

South Africa – Timbavati balancing tourism and hunting revenue to ensure sustainable contribution to conservation

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Africa Geographic

Opinion piece: Timbavati increases conservation levy to fund anti-poaching and other costs

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Opinion post: Written by Don Scott, co-owner of [Tanda Tula](#)

For the past few years, the Timbavati Private Nature Reserve – home to both of our [Tanda Tula camps](#) – has been facing a dilemma. In the Greater Kruger, poaching has shown no signs of abating, wildlife crime syndicates are becoming increasingly ruthless, and **reserve security costs have continued to soar – 850% in the last five years**, to be exact. We have become increasingly aware that this situation is not sustainable, and for some years now, we have been exploring leverage points. Where could the much-needed revenue be generated?

Traditionally Timbavati, along with many other private nature reserves within the Greater Kruger, has relied on hunting revenue as a significant contributor to the enormous operational costs of running and securing a

private nature reserve (which receives no government subsidies). Hunting is regulated by government conservation agencies and is sanctioned by the Kruger National Parks' (and the Timbavati's) strict ethical norms towards sustainable utilisation of wildlife. Since the idea behind sustainable utilisation is for it to be just that – *sustainable* – increasing hunting quotas to boost income is simply not an option. Using the same logic, increasing revenue by adding too many commercial beds in the Timbavati would also be unsustainable.

Now, I fully appreciate that hunting is still a contentious issue which can polarise opinion and create heated debate. Tanda Tula is a photographic tourism operation and I am not a hunter myself in any way shape or form. However, my work on regional conservation forums has made me appreciate that in the Greater Kruger, hunting continues to play a role in creating revenue for the conservation and maintenance of the wilderness landscape. As a citizen of the Greater Kruger, the Tanda Tula philosophy is that we focus on the big picture – one where multiple land-uses co-exist, but where common ethical norms and standards are playing an increasing role in the regulation of all activities including hunting, tourism, security and conservation. In fact, it is the willingness of the multitudes of stakeholders, within the Greater Kruger, to accept their differences, but work with common principles towards a common goal, that has made the Greater Kruger such an enormous success – one of the only wildlife areas in Africa that continues to expand and grow, despite all of the external pressures on land use.

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As one of the members of the Timbavati Exco, my portfolio in the reserve is to look after the commercial lodges and also to assist with financial management and planning for the reserve. Last year, during the Timbavati's annual budgeting exercise, I analysed the reserve's historical revenue data, and I made a somewhat startling discovery.

In our most recent year of data, where the Timbavati photographic tourism numbers had peaked, the revenue brought into the reserve by 24,000 photographic tourists was less than one third of the revenue brought in by only 46 hunters for the same year. It's not hard to imagine that 24,000 tourists have a much larger carbon, and resource use, footprint than 46 hunters, not to mention the amount of activity within the reserve required to support all of those photographic tourists – deliveries, waste management, water use, electricity provision, and staff, to name but a few. My wife (and co-owner of Tanda Tula) Nina and I discussed how we could address this dilemma, and how Tanda Tula could, as a leader in the luxury safari industry, help to solve this untenable equation. The first step was to get all of the lodges of the Timbavati together to establish if the commercial

operations could jointly come up with a solution that would help balance the revenue budget and more effectively account for the utilisation of the reserve by photographic tourists.

In the last two years, Tanda Tula has also been a key role-player, together with other tourism experts and the Kruger National Park, in devising common sustainable tourism norms and standards for the Greater Kruger region. Part of this process is to standardise how we structure conservation fees in the area, and what better place to start than at home? In fact, the Timbavati was the perfect place to start, being a much-loved and respected reserve with a healthy photographic tourism support-base. So, the logical next step was to align our Conservation Levies with those of our direct neighbour, the Kruger National Park.

With the above in mind, we called a meeting of all of the lodges in the Timbavati, and together we agreed that a new Conservation Levy model should be proposed to the reserve landowners. It is important to note here that many of the lodges in the Timbavati, including Tanda Tula, are tenant operations with sometimes limited say in the decisions that are made by the landowners, who are the ultimate decision making body of the reserve. The new model was designed to standardise and match the conservation fees charged by the Kruger National Park. It was also designed to increase revenue for the reserve without having to increase the number of tourism beds in the reserve – thus underpinning our joint commitment to truly sustainable tourism in the Timbavati.

What followed was months of robust negotiations to get the Timbavati's Exco, landowners and all of the lodges on board with a new revenue model. As with all multi-stakeholders initiatives, this was an intense and time-consuming process, and was not without some stumbling points. After what seemed like an endless stream of emails, meetings, negotiations and – well, lobbying! – our joint vision, that had been decided at a meeting of the lodges in April, was finally realised. On 1 September 2017, for the first time in decades, Timbavati had a new revenue model for conservation fees that would change the reserve's reliance on its traditional revenue streams.



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After all of the hard work and discussions with other stakeholders in the Timbavati, the new Conservation Levy model became effective on 1 January 2018. The key change was moving from a “per stay” Conservation Levy model to a “per day” model. Whilst we are only into the third month of the new year, all indications are that the new Conservation Levy model is set to be a resounding success. Just last month (February 2018), thanks to the amazing support from our numerous trade partners and guests, the revenues from Conservation Levies exceeded the budget by more than 41%! If the budget is maintained for the 2018 year, revenues from Conservation Levies will have increased by almost 300%, year-on-year. Even so, in comparison to the rest of Africa, our Conservation Levies remain very affordable, being around \$28 per person per day in comparison to \$100 per person per day in most other parts of Africa. **In keeping with the decisions of the Timbavati landowners, the management of the reserve has responded to this increased revenue, brought in by Conservation Levies, by reducing the budgets and quotas associated with the hunting revenue stream.**

Make no mistake, generating revenue for the management of the Timbavati is part of conserving the Greater Kruger landscape. Security

costs now represent 50% of Timbavati's operational budget and the dedication of our field rangers greatly benefits all endangered species in the fenceless, open system. Timbavati is still the reserve with the lowest losses of rhino per hectare in the whole of the Greater Kruger – a testimony to the enormous spend that has been applied to the security of the reserve, thus aiding the overall effort of the security of the Greater Kruger landscape.

I am personally delighted at the outcome of the new Conservation Levy model. I am sure that my fellow lodge owners in the Timbavati share my view that it would be a great achievement for the Conservation Levies to, one day, fully cover the operational expense budget of the Timbavati. The key, of course, is to achieve that goal whilst maintaining our sustainable low volume and high value tourism offering, that makes the Timbavati unique.

As I said before, none of this would be possible without the overwhelming support of the guests and tourism trade partners of all of the lodges of the Timbavati. I'd like to extend a special thank you, from Tanda Tula, to every guest and to every trade partner who chooses to send guests to the Timbavati. You have understood our philosophy that we must find a way to increase our financial contribution to the conservation effort in the Greater Kruger because it is the right thing to do in terms of a sustainable tourism philosophy. Your contributions are now a significant portion of the reserve's income and your continued support is helping to maintain and even grow the wilderness of the Greater Kruger National Park.