to the wild KNP experience – franchises offer improved food quality and selection, however, service and staff attitudes are once again a disappointment.'

Participants were further asked whether the presence of franchised restaurants has changed the *in-the-wild* atmosphere of KNP (Fig. 5). A large majority (78%) of respondents in Satara main camp and about 60% in Lower Sabie responded that the presence of franchised restaurants has not changed the *in-the-wild* atmosphere of KNP. In Pretoriuskop – one of the older camps boasting a 'traditional old fashioned atmosphere' – just over half of the respondents felt that the presence of franchised restaurants has changed the park's *in-the-wild* atmosphere.
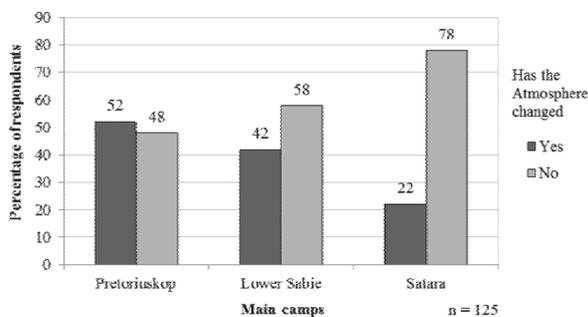

Fig. 5. Opinion expressed by visitors at Pretoriuskop, Lower Sabie and Satara main camps whether the presence of franchised restaurants has changed the 'in-the-wild' atmosphere of Kruger National Park

Source: Authors

Respondents who approved the presence of franchised restaurants in KNP recorded the following: 'It's nice to enjoy fresh food and good coffee'; 'It's easy to access food with franchise time framing'; 'It's more pleasant and standard'; 'Still in the wild with nice food'; 'Know what you will get, quick and tasty'; 'Well hidden, except Wimpy at Pretoriuskop main camp (i.e. red umbrellas)'. A comment by a KNP staff member was: 'Quick service is required by visitors, which is now offered by experienced people who can be accountable and responsible.' Respondents were also asked whether they were informed about the introduction of franchised restaurants in KNP. Fig. 6 illustrates the responses.

The responses in Fig. 6 confirm that there was a lack of communication about the introduction of the franchised restaurants into KNP. Forty-two per cent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they had been informed, 35% either disagreed or strongly disagreed and about one quarter were

not even sure whether the decision had been communicated to them. According to News24 (2013) SANParks ensured visitors that the branded restaurants are committed to toning down signage and interior decor to be in keeping with the sense of place of KNP. When asked whether the decor of the franchised restaurants blends in with KNP's natural environment, 64% of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that it does. The evidence presented in this section suggests that there is a greater degree of approval than opposition to the introduction of franchised restaurants in KNP. The discussion now turns to the customer satisfaction with the service provided by the franchised restaurants in KNP.
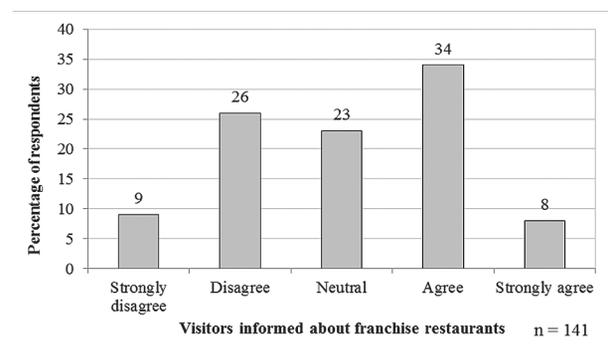

Fig. 6. Availability of information about the introduction of franchised restaurants in Kruger National Park

Source: Authors

Satisfaction with service provision by franchised restaurants

Tourist satisfaction with franchised restaurants in KNP was explored. Questioned whether visitors were pleased with their dining experience at one of the franchised restaurants in KNP (Fig. 7(a)), 75% either agreed or strongly agreed that it had been pleasing. On being asked whether their expectations had been met by the franchised restaurants in KNP (Fig. 7b), 70% either agreed or strongly agreed that they had. Respondents in Satara, Lower Sabie and Pretoriuskop camps commented as follows about their expectations being met and their experiences being satisfactory: 'The burgers of the previous restaurants were inferior, Mugg & Bean's burgers are much nicer'; 'The coffee is much nicer compared to the previous restaurants' coffee'; 'We've received the same products we would expect to receive in the

city's Mugg & Bean'; and 'We've experienced much friendlier service from the newly introduced franchise restaurants, than from the previous restaurant.'
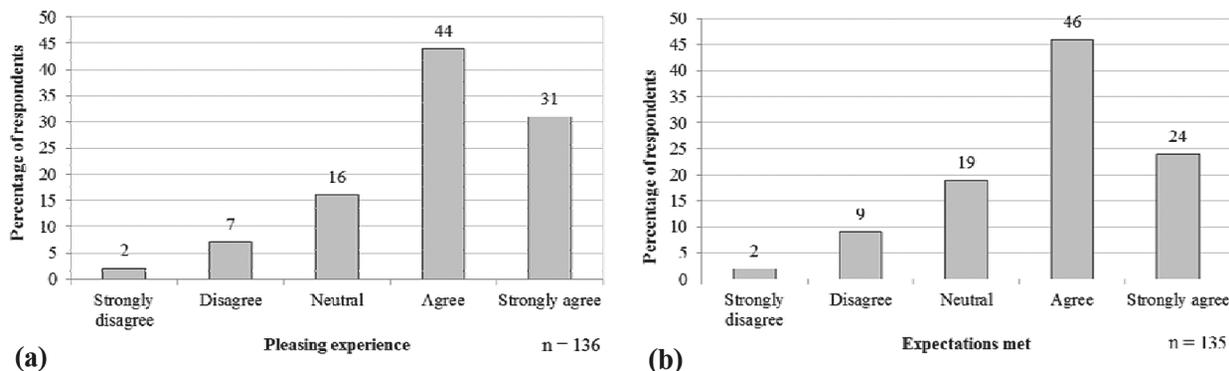

(a)   **(b)**

Fig. 7. Agreement or not whether visitors were pleased with having eaten at one of the franchised restaurants in Kruger National Park (a) and whether the dining experience had met their expectations (b)

Source: Authors

Participants were also asked whether the franchised restaurants have improved the levels of service delivery to customers in restaurants in KNP. The majority (71%) either agreed or strongly agreed that service delivery has improved since the opening of these restaurants in KNP.

In sum, the prevalence of agreement registered in the foregoing discussion signals that this sample of visitors was satisfied with the implementation,

eating experience and service delivery of the franchised restaurants in KNP. Regarding patronage of the franchised restaurants in the park, respondents were further asked which meals they ate at franchised restaurants when visiting KNP. Fig. 8 indicates that lunch (50%) and breakfast (30%) are the most popular meals. The *other* category covers enjoying coffee or buying takeaways at the franchised restaurants or not having meals at these restaurants.
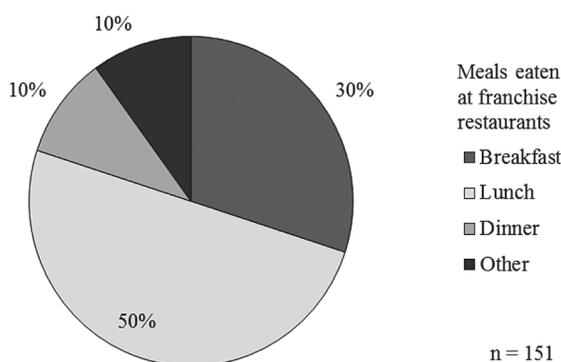

Fig. 8. Meals eaten by respondents at franchise restaurants when visiting Kruger National Park

Source: Authors

Stakeholder perceptions

Six stakeholders were asked whether eating at one of the franchised restaurants contributes to the unique experience and tourism product that KNP

offers. Portia Malabela, Franchise Manager of restaurants in Satara, Olifants and Letaba main camps observed that although it does add to the unique experience of KNP 'it will take time for people to get used to it, because some feel the franchise res-

taurants have brought the city to the park.' She continued that 'It's a shock to them; they come to Satara and expect to find the previous restaurants, where now they find franchise restaurants. It will take time for people to familiarise themselves with the franchise restaurants' (Malabela, personal communication, September 8, 2014).

Francois Haasbroek, journalist at *Weg* magazine (a popular South African travel magazine), reported that visitors consider KNP as part of the common good and 'would protest against any change that is not in accordance with their idea of what the park should be like.' 'Many people won't like the idea of franchise restaurants in the park' because, according to Haasbroek (personal communication, August 29, 2014), 'it would make the image of the park cheaper and more commercial and people don't want to purchase food in the KNP that they could have similarly purchased in a shop in the city.'

James Daniels, Manager of the Business Development Unit of SANParks, wrote that the objective of these restaurants in the park 'is to allow visitors the opportunity to have a decent, value-for-money offering' in KNP. According to Daniels (personal communication, September 5, 2014), 'this is done in restaurants which, in most cases, have unique views and offer a really great setting – the combination of the two is indeed a unique experience in itself.' According to Daniels – and in accordance with the principles of McDonaldization – the franchised branded restaurants in KNP offer standardisation (i.e. efficiency), quality assurance (i.e. predictability), good logistics (i.e. calculability) and owner involvement (i.e. control) (Daniels, personal communication, September 5, 2014).

SANParks required franchisees to tone down signage so that the restaurants would 'specifically fit into the aesthetics and ambiance of the park and the atmosphere of specific main camps' (Stevens, personal communication, August 29, 2014). 'In essence, the evaluation criteria rewarded companies which showed intent to change signage to fit into the parks' contexts. SANParks is very confident and happy that this objective was indeed achieved' (Daniels, personal communication, September 5, 2014). Malabela (personal communication, September 8, 2014) reported that Mugg & Bean and Debonairs tried to blend their restaurants wallpaper with the theme of the park, 'which is all about nature'. 'So

if you visit these restaurants in Satara, the look and feel on the inside of the restaurant is different from what they have all across South Africa' (Malabela, personal communication, September 8, 2014).

According to Daniels (personal communication, September 5, 2014) better service and food quality of the franchised restaurants has led customer satisfaction to rise between 20% and 30%. Daniels (personal communication, September 5, 2014) also noted that: 'In some cases turnovers as high as 120% were achieved, if compared on a month-to-month basis to the previous year.' He continued that:

The average increase in turnovers was around 60% and while the price per meal actually decreased, it is safe to say that as much as double the [number of] people are now making use of the dining facilities and are much more satisfied with the offering they are receiving (Daniels, personal communication, September 5, 2014).

But how does KNP profit from these franchises? According to Stevens (personal communication, August 29, 2014) the model works on a percentage of the turnovers of franchised outlets or minimum rental (whichever is the highest) being paid to SANParks. Ultimately, SANParks managers, restaurant managers, journalists and visitors recognise franchised restaurants as positive contributors to the KNPs service delivery and that they add to an enjoyable KNP experience. The stakeholders and visitors agreed that the implementation of franchised restaurants has been well researched and regulated well (i.e. decor adjustments).

8. Conclusion and recommendations

KNP has evolved as a destination serving more families and multigenerational groups – people who are younger, less affluent and from various countries. Since the introduction of the Wildcard in 2003, day-visit numbers have increased due to the affordability of entrance fees. This has encouraged KNP visitation by a diversity of people (Ferreira, Harmse, 2014). The idea of establishing franchised restaurants in a nature-based tourism destination, such as KNP, was met with divided opinions, polemical discourse and scholarly argument about the issue of mass tourism to national parks in gener-

al. Catering for large numbers of tourists at specific destinations inevitably leads to homogenised and standardised products typified in the concept of McDonaldization. Conversely, the advantages of standardised products are the offering of better service and food quality which ensure tourist satisfaction for the 'mass tourist'. Although beyond the scope of this paper, the authors of this paper are convinced that the 'safari-plus [4]' tourist will increasingly avoid dining in the main camps of KNP that cater much more for the *middle class* tourist.

The aim of the investigation was to explain the *what* and the *where* of casual dining experiences in Kruger National Park and to evaluate the visitors' opinions about or perceptions of the newly introduced franchise restaurants in the park. It was found that visitors' consider eating at a franchise restaurant or picnic site in the park as part of the KNP experience. The most popular meals enjoyed by respondents at franchised restaurants in KNP are breakfast and lunch. The quality of their experiences during these meals has an effect on their overall KNP experience. The respondents' general impressions were satisfaction with the implementation of franchised restaurants; pleasure with having casually dined at the restaurants; agreement that their expectations had been met; and confirmation that service delivery levels have improved.

The restaurant managers, park managers and visitors acknowledge that franchised restaurants are positive contributors to service provision in KNP and that they complement the overall KNP tourist experience. Park managers appraised the franchise restaurants as mechanisms for funding conservation. Standardised products have led to substantial increases in turnover for the park. These advantages the franchised restaurants create contribute indirectly to sustainable conservation and the park's survival. Notwithstanding, the positive findings about the introduction of franchised restaurants in KNP, SANParks' commercialisation strategy should be applied with caution. Because each element of the KNP experience contributes to the total tourism experience of the park, SANParks should never forget KNP's nature-based context which must be conserved with all its authentic elements. It is vital to remember that dining is part of just one element of the park's total tourism product and that KNP should never completely McDonaldize its unique

and much sought-after national treasure for the sake of one element.

It is recommended that a follow-up survey be done to establish park managers', restaurant managers' and KNP visitors' perceptions of the franchised restaurants five or ten years after their introduction to the park. Furthermore, given the paucity of literature on the McDonaldization of catering services in national parks there is scope for tilling this field in other parks in South Africa and the rest of the world.

Notes

(1) SANParks is a semi-government authority responsible for the management of 22 national parks in South Africa.
(2) SANParks has introduced a loyalty card to promote access to national parks by frequent users (mainly domestic visitors).
(3) The local tradition is to fire up a braai (barbecue) and prepare an outdoor meal (breakfast, lunch but especially supper).
(4) Safari-plus tourist refers to the tourist that prefers a five star wilderness and hospitality experience.

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