

Amarula Trust training new generation field guides

A skills training initiative, funded by the not-for-profit Amarula Trust, with the aim to boost eco-tourism in Southern Africa and combat unemployment has exposed a total of 116 students to the demands of field guiding as a career.



The eight students at the Wilderness Safaris Damaraland Adventure Camp where the first part of the course was offered - photo by Gerhard van Nekerck.

The project saw eight students undergo a month-long training course at the Erindi Private Game Reserve and Wilderness Safaris Damaraland Adventure Camp in Namibia, ending last week. This is the fourth time Namibian candidates have benefitted from the programme that extends field guide training provided by EcoTraining in association with the Field Guide Association of South Africa (FGASA).

Namibia's travel and tourism industry set to grow

The initiative comes at a time when Namibia's travel and tourism industry is set to significantly increase its contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP). According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, travel and tourism accounted for 14,9% of GDP in 2014, a contribution that is expected to rise to 21,6% by 2025. The growth of the sector will also result in more jobs. The council anticipates that the 102 500 jobs it currently generates directly and indirectly, will rise to 186 000 by 2025 to represent 25% of the country's total employment.

Hardie Basson, who is marketing manager for Amarula's parent company Distell, in Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, said the building of rural skills to support eco-tourism was critical. "The growth in tourism means there is an increasing demand for qualified field guides to host mostly foreign guests. By facilitating the provision of skills, the Amarula Trust is also helping to tackle unemployment.

"The Amarula Field Guide Scholarship programme is a very important part of the work of the trust that focuses on promoting social sustainability and conservation. Begun in 2010 in Botswana, the programme was extended in 2011 to South Africa and, in 2012, to Namibia."

Field guides in training

Candidates with the potential to develop their careers who are currently working in entry-level positions at game lodges and private reserves are chosen by their employers for the project, he explained. When they are promoted after undergoing the course, and they vacate their positions, they also create employment opportunities for others.

The latest Namibian course involved eight candidates from six game lodges and private reserves. Students were taught about the natural, physical environment and ecology, with the accent on climate, biomes and diversity. Some of the areas they covered included arthropods, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals, geology and soils. They also learned about astronomy, tracking, how to drive a 4x4 and even hosting of guests.

“Some of the students come to the course with a basic understanding of their natural environment. The course builds on that and then formalises their knowledge and skills. It also teaches effective communication: how to transfer knowledge to tourists in a fun, interactive and informative manner,” said EcoTraining instructor Gerhard van Niekerk.

At the prize-giving ceremony, Van Niekerk said many of those who benefited from previous training courses run in South Africa, Botswana and Namibia, now worked as field guides in reserves and at private lodges. Some were in reserve or lodge management while others had continued their studies to become academic researchers.

He stressed the importance of the ongoing development and training of the candidates in order for them to become fully-fledged field guides.

Elephant tracking

For many of this year's Namibian students, elephant tracking was their highlight.

“We encountered an elephant cow with her calf at the Wilderness Safaris Damaraland Adventure Camp,” said Rector Tetuka, a student from the Gondwana Namushasha River Lodge in the north of Namibia. “This was the first time for many of us to come across elephants on foot. We were instructed to stand very still in a non-threatening way, and then to go down on our knees while the elephant cow and her calf passed by literally a few metres from where we were.

“It was exhilarating but very scary. Experiences like this teach us to truly respect animals in their natural environments. Here they set the rules, not the humans.”

Students also learned to analyse elephant dung. Sheldin Naruseb, a student from the Erindi Private Game Reserve, explained: “Generally speaking, if the tree bark and leaves in the dung are finely chewed, the elephant is considered young to middle-aged. This is because during their lifetime, elephants go through six sets of large teeth. When the elephant's final set of teeth falls out, the animal slowly dies of malnutrition or starvation as it can no longer chew its food to release the essential nutrients.”