

The Tourism Department idles while SA tourist attractions turn to filth

By **Hannah Shameema Winkler MP** - DA Member of the Portfolio Committee on Tourism

In the next few weeks, the blue flag status of 3 beaches on Durban's famous golden mile are likely to be removed as water quality testing readings revealed E. Coli levels in the region of 2000. E. Coli in sea water indicates the presence of faeces. Standard readings for E. Coli fall within the 200 range whilst those from Durban's Golden Mile are 10 times higher at 2000.

And yes, swimming in water contaminated with faeces can cause a host of illnesses and is especially hazardous to children, the elderly and people with compromised immune systems.

It goes without saying that it is criminal to expose people to these health risks never mind that we are already in the midst of one of history's worst health crisis.

Tourism in South Africa has reached an all-time low in the wake of Covid-19-induced travel restrictions. The President, this department and South African Tourism (SAT) have called on all spheres of society to step up and save the sector, to save jobs, and have emphasised the importance of tourism in our economic recovery; yet, this department idly stands by whilst some of our most significant tourist attractions turn to filth.

The Duzi Canoe Marathon in KwaZulu-Natal, which is considered the world's leading canoe marathon, has been under perpetual threat of cancellation due to water quality concerns. The Duzi Organisers have gone so far as to engage an independent water quality assessor rather than to rely on municipal data which is regarded with high levels of scepticism and mistrust. Durban Harbour suffers from a similar fate with business and leisure seekers describing Wilson's Wharf as a giant toilet. Howick Falls in the KZN Midlands despite a visit from this tourism portfolio committee remains a squandered opportunity with dumping, sewage spills and poor maintenance a hinderance to investment and tourists alike.

Despite the enormous potential of tourism, there has been no sense of urgency or will to engage COGTA on long-running service delivery failures in waste water treatment even though thousands of litres of raw sewage pour into our rivers, harbours and onto our beaches daily destroying ecosystems, poisoning communities, and degrading key tourism destinations.

In 2018, South Africa generated \$8.4 billion from eco-tourism. South Africa's incredible landscapes, biodiversity and heritage underpin our tourism offer globally and locally. This is why it is so important to conserve, maintain and place an emphasis on the growth of eco-tourism.

In the department's Annual Performance Plan (APP) mention of green tourism is briefly touched upon in the form of the Green Tourism Incentive Programme (GTIP) – this programme has no target besides 4 adjudication meetings per annum. There is no mention of a budget, recipient target, and no markers to establish the success of the programme. This lacklustre approach to incentivise green transformation is great cause for concern. There has also been concern that whilst spending millions on EPWP programs does provide temporary employment relief it does not impart any long-term valuable skills that lend to employability. It would be far more strategic to collaborate with the private sector in the upskilling of EPWP workers with the intent of training Environmental Officers – officers that could then gain meaningful employment in the

private sector by monitoring the parameters of green targets set out in an incentivisation program to accelerate green transformation.

Green transformation in the sector is not only driven by global demand for responsible and eco-friendly tourism offerings, but also by a shared commitment to climate mitigation and adaptation. According to the IPCC special report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5 °C above pre- industrial levels the effects of climate change on South Africa are projected to be catastrophic. As the tourism sector, we have a responsibility to mitigate our carbon footprint, conserve our water resources and biodiversity and to urgently adopt adaptation and resilience strategies to protect lives and livelihoods.

Minister Mmamoloko Kubayi-Ngubane, you have an opportunity to preside over one of the most progressive green projects through transformation of the tourism sector. This is not just your legacy, but an opportunity to actually make a meaningful impact in the lives of millions of South Africans. Do the right thing.