

IN TOUCH WITH THE AFRICAN LANDSCAPE



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PROPOSED MERENSKY – FOSKOR POWER LINE

ECO-TOURISM SURVEY

PREPARED FOR NSOVO ENVIRONMENTAL CONSULTING

Phase 1 preliminary report

Prepared by The Sustainable Tourism Research Institute of Southern
Africa cc



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	3
Outputs.....	3
Methodology.....	3
2. PRESENT SITUATION	4
3. THE APPROACH TO THE PHASE 1 EXPECTATIONS	5
4. Scope of the Study.....	8
4.1 Route 1.....	8
4.2 Route 2.....	13
4.3 Route 3.....	15
4.4 Route 4	16
5. CONCLUSION.....	17

1. INTRODUCTION

The proposal for the Eco-tourism Survey contained certain specific outputs as well as a suggested methodology. For ease of reference the relevant sections have been extracted as follows.

Outputs

The specific outputs proposed are set out below:

- An inventory of all existing eco-tourism facilities and services within the three corridors;
- A summary of all resources that are considered to have some potential for development into eco-tourism products. This would include a broad-based evaluation of the natural, historical, cultural, aesthetic and other heritage resources of the area and how the construction of power lines could affect their future conservation, development and utilization;
- A description of the role of eco-tourism within the study area with particular reference to any relevance that the area may have to the broader tourism scenario;
- An assessment of the economic impact that new power lines may have on the future viability and sustainability of any major tourism nodes or clusters within or adjacent to the corridors;
- A summary of existing eco-tourism markets and an indication of how developing recreational and tourism needs, expectations and patterns may be met by present and potential eco-tourism products within the study area;

Methodology

- Extensive use would be made of Google maps and the exact location of each route would be plotted on large scale images;
- These images would allow assessments to be made of any existing eco-tourism or tourism areas and facilities that may be situated within the three corridors;
- A database of all existing eco-tourism facilities within the three corridors would be researched using web-site searches and other printed tourism publications;
- Enquiries would be made of all affected local authorities in terms of any known new eco-tourism development initiatives within the corridor areas. This would also include a study of the IDPs of the relevant Local and District Municipalities to uncover any tourism infrastructure that may be planned within the corridors;
- The most sensitive sites would be visited and a selection of local eco-tourism operators would be contacted to assess their reaction to the power line developments;
- The images would allow an assessment to be made of any areas of natural beauty or areas that have particular natural significance or importance, and that could be negatively impacted by the construction of power lines;
- An evaluation of these impacts will be done in terms of the following criteria:
 - An overview of existing and potential eco-tourism markets to assess travel habits and behaviour patterns and any significant trends affecting the shape and size of these market sectors;
 - Some characteristics of the 'new' versus the 'old' tourism will be discussed to further indicate most likely trends in tourism demand in the medium term;

- Aesthetics – can ‘aesthetic’ values be quantified, bearing in mind the following comments: “Aesthetics cannot be judged by popular vote – it is based almost entirely on subjective perceptions – it is a function of context and place and the product of cultural convention – it is the result of conditioning by local traditional and cultural environment – it produces an institutionalised image against which we can make some sort of measurement, but there are no universal parameters and will vary from culture to culture. Also taking into account an observation by John A. Livingston “*The beauty of aesthetics is that, in spite of our infatuation with opinion surveys, it cannot be quantified. Aesthetics does not rely for its respectability on hard data*”;
- Playing “Devil’s Advocate” – Some examples will be given of other premier eco-tourism and tourism destinations where man-made structures and activities clearly offend certain sections of the travelling public and yet seem to be quite acceptable to others. In this regard it is noted that “Our sensibilities have become blunted and we have become inured to man-made structures on our rural landscapes”;
- Landscapes and areas that should be avoided at all cost. This would include ‘high ground – especially the Drakensberg/Wolkberg Escarpment; wetlands, vleis and dams; unspoilt bushveld and any area which depends on its ‘landscape’ qualities for visitor use – hiking, hunting, game and bird watching; areas that clearly exhibit a strong ‘Sense of Place’ – a quality that is also difficult to quantify and is related to the concept of aesthetics.

December 2016 note: This report does not require detailed updates, as the proposed amendments will not affect the outcomes or recommendations of this report. We note that the original proposed Route 1 (green route) has indeed been re-located slightly to the north so that it runs immediately alongside the R 530 linking Phalaborwa to Mica and then follows the R 40 and the R 526 all the way to The Oaks, as we had suggested in our July 2012 report. Due to the fact that Route 1 has slightly changed to the suggested alignment along the road, we are of the opinion that the amendment should be supported, as eco-tourism impacts have been largely mitigated.

2. PRESENT SITUATION

In view of the urgency to provide an interim assessment of the eco-tourism operations and resources within the proposed power line corridors, it was proposed that the following actions would form part of the Phase 1 Report:

1] Compile an inventory of all existing eco-tourism facilities and services within the three corridors

- Access relevant Google images of the corridors indicating exact routing of proposed power lines;
- Access websites and databases in order to compile a list of known eco-tourism facilities and services within the corridors.

2] Summarize all resources that are considered to have some potential for development into eco-tourism products. This would include a broad-based evaluation of the natural, historical, cultural, aesthetic and other heritage resources of the area and how the construction of power lines could affect their future conservation, development and utilization

- Using Google images and own experience of the area compile a list of all resources that have values that could be negatively impacted by the power lines;
- Secure information from Local and District Municipalities (IDPs) regarding any proposed eco-tourism development plans within the corridors
- Make contact with a selection of existing eco-tourism operators that would be affected by the proposed power lines.

3. THE APPROACH TO THE PHASE 1 EXPECTATIONS

Some background commentary may help to clarify certain of the issues that guide our sometimes cautious and conservative approach to tourism development, and our conviction that natural and unspoilt countryside is a rare and decreasing asset and that every alternative needs to be explored before new man-made structures are allowed to invade such areas.

1] Comments on the Eco-tourism Sector of the General Tourism Industry

It was clearly the intention of the client to use the word ‘eco-tourism’ to refer to any tourism attraction, facility, service or resource that is dependent for its basic appeal on the natural/cultural environment.

However, it should be noted that the concept of ‘eco-tourism’ was originally conceived by Héctor Ceballos-Lascuráin who indicated that eco-tourism is a form of nature-based tourism that involves not only a commitment to the conservation of nature but also has a strong sense of social responsibility. In other words, the active involvement by local communities in the tourism operations is essential. The Eco-tourism Society has provided a definition that embraces these two focus areas as follows: “Eco-tourism is responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people”.

Whilst it is accepted that most tourism operations will create certain benefits for local people, it is a much more positive involvement by local people in the planning, development and management of the natural – and cultural – resources that is expected if an operation is to adopt the ‘Eco-tourism’ branding. Unfortunately, many operations that have adopted the ‘eco-tourism’ label do not comply with this expectation and the positive brand images that should go with it have been seriously diluted and compromised.

The above comments do not affect our understanding that this ‘Eco-tourism Survey’ includes all existing tourism operations that may fall within the proposed power line corridors as well as those natural, cultural and historical resources that have some potential for future utilization as tourism attractions.

2] The Sustainability of the Tourism and Eco-tourism Sectors

The following is a classic definition of what is meant by sustainability.

“Sustainability is the action of using resources to meet the needs of the present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs from the same resources.”

This is a very sound idea but does it really work? Today's 'needs' are so great that there are very few examples of any voluntary 'holding back' on resource exploitation simply because the small voice of conscience may be asking whether the needs of future generations have been considered.

The word 'sustainability' was surely invented and popularized by the environmentalists. Big business may pay lip service to the concept but the politicians adopt an even less sincere approach to sustainability. Each of these groups is known to have a different 'time horizon' in terms of their planning for the future. The environmentalist sees time stretching forever into the future and works to secure the ongoing conservation and utilisation of rare resources; the businessman's 'time horizon' may extend for no more than perhaps 25 to 30 years, or the time it will take to secure an adequate return on investment; and the politician has a 'time horizon' of only five years – the time he or she is given to try and make a difference in the lives of the voters before the next election.

The 'eco-tourism' operator is caught somewhere in-between the conservationist and the businessman. Optimising the value of his property and other investments must be balanced by the need to retain the local physical environment in a condition that will appeal to those visitors who will, hopefully, continue to be attracted by wild Africa and the very special experiences that it has to offer.

But the tourism industry is a fragile and sensitive sphere of economic activity and travellers are notorious for being of a very fickle nature. This means that a wide range of 'external' factors constantly militate against the health and well-being of the sector, basically because recreational travel is regarded as a luxury item on the household budgets of the greater majority of the population. It is only when all the basic living and household needs have been met that any remaining discretionary income may be allocated to recreational and leisure travel.

Some of these 'external' factors may be summarised as follows:

- Social or political unrest in both the market generating countries and the host destinations;
- Health scares as was evidenced by Asian Flue, Mad Cow Disease, Avian flu and many other generally short-term epidemics;
- Recessions and other currency disorders. This is very evident at present as several European countries find themselves in economic difficulties both at a national level and amongst that sector of the population that would normally partake freely in domestic or international travel;
- Safety scares arising from environmental conditions.

As with most other consumer products, tourism destinations have life cycles and, unless innovation and creativity are constantly applied to the products on offer, the interest of the buying public may easily be diverted to more attractive and exciting offers. The simple step of introducing a more effective marketing campaign by a competitive destination may have serious consequences for existing facilities and services.

Therefore, we subscribe to a conservative approach as far as new or expanded tourism developments are concerned, and we are very hesitant to support any activity that may constitute a threat to the natural and cultural environment, and that may alter the intrinsic integrity and 'seduction' value of the resources upon which this industry is so dependent.

3] Implications for the Proposed Power Lines

Throughout the world, and more especially in countries that are on a rising path of economic development, natural areas are shrinking and there is a constant erosion of both the size and the integrity of many natural and unspoiled areas. In fact, at present, there are almost no areas of land being set aside for conservation purposes and where this is happening, there tend to be a number of compromises in terms of how such land will be managed and utilized. The simple objective of setting aside land 'for its own sake' or 'for the sake of its biological content' does not feature as a high priority at Government level.

A natural environment that is altered in any way by the imposition of man-made structures will never revert to its pristine condition, a state that may have taken millions of years to achieve.

Therefore, the little unaltered land that is left should be protected rigorously; and very compelling reasons would have to be provided to indicate why new power lines should be planned to traverse natural areas, and especially areas that have official conservation status.

It is also very relevant to note that the process of developing eco-tourism attractions, facilities and services is ongoing and increasing focus is being directed at uncovering the natural, historical and cultural heritage resources of rural communities and building appropriate tourism experiences around such resources. This demands that the utmost care should be taken not to impact negatively on the integrity of such resources because they may yet be found to have some useful development option in the future.

In describing the different values of land, the following may be relevant:

“As rural land becomes more populated or overrun by mining, industry, agriculture or forestry, unspoiled land assumes a very appealing and important aesthetic component. Although ‘aesthetics’ may not appear immediately to play an important part in social development, it is vital for the wellbeing of this and future generations that such areas be retained simply for their ‘existence’ value. All life forms have a right to exist in a state that is uncontaminated or unaltered by human activity, although the principle of ‘limits to acceptable change’ may need to be applied to certain landscapes and life forms. In other words, their right to existence is no different to the rights of humans.

Linked to ‘existence’ value is the ‘witness’ value that simply requires that we preserve selected stretches of land, and their associated eco-systems, for the benefit of future generations. It is worth remembering that for a piece of natural grassland to recover from a state of destruction and, once again, to be regarded as climax grassland, may take several hundred years. In some cases, these landscapes may never again be the same as they were when they took thousands, or perhaps, millions of years to evolve.

It is also important to preserve sufficiently large areas of land to ensure that future generations retain the option to decide for themselves, at some time in the future, how this resource could be utilized. There is no doubt that every generation develops new knowledge and skills, and the speed at which technology is transforming our thinking on the man-made and the natural worlds, indicates that the next two or three generations will, undoubtedly, be very much smarter than we are at the beginning of the 21st Century.

Their attitudes to land and natural and cultural resources may also take new directions and it is not the function of the present generation of decision-makers to compromise the integrity of our heritage thereby reducing the options available to our descendants.

The 'bequest' value is similar to the 'option' value but it implies a responsibility to leave to our children a world that is in slightly better shape than the one we inherited from our parents. A bequest implies something of value being handed on, but it may be a vain hope that this generation has the time, the will, the skills or the resources to really make a difference to the current state of the environment before it is time to bequeath it to the next generation."

In Phase 2 of this survey it is intended to try and provide an estimate of the economic value of the 'eco-tourism' industry along these proposed new power line corridors but, even armed with this information, it would be extremely difficult to predict what the economic impacts could be on the value of such businesses and their income streams as a result of building new power lines.

4. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

A map indicating the four (4) possible routes for the power line that will link Merensky (Steelpoort) to FOSKOR (Phalaborwa) was given to this consultant on appointment. Of these 4 proposed routes, the green route alignment was determined by the various specialist environmental sub-consultants to be the most feasible, and as such this at this eco-tourism assessment should focus on this route because of the limited time frame available for the study. However, some comments will be offered on the other routes with an emphasis on any features that may affect the final choice of route.

4.1 Route 1

General Comment - This line has approximately 15 bends and it crosses river sensitive zones approximately 7 times. The route stretches along an area of sensitive flora and important bird species for approximately 15 kms.

Section 1: FOSKOR to the R 40

General Description:

This line will loop out of the existing FOSKOR substation in Phalaborwa in a southwesterly direction along the secondary road 530 towards Mica where it crosses the R 40 south of Mica Village.

Known Eco-tourism Facilities and Resources:

With the exception of the first few kms, this corridor passes through approximately 30 kms of the Balule Nature Reserve. Commercial eco-tourism operations within the Balule Nature Reserve include the following:

- Baluleni Safari Lodge – also self-catering
- Kurhula Wildlife Lodge
- Masodini Private Game Lodge
- Mohlabetsi Safari Lodge – also self-catering
- Pondoro Game Lodge
- Raptor Retreat Game Lodge – also self-catering
- Singwe River Lodge – also conference and wedding venue

- Toro Yaka Bush Lodge

Two other self-catering establishments exist within the Balule Nature Reserve. They are:

- isiLimela Lodge
- Sangasava

In addition, there are a large number of private lodges and homes that do not offer facilities for visitors.

The Warden of the Balule Nature Reserve has submitted a well-documented letter of concern regarding this new power line and it is relevant to start this section with a quotation from this letter.

“The mission of management (both Balule Nature Reserve and the Association of Private Nature Reserves – APNR) entails the following:

- *The APNR is committed to the conservation of biodiversity for the sake of posterity, and to manage its assets as a sustainable resource to serve the ecological, social and economic interests of the central Lowveld;*
- *The APNR landscape will be developed to maintain the faunal and floral assemblages, ecological processes, cultural resources and landscape characteristics representative of the area, to foster international co-operation for the development of the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area (GLTFCA), and offer long-term benefit to the people of the area;*
- *To conserve a wide diversity of indigenous species and their associated habitats using sustainable utilization principles*

The primary objective for the APNR is as follows:

- *The primary objective of the Private Nature Reserves that constitute the ANPR and the APNR itself is to provide for ecologically and aesthetically sustainable (non-consumptive and consumptive) use of the area for its owners, based on wildlife-focussed recreation, tourism and hunting.*
- *In addition one of the secondary objectives is to cost-effectively restore and conserve the ANPR’s landscapes, ecosystems and biodiversity in a productive and aesthetic state that will achieve the primary objective and be considered to be sustainable within the climatic and geological constraints of the area.”*

*“Increasing the number of lines will definitely have a negative impact on the vision, mission and objectives and consequently the property values and future management of the Reserve **which cannot be tolerated.**”*

The fact that several power lines already traverse through Balule Nature Reserve cannot be used as justification for building an additional power line. Ten or more commercial tourism operators within the Reserve depend for their livelihood on an environment that is as natural, wild and unspoilt as possible.

Comments made above indicate that the eco-tourism industry is highly competitive and it is not unreasonable to predict that some competitive destination may one day advise that *“you should not go to Balule Nature Reserve, because all you will see are power lines!”*

Olifants West Nature Reserve - A letter from Wickus du Toit Attorneys raises some additional objections in respect of properties on the farm Cambridge that is contained within the Olifants West Nature Reserve (OWNR) section of the Balule Nature Reserve. They are quoted hereunder:

“The corridor 1 (green line) is planned parallel to a small existing power line from Mica. Putting another line there will actually double the impact.

- When you talk about economic profile of the study area you must take into consideration the small emerging game farmers. These farmers have been persuaded to change from domestic livestock to lodges. Most of them have dropped their fences to allow for wild animals to roam on their farms to attract tourism. Putting a power line through the area will affect these emerging farmers negatively because tourists will tend to stay away from A protected area that has visual intrusion. [It is expected that the 3 km buffer will allow for consideration of deviation of the power line to mitigate some impacts where necessary]*
- If the power line is recommended through the protected area the study team must be aware that OOWNR is definitely going to appeal the authorization of the project.*
- The OOWNR would like to recommend that the power line follows the R40 road. A map was then used to explain the area owned by OOWNR and where the power line may be placed without creating significant impact to the area.*

A further communication from the Warden of OOWNR contains the following comments:

- 2. Please also be aware that the Olifants West Nature Reserve is a co-operative management model that has recently made successful application for Nature Reserve status in terms of the National Environmental Management; Protected Areas Act, 2003 (Act No.57 of 2003).*
- 3. Olifants West Nature Reserve (OOWNR), as a co-operative association of 56 landowners (members), has not been consulted during this process. This includes the individual property owners that will be directly affected by this route.*
- 4. OOWNR is an international tourist destination with 200 bed-nights at various commercial lodges. One of the more prominent lodges is situated on the farm Cambridge 4 which is directly adjacent to the proposed Route 1.*
- 5. It is our belief that the market values of the properties within the OOWNR will be adversely affected by the proposed Route 1. Although there is already a similar line through the reserve, we firmly believe that an additional over-head power-line will impact negatively on the intrinsic values of the properties and reduce their appeal.*
- 6. The visual impact of the proposed Route 1 must be considered and this will further reduce the values of adjacent properties. **This is in contradiction with the Management Plan for the Associated Private Nature Reserves (Peel, 2007), which has been approved after extensive public participation.***

It must also be said that the required maintenance of the proposed route will create similar objections and problems as those mentioned above. ESKOM already receives many objections and negative public opinion regarding the maintenance and bush-clearing of the existing over-head infrastructure that bisects OOWNR. The potential for continued conflict, should Route 1 still be considered, will increase.

A letter from Oxford Trading states as follows:

“As a landowner that would be affected by Route #1, as illustrated in the Draft Scoping Report, we would like to hereby place on record that we object to the proposed power line traversing through our property. Our property is part of the Olifants West Nature Reserve, which is a component of the Greater Kruger National Park. Olifants West Game Reserve has also very recently made a successful application for Nature Reserve status. Should Eskom proceed with route # 1 the effects of the power line will negatively impact us as well the Olifants West Game Reserve. There is already an existing line traversing through our property and having another line adjacent to this line with a servitude width of 47m would be a visual nightmare, in this very lovely and scenic part of the country. The visual impact of such a line

will ultimately have a negative impact of the value of the land, as well as the natural habitat of the area, as indicated in the objection submitted by the Warden of Olifants West Nature Reserve.”

At a meeting between Nsovo and representatives from the OOWNR, the Warden (Mr. Craig Spencer) made the following observations:

“In the property that he is managing, there are 112 residents living within the boundary, his main concern was the wildlife and the fauna (birds) within the property, should another line come inside the property, it will have a detrimental impacts on them as birds always get electrified and the wildlife always bumps the pylons as they move around the bush. Furthermore, he is also concerned about the lodges around the Mica area as his also responsible for them and to his understanding, that area is a protected area. He concluded by the meeting by saying he will email formal comments to Nsovo, however, his biggest concern for the proposed project is that Olifants West Nature Reserve is the intrinsic value where people all over come for a natural feeling.”

Section 2: R 40 to The Oaks

General Description:

The corridor continues from the R 40 in a southwesterly direction and runs through the Blyde Olifants Conservancy where several other commercial lodges are situated. It then passes within the Diphuti and Finale villages in Maruleng and crosses the R 36 at The Oaks

Known Eco-tourism Facilities and Resources:

Two commercial tourism operations lie alongside the eastern bank of the Olifants River almost immediately after the proposed power line crosses the R 40.

After crossing the Olifants River the corridor traverses the Blyde Olifants Conservancy where two major tourism operations are located. They are as follows:

- Phuza Moya
- Lissataba Shareblock

Dr Albert Zinn, (Chairman of BOC) sent a letter of concern regarding the proposed new power line corridor. He stated:

“The Blyde Olifants Conservancy (BOC) comprises 17,000 ha surrounding the confluence of the Blyde and the Olifants Rivers. Power Lines currently traverse the Conservancy in two areas; one, to the south of the confluence (Route 2) and the other on the northern banks of the Olifants (Route 1).

That portion of the Conservancy on the northern aspect of the Olifants River is currently under application for registration as a Nature Reserve; ultimately the whole BOC which is regarded as a Raptor Conservancy and very sensitive in its bio-diversity. You are no doubt aware of the casualties amongst the large birds caused by Power Lines.

The beauty of this unspoiled area has already been jeopardised by the current power lines and I fear the value of the property will diminish further should your EIA suggest anything other than ‘Route 4’. We would also like to address other aspects of your intended construction.”

It is noted that the proposed power line passes directly through the village of Finale before reaching The Oaks. It is assumed that the 3 km corridor will allow the line to be deviated,

preferably to the north west because it would approach too close to the Olifants River if moved to the south east.

Several years ago, there was a fairly detailed plan to develop eco-tourism facilities at Mburuburung a site on the bank of the Olifants River close to the Village of Finale. Although the plan was never implemented it is still worthy of development and it is, therefore, recommended that the power line be moved as far from the river as the corridor will permit.

Section 3: The Oaks to Ga-Moraba Village

General Description:

The route crosses the Olifants River immediately to the west of The Oaks and then re-crosses the R 36 approximately half way between the T-Junction (R 36 and 531) and the Strijdom Tunnel. It then ascends the northern Drakensberg escarpment immediately to the east of the Strijdom Tunnel before reaching the Village of Ga-Moraba.

Known Eco-tourism Facilities and Resources:

This section gives rise to several matters of concern.

1] Immediately to the west of the R 36, and part of The Oaks Village, is an operation that is described on the signboard as Sepeke Cultural Village. This was a project developed by Maruleng Local Municipality almost 8 years ago and it originally consisted on 5 or 6 'thatch over' safari tents on concrete bases. There was also an office, kitchen and ablutions as well as a small but attractive swimming pool and public braai facilities. This facility was never opened to the public and has since deteriorated to the point where nothing can be salvaged from the tents and the pool is beyond repair. More recently, the Municipality constructed a series of thatched buildings alongside the road and, once again, these have never been brought into operation. Some of the buildings were clearly designed as workplaces for crafters while the larger buildings had some potential for as a restaurant and a meeting venue.

There are some vague plans to revive not only the accommodation section but also to lease the craft centre to a suitable entrepreneur. If the accommodation units are re-built they do have a fine view across the Olifants River towards the escarpment.

Therefore, it would be critical to site the power line as carefully as possible so that the quality of the landscape view is not compromised.

2] The escarpment adjacent to the Strijdom Tunnel is popular with birdwatchers because of the presence of certain rare raptor species. Due west of Ga-Moraba is the village of Tshwenyane and to quote from a recent report by a concerned consultant: *"There are not many such spots left in the world. It has the potential of being an icon in tourism as the most impressive portal to Limpopo - Land of Myth, Legend and Wilderness. An Old Coach Road dating from the 1840's and the modern Abel Erasmus Pass (R36), cross each other in the centre of this rural village, situated on a small plateau, on the edge of an escarpment in the spectacular Drakensberg Mountains. It is surrounded by magnificent mountains and natural scenery, and it has clean unpolluted air, deep red soil and ample pure fountain water. It has a relatively small community of approximately 250 families and is part of the Bapedi-ba-Dinkwanyane Traditional Council – presenting a rare opportunity for the development of a unique African destination and experience."*

Section 4: Ga-Moraba Village to Steelpoort

General Description:

After the mountainous areas, which are prone to lightning, the line descends in a southwesterly direction towards the low-lying Burgersfort village. It crosses the R37, a few kilometers north of Burgersfort and then continues along the Secondary Road 555 to Steelpoort. Here it enters the Merensky substation. Part of the central section of this route has no access roads and it is assumed that Eskom would have to construct a track for maintenance purposes.

Known Eco-tourism Facilities and Resources:

The first part of this section is very sparsely populated tribal land. No known eco-tourism operations have been identified in this section and it is only along the road between Burgersfort and Steelpoort that a lodge with a range of accommodation and other tourist facilities is located. This is Khumula Game Lodge situated on farm 'Fraaiuitzicht' approximately 10 kms north of Steelpoort. The owner, Mr. Pretorius, has registered his concern regarding the power line that would certainly obstruct the view from the lodge towards distant mountains.

4.2 Route 2

General Comment - This line has approximately 23 bends and it crosses river sensitive zones approximately 5 times. The route stretches over an area of sensitive flora and important bird species for approximately 20 km.

Section 1: FOSKOR to Hoedspruit

General Description:

The line loops out of the existing FOSKOR substation in Phalaborwa in a southeasterly direction for approximately 5 kms. It bends westward for another 5 kms and then bends southwards towards Hoedspruit following the existing 132 kV line. Almost the full length of the corridor from FOSKOR to near Hoedspruit town passes through the Balule South Nature Reserve.

Known Eco-tourism Facilities and Resources:

The following is an extract from a letter from Ms. Karin Kampinga representing the Olifants River Game Reserve Share Block Ltd.

"We would like to place our objection on record for the proposed Route No. 2 (Blue), which traverses right through the middle of Olifants River Game Reserve Share Block Ltd (ORGR) in a North/South direction. See attached map for position of the reserve. Olifants River Game Reserve was proclaimed by the Administrator of the Transvaal on the 3rd November 1993 as a Nature Reserve and therefore falls under the ambit of the Protected Areas Act, 2003 (Act No. 57 of 2003), please see attached. This proclamation covers the following properties through which the Blue Route (Route 2) is proposed:

- The Remaining Extent of the farm Grootdraai 38
- Portion 1 of Grootdraai 38
- Remaining Extent of farm Lisbon 37; and
- Portion 1 of the farm Madrid
- Klipheuwel 36

ORGR is a component of the Greater Kruger National Park, being a member of the Balule Nature Reserve which in turn is a member of the Associated Private Nature Reserves (APNR),

which is subject to the authority of S A National Parks and therefore also falls within the Management Strategy of the APNR.

The following comments have been extracted from the minutes of a public participation meeting and they raise the interesting point that a spokesperson for Nsovo (Phuti Makweya) said that “whichever route gets approved by the Authority, there will be mitigation measures that will be undertaken where lodges, residential homes, animals will be relocated.” This comment requires clarification.

The minutes also recorded the following comments: “Ms. Karin Kampinga (KK) stated that in their property, they have four pylons that are supplying FOSKOR, a single power line and a railway line. Already their property is congested and they do not know where the other line will fit should the blue route be approved. She asked why the existing line can’t be upgraded. (Henry Nawa (HN) responded that should Eskom consider an upgrade, there would be loss of power during the upgrading process which Eskom is trying to avoid.)

KK asked how will compensations be done and what if landowners refuse to be relocated. (Phuti Makweya (PM) stated that it will be a willing buyer, willing seller situation. However, if the owner is willing to sell or relocate, they will be compensated according to the market value of their properties.)

KK said Olifants South is part of the proclamation area and is also a protected area, how will Eskom go about such area should alternative 2 get approved?

(PM responded saying whichever route gets approved by the Authority, there will be mitigation measures that will be undertaken were lodges, residential homes, animals will be relocated.)

KK raised a concern about the damage that might happen during construction, as the construction vehicles will be moving around. Following the concern raised by KK, HN stated that, during construction, Eskom will appoint an Environmental Control Officer (ECO) to be on site at all times to see that nothing is damaged and the site is re-instated as it was before.”

Although this line traverses a large section of the Balule South Nature Reserve, it does follow the railway line for most of the way and this may be a mitigating factor because it is noted that the tourist game drives do not spend much time in this eastern section of the Nature Reserve.

Section 2: Hoedspruit to the R 527

General Description:

Just before Hoedspruit town it crosses the R40 and bends westwards and moves between the existing 275 kV and secondary road 527 on the eastern side of Diphuti and Finale villages.

Known Eco-tourism Facilities and Resources:

This is predominantly agricultural land but some farms form part of the Blyde Olifants Conservancy. No eco-tourism facilities have been identified.

Section 3: R 527 to R 36

General Description:

The line passes through five separate farms.

Known Eco-tourism Facilities and Resources:

No eco-tourism facilities have been identified on these five properties but it is understood that wildlife is bred on farm Calais.

The power line would run approximately half way between the R 36 and the main Drakensberg escarpment and may have a negative visual impact.

Section 4: R 36 to Steelpoort

General Description:

Please refer to comments made in Sections 3 and 4 for Route 1

Known Eco-tourism Facilities and Resources:

Please refer to comments made in Sections 3 and 4 for Route 1

4.3 Route 3

General Comment - This line has approximately 26 bends and it crosses river sensitive zones approximately 6 times and stretches along several river sensitive zones. The route stretches over an area of sensitive flora and important bird species for approximately 15 km.

Section 1: R 36 at Ga-Moraba to Burgersfort

General Description:

This route follows the R 36 from Ga-Moraba Village to the R 555 turnoff just north of Ohrigstad. From here it follows closely the R 555 to Burgersfort.

Known Eco-tourism Facilities and Resources:

No eco-tourism operations have been identified along this route and there are no conservation or protected areas along this section.

This would appear to be a very acceptable route because the power line would be within easy distance of main roads and additional bush clearing for a maintenance track would not be required.

Section 2: Burgersfort to Steelpoort

General Description:

The line crosses the R37, a few kilometers north of Burgersfort, and then continues along the Secondary Road 555 to Steelpoort

Known Eco-tourism Facilities and Resources:

Along the road between Burgersfort and Steelpoort is a lodge with a range of accommodation and other tourist facilities. This is Khumula Game Lodge situated on farm 'Fraaiuitzicht' approximately 10 kms north of Steelpoort. The owner, Mr. Pretorius, has registered his concern regarding the power line that would certainly obstruct the view from the lodge towards distant mountains.

4.4 Route 4

General Comment - This route stretches for a long distance in mountainous areas, and crosses river sensitive zones four times. The route traverses areas of sensitive flora for a distance of approximately 50 kms.

Section 1: FOSKOR – R 36

General Description:

This line will loop out of the existing FOSKOR substation in Phalaborwa in a northwesterly direction along the secondary road 530. It crosses the R 40 and proceeds in a generally westerly direction before crossing the R 526 just north of its junction with the R 40. From here it continues in a west-south-westerly direction to the R 36.

Known Eco-tourism Facilities and Resources:

Between the R 40 and the R 526 most of the proposed corridor passes through the Selati Game Reserve which includes the Lelie Nature Reserve, home to a special species of cycad.

Thereafter the majority of the corridor falls within either the Makalali Game Reserve or the Karongwe Game Reserve both of which have commercial eco-tourism operations. It would appear that none of them have, to date, registered any concerns with Nsovo Environmental Consulting regarding the proposed power line, but they will be contacted in Phase 2 should this route be considered as a possible option.

Section 2: R 36 – Penge

General Description:

The line continues through tribal areas and villages before ascending the escarpment through very mountainous countryside and then crossing the Olifants River to Penge, a class 2 town in the western section of the study area.

Known Eco-tourism Facilities and Resources:

Immediately after crossing the R 36, the corridor traverses through Bulwer, a property declared as a protected area and managed by Limpopo Tourism and Parks. It has no commercial activities but it may be regarded as a potential resource for the future.

The crossing of the escarpment would present some challenges for the construction team and it is possible that negative visual impacts would occur as the line passes over the skyline. However, this skyline will be at some considerable distance from any existing or potential eco-tourists and should not be considered as a problem. In this regard the following is quoted from a report by Nsovo: *“The visual impact of the power lines would be at its maximum at distances of 500 m or less.*

However, the visual impact of an object in the landscape decreases quickly as the distance between the observer and the object increases. The visual impact at 1 km is approximately a quarter of the impact viewed from 500 m, and at 2 km, is one eighth of the impact viewed from 500 m. Therefore, objects appear insignificant in any landscape beyond 5 km.”

At the same time, this section of the Drakensberg escarpment is regarded as almost a wilderness area and humankind may be in need of such unspoilt landscapes at some time in the future. It would be a pity to push a power line through a piece of countryside that is so remote (at present) with potential adventure and eco-tourism potential.

Section 3: Penge – Steelpoort

General Description:

From Penge it bends southwards, crossing and following for a short section the R37 that links Lebowakgomo to Burgersfort. It then moves away to the west of the R 37 and heads directly to the Merensky substation.

Known Eco-tourism Facilities and Resources:

No eco-tourism operations have been identified along this section and the corridor does not appear to traverse any protected or sensitive natural systems. However, it does run through a number of rural villages and it is possible that sites of cultural heritage value may be impacted.

5. CONCLUSION

There is widespread concern regarding the siting of a new power line that will run through conservation and officially protected areas. The objection raised in connection with Route 1 are supported by this consultant.

The opposition from the private nature and game reserves is unlikely to simply fade away and ESKOM could expect further objections and possible legal actions to prevent the proposed new power line being built.

In view of this existing and anticipated antagonism towards the power line it would seem that ESKOM should investigate the following alternative as far as Route 1 is concerned.

If the corridor could be re-located slightly to the north so that it runs immediately alongside the R 530 linking Phalaborwa to Mica and then follows the R 40 and the R 526 all the way to The Oaks, this would cause the least impact on the conservation areas because these roads already constitute barriers through the landscape. This route would also reduce considerably the need to build new maintenance tracks and it is believed that such an alternative may be acceptable to the landowners.

It is accepted that some additional public participation work would be required but, in general, the majority of the landowners affected by this route have already been registered as IAPs and it should not be too costly to advise them of the possible route change and to hold additional focus group discussions.

Phase 2 will focus on more detailed interaction with affected landowners as well as the project to try and assess the economic value of the eco-tourism sector in the study area.

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