

Land Claimants Tourism Partnership Launches Elephant Tours

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Following on the heels of the [Hazyview Hollow Hotel and Convention Centre partnership deal](#) that was signed in March 2007, the Sandford Trust (the Seasons in Africa tourism group) and Elephants for Africa Forever (EFAF) have signed a contract to provide elephant tours in the Hazyview area.

The Sandford Trust and the private investors have been assisted in the structuring of the partnership by members of the Maruleng and Bushbuck Ridge Economic Development

Initiative (MABEDI) which is a joint initiative of the Business Trust of South Africa and the Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG). This is a pilot initiative that falls under the Business Trust's [Community Investment Programme](#). As a result of the support and guidance from the MABEDI, substantially under-utilised and decaying assets will be transformed into high value tourism assets. Similarly, with the help of the MABEDI team, the Sandford Community have secured themselves very experienced and highly successful private partners - features that are critical to the long-term sustainability of this tourism venture. The MABEDI team is providing further support to Sandford Trust for at least four further tourism and agriculture deals.

The key focus of the Elephant Whispers project is the introduction of trained elephants into Hazyview. Initially five, and ultimately 12, elephants will be introduced to the Sandford Trust's land, on the banks of the Sabie River, as part of the project. The excursions offered, which vary from 45 minutes to two and a half hours, allow for interaction (including touching and trunk greetings), feeding, walking and elephant back riding with some excursions providing for a variety of dining experiences.

Elephant Whispers will train members of the Sandford community to become elephant trainers for the elephant excursion company. An intense three years of training will see chosen members of the Sandford community as elephant trainers, five years will see them as an elephant guide. Elephant Whispers uses the Ask and Reward system to train the elephants that will operate on the Sandford Farm. The system is based on the very simple process of rewarding an elephant with food after having obeyed a command, with fully trained elephants understanding up to 75 commands.

The Ask and Reward system takes between 12 and 18 months to master with the first hurdle seeing trainers having to convince elephants that they can be trusted. Rory Hensman comments, "It is an amazing privilege to be able to work so closely with elephants and to get to know these animals on an intimate level. At Elephant Whispers we aim to spread the conservation message. We constantly check glucocorticoid levels in dung samples to measure stress levels, with recent sample results showing our elephants in training are less stressed than those in the Kruger Park. The elephants acquired at Elephant Whispers were previously earmarked for culling at private game reserves as a result of reduction programmes following reserves having become too small to accommodate the gentle giants.

In terms of the contract the Sandford Trust will enter into a tourism related community/private partnership for a period of 51 years. The contract ensures that the Sandford Trust will receive a guaranteed base rental, as well as turnover based rental in exchange for the use of the property.

The proposed development project is intended to supplement the development of the Hazyview Hollow Convention Centre and Hotel (a R22 million joint venture between the Sandford Trust and the Hollow Group that was signed in March 2007). The Sandford Trust has secured an option to purchase up to 26% of the equity in the venture at any time.

The first 5 elephants are expected to be settled on the farm by end of June 2007. Initial employment is estimated at 25 people, and this will increase to 45 people once all 12 elephants are working. The value of the direct investments in elephants and infrastructure is estimated at R12 million.

Seasons in Africa were thrilled with the proposed partnership which would add to this leading group's repertoire of offerings. Patrick Siebel, managing director at Seasons in Africa comments "Peoples understanding of elephants is essential in ensuring that they are looked after, and this tourism project also aims to educate locals on the extraordinary skills elephants possess so that we can ensure the respect that these beautiful animals deserve."

The elephant tours have already generated considerable interest from the public and press.

To read some of the press coverage, click on the links below.

[Government Digest - Multi Million Rand Partnership, June 2007](#) -169kb

[Sunday Sun - Mapulana in Elephant Business, May 2007](#) -65kb

[City Press - Land Claimants venture into Tourism, May 2007](#) -55kb

[Sowetan - Landmark Deal, March 2007](#) -151kb

[Business Day - Joint Venture to Stimulate Successful Land Reform, March 2007](#) -1071kb

[Daily Sun - This will BEE a big investment, March 2007](#) -91kb

[Financial Mail - Pioneer Partners, March 2007](#) -99kb

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