

Is South Africa's Great Karoo region becoming a tourism destination?



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ABSTRACT

Desert tourism has grown steadily in several regions of the world, due to a post-modern fascination with remoteness, barrenness, silence and solitude. This paper evaluates the trend towards tourism development in South Africa's arid Karoo region. It utilises several methodologies – analysis of discourse, demand and supply – to track the changing profile of tourism in the Great Karoo. The paper concludes that the reputation of the Karoo has shifted profoundly from being hostile, dangerous and boring to being attractive, enticing and spiritual. At the same time, tourists are increasingly expressing favourable opinions of the Karoo as a destination, while accommodation facilities are growing apace. The overview also finds that tourism services in some Karoo towns are developing at a much faster rate than others, so the tourism performance is uneven. A survey of tourists in the Karoo found that the arid environment and small-town ambience offer significant attractions, and Karoo guest houses have a positive outlook for the future. These findings suggest that the Great Karoo is indeed in the process of becoming a tourism destination.

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1. Introduction

“A desert is a tough sell for a vacation. ‘Come to nothing’ is not a slogan ever likely to draw amusement-park crowds” (Perry, 2007:1). Nevertheless, desert regions are becoming popular tourism destinations. The word “desert” does not only refer to hyper-arid areas with sand dunes – although those are certainly important. It also refers to areas which are “deserted”, i.e. remote, sparsely populated, and typically, not a mass holiday destination.

“Desert tourism” can be regarded as a form of niche tourism, where specific types of people (usually a minority of tourists, although the numbers are substantial) enjoying visiting unusual kinds of places, which offer location-specific attractions or activities. In fact, many tourists get a kind of special pleasure in going where their friends and peers have not yet gone; they want to be pioneers, and a degree of physical challenge is part of the enjoyment. There has been substantial growth in tourism to deserts or remote localities, such as the Sahara Desert or the Outback in Australia. The Namib Desert in Namibia is now a major attraction, particularly amongst German tourists, who comprised 17% of tourists in that country, based on 2012/2013 data (Namibia Ministry of Environment and Tourism, 2014:6) – by far the largest long-haul category of visitors to that desert country. Desert tourism has

become so widespread that the United Nations Environmental Programme has issued a guide to desert tourism management, particularly in the light of sensitive social and environmental contexts (UNEP, 2006).

South Africa has its own desert – the Great Karoo. Located in the middle of the country, this region was – for almost two centuries – seen as a vast, hot, uncomfortable, slightly frightening, and also boring, stretch of empty countryside. This impression of the Great Karoo appears to be changing for the better, with more people finding the Karoo appealing and interesting. The paper will argue that the Karoo is increasingly regarded as a place worth visiting, either as a leisurely stop-over on the way to the sea, or even as a destination in its own right. The paper draws on a combination of methodologies: The changing discourse of several well-known public media (including *Country Life Magazine*, TV Bulpin's travel guides, and *Lonely Planet*); the growth of accommodation establishments since the late 1990s; an opinion survey of a group of Karoo tourists; and the perspectives of a group of Karoo guest house owners. These methods provide data which show a trend towards increasing tourism interest in the Great Karoo.

In recent years, various analysts (such as Ingle, 2012; Atkinson, 2012; Van Staden and Marais 2005 and Donaldson and Vermeulen, 2012) have presented town-based case studies of Karoo tourism; others (such as Nel and Hill, 2008) have analysed general developmental trends in the Karoo; and rather rarely, authors have studied specific types of tourism in the Karoo (such as

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Ingle, 2010). This paper addresses a significant gap: A region-wide analysis focused specifically on Karoo-wide tourism trends.

2. Desert tourism: international precedents

In the last few decades, desert tourism has become a recognised *niche* attraction, with a range of specialised tourism markets. In Israel, desert areas receive thousands of travellers annually, who visit archaeological sites, unique geological structures, and beautiful landscapes. So many travellers undertake a range of more “extreme” activities, such as long-distance hiking, rock climbing and off-road driving, that a special unit of skilled volunteers has been established to help tourists out of difficulties (Uriely et al., 2002: 25). Desert communities' heritage is becoming an important tourist asset, as the case of the Negev Bedouin illustrates (Dinero, 2002). In the Negev desert, natural attractions, including geology and star gazing, have the most appeal (Reichel et al., 2008). Nature-based desert tourism in Namibia is growing apace, and is offering a welcome degree of economic diversification to a mining-dominated economy (Nyakunu and Rogerson, 2014). Tourism is an important revenue generator in Nepalese communities, drawing tourists who like to visit indigenous groups in a montane environment (Chhetri, 2006). In China's Shapotou's Tourism Zone, southeast of the Tengger Desert, tourism activities include dune-sliding, river rafting, sand sculptures, riding on camels and sleeping in tents (Beijing Tourism Review, 2007). Desert Museums, including those in Tucson, Arizona (Allen, 2009) and Alice Springs, Australia (see <http://www.alicespringsdesertpark.com.au/>), are dedicated to promoting sustainable living and environmental conservation in desert environments. In Australia, 4-wheel-drive tourism in the Outback appeals to tourists who like desert nature activities (such as birdwatching and fishing), or who like to test their driving skills in a harsh environment. Enjoying natural desert attractions may not require rough living; it can be reconciled with luxurious facilities, as in the Dubai nature reserves (Ryan and Stewart, 2009).

Desert tourism has also created a new appreciation of the spiritual dimensions of exploring arid and remote areas, giving rise to concepts of “sacred spaces”, a “nature religion” or spiritual pilgrimages (Narayanan and Macbeth, 2009). Desert tourism can be regarded as a sub-set of “frontier tourism”, i.e. “journeys to places which currently lie at the fringes or extremes of our world or experiences, both geographically and socially/culturally, in locations which lack a permanent resident population and/or existing tourist infrastructure, and involving a high-degree of pre-preparation and planning, authenticity, high-risk activities and situations, and extraordinary experiences” (Laing and Crouch, 2009: 325). In particular, the quest to be *alone* is becoming important in our overpopulated world, and it is associated with recuperation, regeneration, self-reliance, self-actualisation and spirituality. At the other extreme, there are desert festivals, such as the Burning Man Festival in Nevada (Sherry and Kozinets, 2007: 121), or its off-shoot, the Afrika Burn Festival in the Tankwa Karoo desert in South Africa. Festival-goers rejoice in the remote, harsh, and dangerous arid conditions with which they have to contend.

3. Tracking tourism over time: methodological challenges

Very often, tracking a trend is a *post-hoc* affair. Tourism in the Karoo region is no exception. The growth of tourism was neither expected nor planned; it happened slowly, incrementally, often under the radar screen. Consequently, no data was collected at the beginning of the phase of tourism development, and longitudinal data has to be reconstructed from diverse sources.

This paper uses a combination of research methods. After a brief introduction to the historical image of the Karoo in travel literature, we provide a discourse analysis of several key lifestyle and tourism magazines and books. The paper then provides a supply-side analysis of tourism enterprises: A comparison was done between a detailed traveller's guide (1996/7) and two 2015 travel websites, to assess changes in the number of enterprises offering hospitality and activities. Finally, to determine demand-side dynamics, a survey was conducted of 210 Karoo travellers and 27 Karoo guest houses, in 2010. In each section, there is a comparison between our findings and recent perspectives in the research literature.

These various research methods provide an overview of roughly 20 years of tourism development in the Karoo, from 1995 to 2015. This enables us to answer the question: Is the Karoo desert becoming a tourism destination in its own right?

4. The Karoo: an unpleasant wilderness?

The Karoo is a vast arid region located in the centre of South Africa, comprising about 400 000 km² (Dean et al., 1995: 248), which adds up to about 40% of South Africa's land surface. It is a vast inland desert, with characteristic small, hardy, deciduous shrubs, low rainfall (ranging from less than 100 mm *per annum* in the winter-rainfall west to 500 mm in the summer-rainfall east), occasional spectacular thunderstorms, and about 60 towns typically located 60–80 km from one another.

The Karoo in fact consists of two distinctive deserts: The Succulent Karoo and the Great Karoo (sometimes referred to as the Nama Karoo). (See Map 1).

Rainfall in the Great Karoo is highly variable, often with “back-to-back” years of drought and high rainfall (Dean et al., 1995: 249). At times of higher rainfall, the Great Karoo appears quite grassy, but this is typically followed by long areas of drought and extreme heat and cold.

Karoo towns were slowly established from the late 1700s and throughout the 1800s; many were originally “church towns”, which served the surrounding farm communities. The Karoo economy was based on livestock, including cattle, goats, and sheep (mutton and wool). The region benefited from the diamond and gold booms in the 1870s and 1880s; but a long-term economic decline began in the early 20th Century, due to drought, over-grazing, economic depression, and the ravages of the Anglo-Boer War (Nel and Hill, 2008: 2268). By the 1970s, the Karoo presented a picture of a static and even retrogressive region, when compared to the rest of the country, characterised by out-migration. In fact, recent data has shown how some Karoo towns have grown economically, while others have declined, showing a relatively uneven developmental profile (Nel and Hill, 2008: 2271). The populations of Karoo towns range from 4000 (such as the village of Pearston) to 35 000 (Graaff-Reinet). Until the 1990s, the concept of “Karoo tourism” would have been virtually unimaginable.

Since 1994, the economic potential of the Karoo has been obscured from view, because of the fact that the Karoo straddles four provinces in the post-apartheid South African political landscape – the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Northern Cape and Free State (Atkinson, 2016). In addition, the Karoo is sparsely populated, which has contributed to its political insignificance, as the various provincial and national governments have invariably given more attention to their more populous municipalities. The Great Karoo is traversed by two important north–south highways which connect the economic powerhouse of Johannesburg with coastal cities. Many travellers never leave the highway. The main economic sectors of the Great Karoo are livestock and game farming, as well as government services. A key question is, therefore, whether tourism is becoming an important economic sector in the Great Karoo.

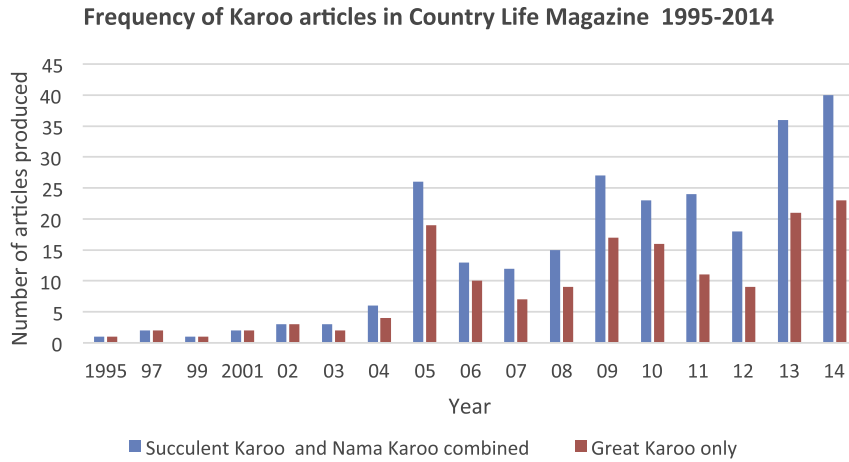


Fig. 1. Frequency of articles on the Karoo in Country Life Magazine, 1995–2014. Source: Own calculations.

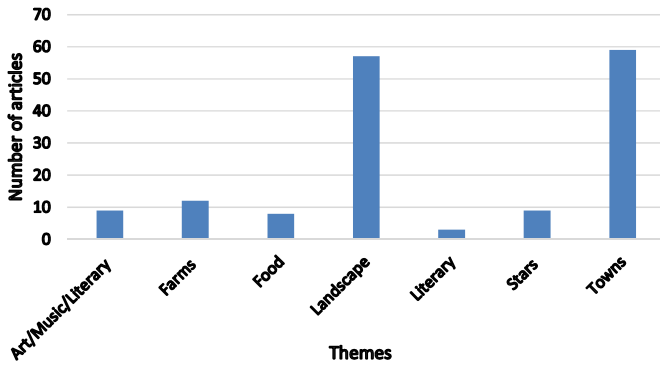


Fig. 2. Karoo themes in Country Life Magazine, 1995–2014. Source: Own calculations.

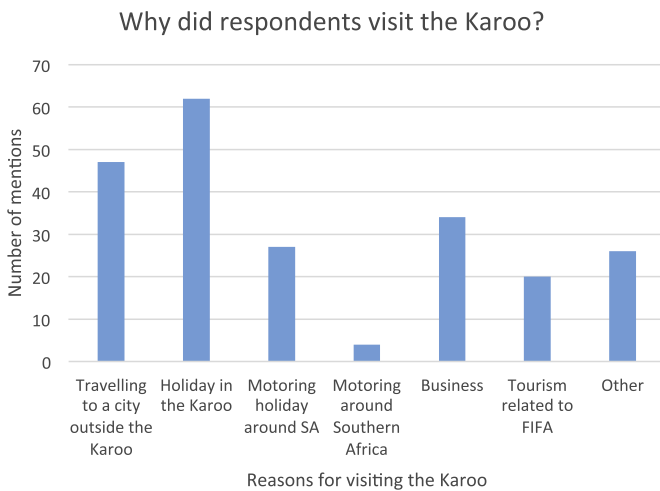


Fig. 3. Reasons for visiting the Karoo.

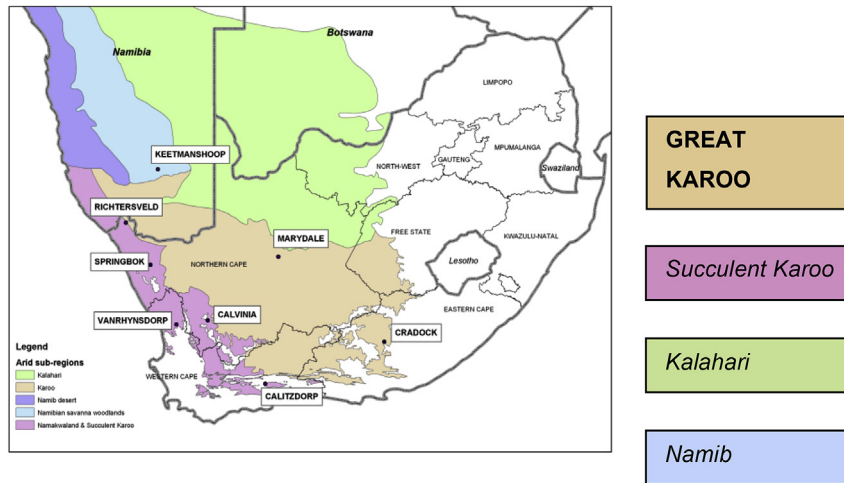
The image of the Karoo has changed dramatically during the last three centuries. Until very recently, the Karoo had a reputation as a desolate, grim and rather frightening landscape. The description by Boyes, travelling through the Karoo to the diamond fields in 1871 (Roberts, 1976:54) captures this sentiment well: “After Bains Kloof, the real wilderness of the Karoo began. For miles ahead, the

monotonous veld shimmered, flat and forbidding under a pitiless sun ... There seems no end to the grey, stony, desolate plains. Nothing breaks the dead level till in a dim haze it fades against low dusty hills. No shadow falls, but the gloom of a passing cloud. Even the stones that clothe the ground are small and shadeless. A dusky knot of prickles here and there, a sprig of heath, a tuft of chamomile or sage, a thin grey arm of vegetation ... the sole thing real in all this landscape is that abomination stretched before you.” It took Boyes’s wagon a week to cross the Great Karoo. Similarly, in midsummer 1900, Dr Howard Tooth wrote in his unpublished diary that the Karoo was “a country most desolate in appearance, with rocks, little bushes, a few goats and at long intervals a station and perhaps a house.” His Scottish companion felt it was “a fine country to be away from” (Rose Willis, pers.comm). In 1903, T Silver described his summertime Karoo trip: “The sun-baked Karoo lay before me, an illimitable panorama of rocky boulders, stunted bushes, waterless river beds and sand, sand, sand! Stone and sand, sand and stone – nothing else. Only the hum of beetles broke the deadly monotony ... a dreary, dancing, palpitating heat ...” (Silver, 1903).

This paper argues that another shift in perspective has gradually taken place. An important early contribution was the book *Karoo*, by Lawrence G Green (1955), who found many attractive features amidst the “miles and miles of blow-all”. In Green’s book, the reader learns about the legendary springbok migrations, the building of railways through the arid wastes, the characterful small towns, the architectural heritage of Graaff-Reinet, and even the idiosyncratic Karoo food dishes. But Green’s book did not launch a wave of Karoo tourism; it was many years ahead of its time. With the advent of modernity and motorised transport, the image of the Karoo changed from being dangerous; it simply became boring expanse of emptiness which had to be traversed – preferably in an air-conditioned car – en route to more desirable destinations.

Then, roughly from the 1990s, the Karoo was re-discovered as an attractive, spiritual space, away from the crowded cities. “The quality of nothingness, which characterises South Africa’s arid Karoo in the public mind, has been transformed in recent times from a perceived liability into a touristic asset (Ingle, 2010:87). The same profound transition in perceptions has taken place in the Australian Outback (Narayanan and Macbeth, 2009:372): “Historical reactions to the remote outback were usually ones of horror, dismay and fear”; now, travellers in the Outback have extraordinary fulfilling and spiritual experiences.

Such changes in emotional associations do not happen overnight. They often require years or decades of incremental



Map 1. The deserts of South Africa: The Succulent Karoo, Kalahari, Namib desert and Great Karoo.
Source: Charles Barker, Department of Geography, University of the Free State

alterations in the public mood – as the case of the slowly growing fascination with Karoo astronomy has shown (Ingle, 2010). The next section tracks the changes in public perceptions about the Karoo.

5. Discourse analysis

This section analyses the content of several publications, roughly in chronological order: TV Bulpin's travel book series *Discovering South Africa*, the lifestyle magazine *Country Life*, and finally, the international guide book *The Lonely Planet*. Several other travel books will be briefly mentioned.

TV Bulpin was one of the original travel authors in South Africa, with several editions of his landmark book, *Discovering Southern Africa*, published between 1970 and 2001. His description of the Karoo changes subtly over the years. In the earlier edition, Bulpin comments flatteringly about the small Karoo towns. Laingsburg, for example, has quaint architecture, with "wrought-iron embellishments on houses" (Bulpin, 1970:139); Richmond is "a clean and pleasant little Karoo town, its gardens full of flowers and the streets well shaded with trees" (1970:144). But his sentiments about the landscape are less complimentary: The Karoo has "minimal rainfall, scanty soil, coarse surface waste rubble, and numerous exposed outcrops of rock concealed by little vegetation save clumps of the hardy rhenosterbos" (Bulpin, 1970:139).

Ten years later, the 1980 Bulpin edition had a much stronger focus on the Karoo – including an entire chapter and a colour photograph. The discourse still warns of bleakness, but it has become lyrical: "Vast, moody, lonely, melancholy, autumnal in its moods and stillness. Remote, elusive, harsh in the midday sun, but transformed by the approach of night into a place of gorgeous sunsets, with cool shadows arising out of valleys and hollows, slowly enveloping the land in a dark blanket of sleep while the heavens gleam with so brilliant a display of stars that the Karoo seems to be washed with a soft dew of falling light" (Bulpin, 1980:219). Bulpin acknowledges that some travellers will still see the Karoo as "a hot and dreary non-scenic intrusion"; but the "discerning" will enjoy the landscape in the early morning or late afternoon. The Karoo now provides a "nostalgic journey off the beaten track to places seldom visited, along a route crowded with memories of adventures and characters" (Bulpin, 1980:230). By 2001, the Bulpin guide had information on virtually every Karoo

town, with detailed descriptions of towns such as Nieu-Bethesda and Graaff-Reinet (Bulpin, 2001).

During the 1980s, domestic tourism increased in South Africa, and more travel guides began to highlight the attractions of the Karoo. One of these was a guide to trails, hikes and walks (Levy, 1987), which includes a whole chapter on trails in the Karoo. The author's perspective is positive, but not effusive: Those who have hiked in the Karoo "would have come to know and appreciate the great natural wealth of these seemingly endless scrubby plains, punctuated occasionally by rocky outcrops and rondavel-shaped koppies" (1987: 25). But she also admits that the magnificent herds of game in the Karoo have been replaced by sheep, "regimented" into barbed wire camps. Sheep farming is causing pressure and erosion on natural vegetation.

Another text, in 1987, has a greater sense of Karoo atmosphere: "Ashimmer in summer noons, crisply detailed in the chill of icy winter dawns, the Karoo's empty arid plains awe with their sense of boundless space, timeless moments and wind-whispered silences" (Wannenburgh and Dickson, 1987:110). However, the "cachet" of the Karoo was not yet universal. Another text, published in 1986, barely mentions the word "Karoo" at all, although certain Karoo towns are well described (Leigh, 1986). Connolly (1992:106) described the Karoo in terms of its "dry climate, scanty soil, rocky outcrops, sparse vegetation and the most vivid sunsets", as well as its unique flora, animal migrations and fossils. Connolly provided very few evocative phrases in his text.

From 1992 onwards, South Africa emerged from apartheid isolation and developed a democratic system, along with a new national pride and investment confidence. National tourism guides grew in number and sophistication. Gradually, a new emotiveness enters writing on the Karoo. By 1997, the *Traveller's Guide* referred to the Karoo as an "area of stark contrasts and ever-changing moods. Bleak and barren during winter, the Karoo explodes into a multitude of coloured with the onset of the summer rains, when millions of exquisite wild flowers cover its vast plains" (ReproTouch, 1997:125).

A more recent guidebook devotes an entire chapter to the Central Karoo. It emphasises austere as well as magical qualities: "In a drought, blackened, brittle Karoo bushes wither grimly in hard, dry and cracked ground. But ... when rain eventually falls, the whole scene will change in a twinkling of the eye. Then the earth gives off a special damp smell and there's a soft green carpet

underfoot, dotted with brilliant tiny wild flowers” (Erasmus, 2004:148). It eulogises the culinary speciality of the Karoo: “Tall grasses bend and ripple between the now lush little bushes, which smell herby and aromatic and give Karoo mutton that special flavour”.

One of the most recent travel books, aimed primarily at the South African domestic tourism market, is *Suid-Afrika vir Suid-Afrikanners* (Renssen and Aronowitz, 2014). This guide offers 23 travel routes throughout South Africa, embellished with useful information on attractions, activities, and festivals. Six of these routes traverse the Karoo, and fascinating details are provided about Karoo towns. A significant attraction is that it is a land of little rain, limited water and relentless heat: “It is not surprising, therefore, that the Great Karoo is often called the Hard Man's Karoo by some of its toughest inhabitants” (Renssen and Aronowitz, 2014: 128, translated from Afrikaans). Indeed, the Northern Cape Tourism Authority has adopted the theme of “Extreme Adventure” in marketing the province (NCTA, 2015). The Karoo is becoming a desirable place to test one's survival skills.

A 15-year review of the lifestyle journal, *Country Life*, provides a profile of the changing image of the Karoo. *Country Life* is a glossy monthly publication (typically about 130 pages per issue), which claims to be read by 155 000 readers every month (www.countrylife.co.za). It sells hard copies in almost all grocery stores in South Africa, and has an on-line edition as well, based on a subscription fee. The magazine provides well-written text and high-quality colour photographs, as well as information on country events, property and accommodation. It is the premier journal covering lifestyle, tourism and creative industries in rural areas in South Africa. Over almost two decades, *Country Life* has shown a steady increase in articles on the Great Karoo, as well as the adjacent Succulent Karoo (See Fig. 1).

A wide range of topics are covered in the Karoo articles in *Country Life* in the period 1995–2014. These fall roughly into seven main categories: Art/Music, Farms, Towns, Literary, Stars, Food and Landscape (Fig. 2).

Another way of presenting the *Country Life* data is by authorship and productivity. Some *Country Life* authors (a total of 38 journalists) produced only one Great Karoo article each. Others produced two articles (8 authors in this category), and some produced three or more articles. The data is significantly influenced by two authors (Chris Marais and Julie du Toit, who live in the Karoo town of Cradock) who, between them, were responsible for a grand total of 69 articles. The number of authors is significant, for two reasons: It shows how many journalists find the Karoo worth writing about, and this in turn leads to a sustained output in Karoo-related articles – creating a strong regional focus.

Another method of assessing the changing portrayal of the Karoo is by means of a survey of six editions (1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2012) of *Lonely Planet*, thereby assessing the image of the Karoo as presented to an international market.¹ *Lonely Planet* is a well-known brand in the tourist guide books market, and describes itself as “the world's most successful travel publisher, printing over 120 million books in eleven different languages” (www.lonelyplanet.com). It prides itself that their writers “tell it like it is, without fear or favour ... It's trusted advice from a trusted source”.

In the 1998 edition, 11 Karoo towns were included (Murray et al., 1998); in the year 2000, it was 13 towns (Murray and Williams, 2000); and in 2002, it grew to 15 towns (Richmond et al., 2002). After 2004, two Karoo towns were left out, but the remaining towns

tended to receive more extended descriptions. *Lonely Planet* is now more selective about the towns it wishes to recommend for a visit. Some towns in the earlier selection were excluded from the later offerings, whereas other towns were added.

Lonely Planet contributions can also be assessed in terms of their changing discourse. The first three editions in the survey (1998, 2000 and 2002) mention the silence, space, and exhilaration of the Karoo: “For some people, the Karoo means nothing more than flat hot roads and a long and boring trip between Johannesburg and Cape Town. For others, however, the Karoo is one of the most exhilarating regions in South Africa” (Murray et al., 1998:263); “The Karoo feels untouched. There are very few obvious signs of human occupation, apart from the roads snaking over the plains ... There's nothing like stopping in the middle of nowhere, listening to the silence and wandering off the road into the veld” (Murray et al., 1998: 262). These descriptors are rather typical of desert destinations, but the Karoo towns are described as “charming” backwaters.

In the later editions, the other-worldly and artistic qualities of the Karoo are increasingly emphasised: “There's something magical about the vast and arid Karoo. Maybe it's the wide-open spaces that make you feel so tiny, or maybe it's the towns, which make you feel you've been suspended in time” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2004: 206). By 2006, “The Karoo is pure magic ... stunning sunsets and starscopes ... Perhaps the best thing about the Karoo is the way life moves slowly” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2006:226); “Only the heartless ... will fail to be bewitched by the quiet beauty of the Karoo” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2006: 264). *Lonely Planet* (2006) notes that the Karoo has also inspired famous artists and writers.

Over time, *Lonely Planet* becomes more selective about its Karoo recommendations. Graaff-Reinet remains the *epitome* of Karoo charm: “Graaff-Reinet is perhaps the quintessential Karoo town ... the gem of the Karoo. If you visit only one inland town in the Eastern Cape, make it this one” (Murray et al., 1998: 313), and six years later, the magical quality of the town is particularly emphasised: “Superb architectural heritage ... Added to all this beauty is a charming small-town quirkiness, some excellent-value accommodation and a variety of eccentric local characters who add to the benignly surreal feel of the whole place” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2004: 246). By 2006, the hyperbole grows, and Graaff-Reinet is described as “exquisite” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2006:264).

The town of Nieu-Bethesda grows rapidly in stature in the pages of *Lonely Planet*. In 1998, Nieu-Bethesda is modestly described as “worth a look to get an idea of life in the rural hamlets” (Murray et al., 1998: 318). By 2004, “Nieu-Bethesda has become a minor artistic colony ... A great place to kick back for a few days and contemplate life amid the vast open spaces” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2004: 251), and two years later, “The tiny, isolated town of Nieu-Bethesda ... has achieved worldwide fame as the home of the extraordinary Owl House” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2006:271). In the same vein, the town of Sutherland moves from complete oversight in 1998 to a description as a destination purely for astronomers in 2000; by 2012, an entire text box is devoted to this star-gazing town.

Lonely Planet even manages to say increasingly kind things about the town of Beaufort West. In 1998, Beaufort West is damned with faint praise, as “the archetypal stopover town ... It is not completely lacking in appeal” (Murray et al., 1998:263); eight years later, its rating has begrudgingly improved to “Not a place to linger but has a strange faded charm about it if you know where to look” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2006:230). Prince Albert also improves its image, from “a beautiful, peaceful town, dozing on the edge of the Karoo” (1998:262) to representing “an idyllic life in the Karoo” (Murray and Williams, 2000:231), two years later. Similarly, Matjiesfontein's reputation grows from “impressive buildings incongruous in the bleak Karoo landscape” (1998:267) to “one of the most fascinating places in the Karoo” (Murray and Williams, 2000:236).

¹ Only the Nama Karoo (Great Karoo) is included in this overview. The Little Karoo and Namaqualand are not included.

Several other towns – such as Calvinia and Britstown – are consistently described as attractive.

In some towns, *Lonely Planet* remains rather ambivalent in its judgement. Although Cradock “may appear a bit shabby at first, it is worth taking a closer look at the beautiful buildings and tree-lined avenues” (Bainbridge et al., 2012: 171); and regarding Colesberg, the authors suggest that: “Drive through it enough times and it starts to grow on you” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2004:497). De Aar is described as “a major service centre for the Karoo ... There is so little to see or do here that an overnight stay can be unnerving” (Murray et al., 1998: 350), a put-down which is almost intriguing!

The overriding impression gained from these books, magazines and travel guides is that the Karoo is increasingly regarded as an interesting place to visit, whether as a stop-over *en route* to other destinations, or as a destination in itself. The themes of magical qualities, charming towns, space, silence, solitude and self-expression are now reiterated so many times that these are becoming almost synonymous with the image of the Karoo.

Discourse analysis provides a certain kind of window on a subject; in this case, it is the image of the Karoo in the pages of literary works such as TV Bulpin's books, *Country Life Magazine* and *Lonely Planet* guide books. It is likely that these literary sources help to create a good impression of a region, as a place worth visiting. The impact of these sources on the actual or potential tourism market in the Karoo has not been empirically tested, and this would be a useful research question in future. The next section turns to a 2010 survey of 210 Karoo travellers.

6. The demand side: the changing image of the Karoo as a tourism destination

Do travellers *think* that the Karoo has tourism appeal? In this section, the issue of tourism demand is addressed. Tourist perceptions can be divided into three potential categories: (a) There are tourists who see the Karoo as unpleasant or boring, and who simply want to drive through the Karoo as fast as possible, *en route* to their real destinations; (b) There may be visitors who enjoy the drive through the Karoo *en route* to their ultimate destinations, perhaps sampling guest houses, shops or local Karoo food while they are on their travels; and (c) There may be tourists who envisage the Karoo as their actual destination, possibly for road trips, niche festivals or farm stays, and typically enjoy at least a two-night stay.

In this section, we will try to assess whether Karoo tourism has moved from (a) to (b), or even to (c). There will, of course, be a continuum of preferences. Many people will always regard the Karoo as an unpleasant stretch of boring road to traverse as fast as possible. Some visitors will always see it as a pleasant transitional zone, getting into a holiday mood as they head to their actual destination (or enjoying the last of their holiday mood as they head back home). The really critical question is the last one: Is the Karoo becoming a tourism destination in its own right?

6.1. Scholarly views

Several Karoo studies are useful in addressing tourism demand in the Great Karoo.

In 2001, a provincial government report offered a rather dispiriting view of tourism in the Central Karoo: “Only 2.2 per cent of all trips in the Western Cape have the Central Karoo as their destination, despite the fact that approximately 15 000 cars and 1000 trucks pass through Beaufort West every day” (Western Government of Western Cape, 2001, cited in Van Staden and Marais, 2005: 240). Nevertheless, a 2007 study of the Karoo National Park, located outside the town of Beaufort West, showed that a total of

31 469 people visited the Park in 2007 (Saayman et al., 2009). For a remote rural park, this is an impressive figure.

Van Staden and Marais (2005) conducted a survey of travellers in the highway town of Beaufort West. Their findings appear to echo the findings of the Western Cape Government study; most visitors to the town only tarry for a few hours. Only 15% of respondents stayed overnight, and only 8% said that they would be staying two days or more. These are small percentages, but then, given the volume of traffic through Beaufort West, the numbers may be more significant than they initially appear. Also, some of the qualitative comments on Beaufort West reflected an appreciation of the Karoo town: 16% regarded it as “Karoo Lamb country”, 9% as “the heart of silence”, 6% appreciated its “endless space”, and 6% regarded it as a “treasured lifestyle”.

A 2006 study interviewed 128 travellers in the Little Karoo (Gelderblom, 2006). To the question “What do visitors enjoy most?”, the responses included Scenery/Nature (53%), People and Hospitality (16%), space (13%), food and wine (7%), and exploring (7%). This suggests that the desert ecology is attractive to at least half the sample. The significance of tourism in the Little Karoo has been emphasised by other studies as well (O'Farrell et al., 2010). Nevertheless, it is not clear whether these attractions are simply enjoyed *en route*, travelling through the Little Karoo, or whether they are drawing travellers into the area as a destination. Furthermore, would tourist perceptions in the picturesque Little Karoo be similar to those in the much larger, more barren Great Karoo?

6.2. A tourism survey in the Karoo, 2010

To answer this question, the author undertook a survey of 210 tourists in twelve towns of the Great Karoo during April to August 2010. These were all travellers who overnights in a guest house or hotel in the Karoo. This was done for logistical reasons: Thirty Karoo accommodation establishments were requested to place the questionnaires in their rooms, and to encourage visitors to fill them in. To some extent, therefore, the sample is biased; it excludes people who simply travel through the Karoo in a single day, as well as Karoo visitors who stayed with friends or family.

More than half of the interviewees (53%) were in the age bracket 36–55, and an additional 19% were 56 years or older. However, there was a fair smattering of people in the 26–35 age group (17%), and young people in the 18–25 age group (7%). This slightly older profile of Karoo visitors reflects the finding of Saayman et al. (2009: 30); in their study of visitors to the Karoo National Park, the average age of overnights was 48 years. Three-quarters of the respondents were South Africans; since this research period included the FIFA World Cup, the number of foreigners may be somewhat larger than usual.

Travellers were generally well educated: More than half (57%) had university degrees, 18% had some university education, and 9% had a diploma. The same remarkably high levels of education were noted in the study of the Karoo National Park (Saayman et al., 2009: 30), where 98% of overnights had post-matric qualifications. This suggests that the Karoo tends to appeal to more educated people.

In terms of income, 61% were in a middle-income category of US\$ 10 000–50 000 *per annum*. About 13% were more affluent (more than US\$50 000), while only 16% earned less than US\$ 10 000. These are therefore relatively affluent, middle-class, elderly, educated travellers.

Respondents were asked about their reasons for visiting the Karoo (open-ended multiple responses): (See Fig. 3)

In this survey, only 21% of travellers were clear “transit” travellers, *en route* to a city outside the Karoo. An additional 9% of travellers were “FIFA travellers”, and therefore were probably focused on visiting host cities outside the Karoo. Together, then,

about 30% of travellers can be regarded as “transit travellers”. Sixteen percent were business travellers, probably including government officials. A total of 14% were travelling through the Karoo as part of exploring South or Southern Africa, and therefore probably chose to spend vacation time in the Karoo.

Finally, there was a significant category (28%) of people who chose to have a holiday in the Karoo. Since these interviewees were staying over in hotel or guest house accommodation, they were therefore not primarily visiting friends and relatives (VFR), and therefore may be a slight underestimation of the number of travellers choosing to visit the Karoo as a destination.

The interviewees then addressed the question of why they chose this specific Karoo town for their stay-over. The answers reflect some of their priorities, and shows what kind of travellers they were. A total of 249 responses were obtained (including multiple responses to open-ended questions). The answers were highly diverse, and were then grouped into several “Types of motivation”: (See Table 1)

In this table, two categories of travellers were particularly interested in the Karoo as a destination: Those seeking it for Authentic and Unique Experiences (35%), and those who were Loyal to the Karoo (5%). Those who visit the Karoo for Rest or Excitement probably have specific criteria for enjoyment; they happen to find it in the Karoo (which is good, for Karoo tourism), but they may find it elsewhere as well (which suggests that the Karoo competes with other similar destinations to attract these people).

The curiosity factor (16% of mentions) suggests that information about the Karoo is becoming widespread and people want to come and find out for themselves what the Karoo is like. The category who stay over because of Convenience are the least committed visitors to the Karoo, because they choose the Karoo purely for logistical reasons. Nevertheless, they are an important category, for two reasons: Firstly, this is a steady stream of visitors which helps to sustain tourism enterprises; and secondly, their exposure to the Karoo – and possibly, pleasant experiences – may turn them into Authentic visitors (seeking out Karoo attractions), Loyal visitors (wanting to return again and again), and Curious visitors (wanting to explore additional attractions in the Karoo). The Convenience travellers may “graduate” into tourists who wish to explore Karoo attractions more fully, or eventually even to see the Karoo as a destination in its own right.

An additional consideration is that many respondents provided multiple answers. These categories are by no means clear-cut. People have shifting and complex feelings about the Karoo. Even several business travellers felt that they visit the Karoo for enjoyment as well as work.

A good indicator of the degree of importance of the Karoo in people's travel plans will be whether they stay over for one night or longer, as reflected in the Table below: (See Table 2)

In this table, we excluded the 16 business travellers, as they tended to stay for much longer periods. The category of “overnighters” may have chosen to stay over, purely for logistical reasons, although they may have chosen to spend a night in the Karoo because of its attractions. The more important category is those (around 59%) who stayed for two nights or longer. These are clearly travellers who choose to spend some leisure time in the Karoo.

When asked what activities they plan to undertake on *this* trip (open-ended, unprompted question), the tourist interviewees recorded the following: (See Table 3)

The most frequently cited activity is *eating out* (28% of responses), suggesting that Karoo food cuisine is becoming an important aspect of future the Karoo experience. *Shopping* (14% of responses) is more intriguing, as it suggests that visitors believe that certain kinds of distinctive commodities may be available in the Karoo (possibly crafts or farm stall produce). Visits to *heritage sites* remains a very important activity (23% of mentions), indicating that visitors believe that there are distinctive heritage assets in the Karoo. *Game parks and game farms* together constitute 20% of responses, showing the importance of nature tourism in the Karoo.

The travellers were also asked what they enjoy in the Karoo. Even those tourists who visit the Karoo on business, or are just passing through, may well enjoy aspects of the Karoo. This data gives a broader perspective on the Karoo's ability to appeal to visitors. A total of 428 responses were obtained (open-ended and unprompted question). The most significant attractions were the silence, tranquillity and solitude of the landscape (16%), linked to the experience of open space (10%). These, in turn, are also associated with other landscape factors, such as scenery, birdlife, wildlife, veld and sunsets (25%). Clearly, people are now beginning to experience the Karoo as appealing, in a range of ways. In addition, the friendly people (15%), heritage (4%) and sense of safety (1%) are adding value to the Karoo's reputation. These attractions were classified into categories: (See Table 4)

These categories are not clearly defined, and may overlap. The prevalence of mentions regarding the landscape (49%) suggests a fascination and enjoyment of the open, remote desert landscape. Also, this is often associated with psychological experiences (20% of mentions). Interestingly, the society of the Karoo (20%) is also experienced as attractive. The products (such as crafts) and the heritage of the Karoo are occasionally mentioned spontaneously, but are not prominent – possibly due to a lack of product development and/or marketing.

Interviewees were asked what infrastructure needed to be improved in the Karoo. This was again an unprompted and open-ended question, allowing multiple answers. A large number (21%) of responses were that the Karoo should “be kept as it is – don't make changes”, suggesting that many people experience the Karoo as authentic, and that it is therefore appealing. There were two

Table 1
Types of motivation for Karoo travellers (210 interviewees).

Type of motivation	Percentage of mentions
Authentic and unique experiences: History, heritage, nature, game parks, dams, psychological experiences, atmosphere, quaint towns, farm stays, art, cuisine photography, health and wellness: <i>People seek out specific qualities of the Karoo</i>	35
Curiosity: People want to find out what the Karoo is about: Sightseeing, curiosity, seeing unique places, responding to “word of mouth” reports about the Karoo, learnt about the Karoo from guide books, magazines or the internet: <i>People want to find out more about the Karoo</i>	16
Convenience: A useful stay-over spot: Good geographic position, half-way stop, business, visiting friends and family, good clean accommodation, climate is nice, affordable, value for money: <i>People do not visit the Karoo for its own sake; they stay over because of logistics or because their family/friends live here; includes typical transit travellers</i>	34
Loyalty: Enjoyed previous visits: <i>People have developed a loyalty to what the Karoo stands for, they may even feel a sense of “belonging”</i>	5
Rest: It is a good place to have a holiday and relax: <i>People like the Karoo primarily because they want to have fun here; they may have chosen another destination which would suit their purposes equally well.</i>	3
Excitement: Sport, hunting, activities, adventure: <i>People like to have exciting experiences; they may have chosen another destination which would suit their purposes equally well.</i>	7

Table 2
Length of stay (N=210).

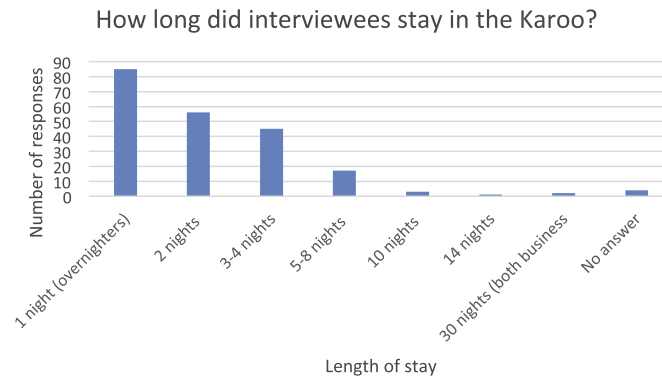


Table 3
Planned activities in the Karoo (210 interviewees).

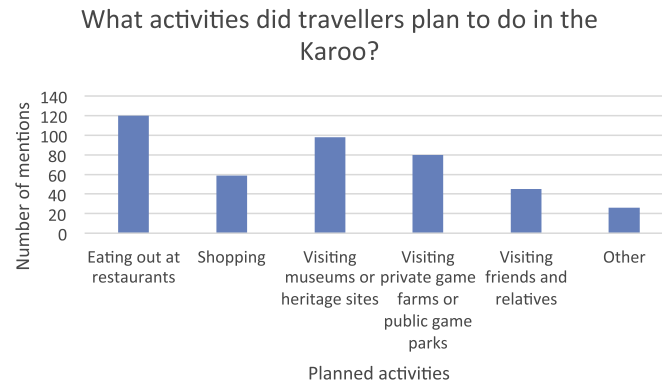


Table 4
Types of attractions.

Type of attraction	Prevalence of mentions (%)
Landscape: Openness, cleanness, fresh air, remoteness, desert, dust roads, Nature, scenery, landscape, dam, veld, sunsets, birdlife, climate, wildlife, parks, hunting, nature activities	49
Psyche: Peace, tranquility, silence, solitude, unspoilt, quaintness, authentic, beautiful	20
Society: Small towns, hospitality, friendly people, safety	21
History: Heritage, political history, fossils	4
Products: Food and wine, Karoo Lamb, restaurants	5
TOTAL	100% (rounded off)

kinds of responses which reflected a spontaneous appreciation of the Karoo: Maintain heritage and authenticity (18%) and market the Karoo better (12%). Then there were more practical suggestions: Improve infrastructure (32%) and help to reduce poverty (7%). Interestingly, less than 1% of responses referred to crime or security worries, which is rather unusual in South Africa, and may well contribute to the overall attraction of the region.

This led to the really important question: Do travellers regard the Karoo as a potential destination in future? Almost 75% said Yes, almost 6% said No, and almost 9% were undecided (11% did not answer). Of course, this does not mean that these travellers will actually visit the Karoo as a destination, but at least they found the idea agreeable. The large majority of affirmatives suggests that the Karoo is becoming appealing to members of the public.

7. The supply side: is the tourism product growing?

7.1. Scholarly views

Matching tourists to niche destinations is sometimes a challenge. Niche destinations often have to be innovative to market their attractions, and to reach that rather small group of tourists who may want to visit these attractions. It is a question of matching supply with demand.

Several Karoo studies have commented on the growth of Karoo tourism enterprises, notably in the hospitality sector, but also those offering new tourist activities.

A study of ecosystem services in the Little Karoo observed that: “Tourism is becoming increasingly important in this region, and many landowners are turning to accommodation and recreational

opportunities on their land as alternative income sources. The region is popular for its wide open spaces and scenery” (Reyers et al., 2009: 6). In particular, farm-based tourism is increasing: “Several land purchases in the region over the last 10 years have been made in order to create tourist features such as private luxury game parks” (O’Farrell et al., 2008). Furthermore, the authors commented that tourism can boost the regional economy in the Little Karoo: “Tourism ecosystem services provide opportunities for landowners to diversify their income streams and the potential for them to make money from their land without having to overstock it with ostriches” (Reyers et al., 2009: 12).

Regarding the Great Karoo, Maguire (2009) noted numerous attractions spread across more than 60 Karoo towns; these include geology, landscapes, mountain passes, palaeontology, archaeology and rock art, architecture, Anglo-Boer War history, literary tourism, guest farms, hunting; astronomy; historical events, restaurants and local foods, missionary and church history; and outdoor and adventure tourism. Ingle (2012) also noted the authenticity of Karoo towns, which is contributing to their growing appeal.

Several studies have focused on Karoo towns in greater depth, and each concluded that there is a growing supply of tourism enterprises, as well as a degree of awareness of local attractions. In Prince Albert, tourism has grown steadily, drawing on a range of attractions: Architecture, cuisine, motorbiking, cycling, hiking, archaeology, stargazing, and the perennial attraction of the Swartberg pass (Toerien, 2012:156). The Karoo’s Book Town, in the town of Richmond, has created a number of special events, such as an annual Book Festival and Anglo-Boer War Festival, with enthusiastic participants (Donaldson and Vermeulen, 2012:174). The diminutive town of Nieu Bethesda has experienced an influx of people who can be characterised as part of the “creative class”: Retired professionals, freelance journalists, academics, artists, sculptors and writers. The tarring of the road to Nieu Bethesda has led to a much greater inflow of tourists, both day-trippers and overnighters (Ingle, 2012). In Calvinia, the spring flower tourism season is bolstered by a Meat Festival, celebrating the region’s lamb and mutton industry; this event includes a vintage car rally and musical concerts (Rule and Fryer, 2012:285). There appears to be a significant growth in tourism, at least in some Karoo towns.

This section provides a quantitative overview of changes in the number of hospitality enterprises in different Karoo towns, over a period of 17 years (1998–2015), as well as an opinion survey of 27 guest house owners in various Karoo towns, undertaken in 2010.

7.2. Accommodation growth and diversification in the Karoo

To assess the growth in the Karoo hospitality sector, we analysed 1998 and 2015 data on accommodation establishments. Tracking the number of accommodation facilities and attractions in a region is not a simple matter, as there is no inclusive, coherent data-base. Hence we have used two data-bases, to provide a comparison between 1998 (*Traveller’s Guide*) and 2015 (Kwathabeng website). Both these sources appeared to make a special effort to be comprehensive in their information.

The first table provides an overview of *scale and number* of accommodation establishments (hotels, guest houses, B&Bs and guest farms) per town, over the period of 17 years. (See Table 5).

The comparison, over a period of 17 years, shows how different towns’ fortunes have taken different directions. In 1998, by far the majority of towns were concentrated in the categories of 1–10 establishments; by 2015, at 21 towns had more than 10 establishments. This suggests that several towns have developed significantly, and others may have declined. A more detailed analysis of the data from 1998 to 2015 shows a mixed profile: (See Table 6)

A few towns have declined in terms of their accommodation offerings; a few others have remained static; but by far the most have increased significantly. One must be rather wary of comparisons here, as the table only records proportional changes, and not the absolute number of establishments in each town (some towns could be growing dramatically off a very low base). Furthermore, the data does not reflect the size of establishments; in one town, such as Laingsburg, the number of establishments has declined, but the remaining ones have grown significantly in size. Nor does the data reflect sophistication, quality or profitability of establishments.

Exploring the reasons for this diversity in towns’ fortunes will be an extensive task, but there are at least three causal factors. The first is the fortunes of the white middle class in these towns. Some towns have expanded their middle class base (in size and sophistication), while other towns have remained largely static, and others have seen an exodus of white middle class people. Interestingly, accommodation facilities tend to be offered almost exclusively by white people (Donaldson and Vermeulen, 2012:176); in contrast, middle-class black people tend to be concentrated in public sector jobs, such as teachers, nurses and police. The Karoo towns have slowly experienced racial integration in some spheres (such as business, clinics, some schools and the visitor base of guest houses), but the ownership of the tourism sector is still functioning along racial lines. (The patrons of Karoo accommodation establishments are gradually becoming more racially mixed). The second causal factor for tourism growth would be the performance of local municipalities, which vary greatly in their competence, resources, innovation and political will to collaborate with the private sector (Atkinson, 2012). The third factor is the condition and quality of local urban architecture; even where it is dilapidated, it may attract investors if the local buildings are historical and “authentic”.

The towns also vary in terms of their tourism product. In some districts, the main tourism product (in terms of accommodation services) is located on farms, and others primarily in town. In Table 7, the towns are categorised as “town-based”, “farm-based”, and “relatively balanced between town and farm” (the number of farm establishments is roughly comparable to those in town). Once again, we can compare data for 1998 and 2015:

The number and prominence of guest farms have grown. The data shows that there has been a systematic shift away from town-based tourism districts to more balanced districts, suggesting that farm stays, agri-tourism and various niche types of eco-tourism have developed during the last 17 years.

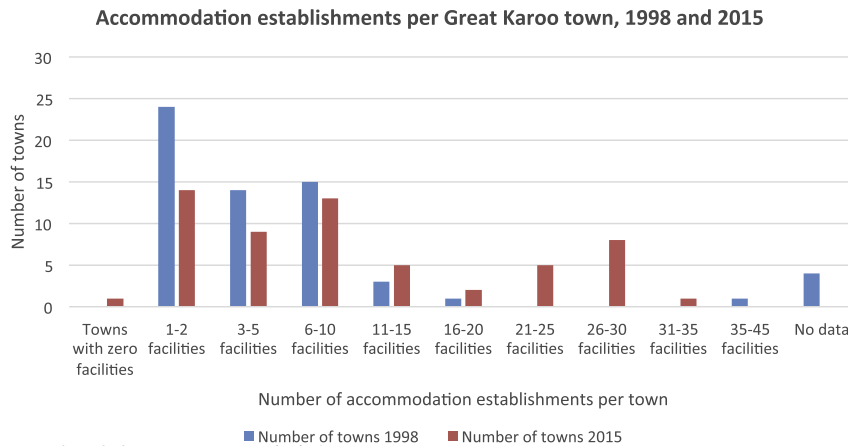
7.3. Growing business confidence of guest house owners

The author conducted research on Karoo enterprises’ perspectives in 2010. Of the 27 guest house owners/managers interviewed, 25 believed that Karoo tourism will grow; the other two responded that it will “maybe grow”. No-one felt that it would decline. Hospitality owners were then asked to give reasons for their response. The most frequent response (9 interviewees) was that the Karoo had a great deal of authentic heritage. Other significant responses were that the Karoo was a peaceful and remote rural refuge (7 people), and an important eco-tourism destination (4 people). Other causes for optimism were: Desert tourism, improved quality of accommodation, physical safety, and key government investments (such as astronomy facilities).

8. Conclusion

In several parts of the world, desert tourism has grown steadily in the last twenty years, suggesting that there is a new international

Table 5
Number of accommodation establishments in the Great Karoo, 1998 and 2015.



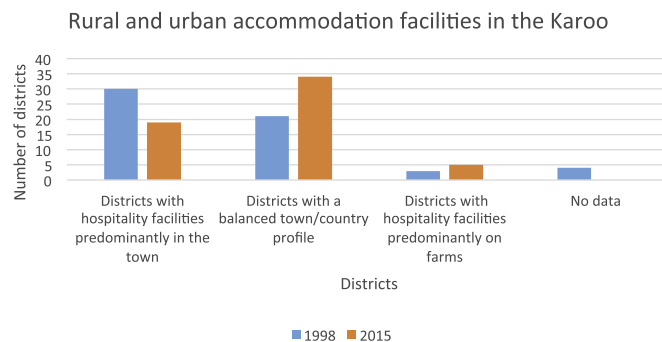
Sources: *Traveller's Guide* (1998), www.kwathabeng.co.za; own calculations.

Table 6
Longitudinal profile of Karoo towns: 1998–2015.

Change in number of guest houses, 1998–2015	Number of towns	Towns
Decline by 100% (no accommodation establishments left)	1	Marydale
Decline by two-thirds	3	Jagersfontein, Philipstown, Vosburg
Decline by 50%	3	Fauresmith, Leeu-Gamka, Strydenburg
Decline by less than 50%	4	Fraserburg, Laingsburg, Oudtshoorn, Loeriesfontein
Remained static	5	Campbell, Matjiesfontein, Noupoort, Pearston, Petrusville
Increase 1–50%	4	Aberdeen, Calvinia, Hopetown, Nieuwoudville
Increase by 50%	8	Barkly West, Beaufort West, Carnarvon, Hanover, Loxton, Prieska, Richmond, Williston
Doubled	9	Bethulie, Brandvlei, Calitzdorp, de Rust, Douglas, Koffiefontein, Ladismith, Springfontein, Vanderkloof
Tripled	6	De Aar, Edenburg, Jansenville, Middelburg, Trompsburg, Prince Albert
Increased 4x	5	Britstown, Nieu-Bethesda, Philippolis, Steytlerville, Victoria West
Increased 5x	4	Colesberg, Graaff-Reinet, Griquatown, Willowmore
Increased 10x	1	Sutherland
Increased by 15x	1	Gariep Dam
No comparative data	4	Cradock, Orania, Richmond, Uniondale
TOTAL	58 towns	

Sources: *Traveller's Guide* (1998), www.kwathabeng.co.za; own calculations.

Table 7
Rural and urban hospitality establishment profile in Karoo districts.



Sources: *Traveller's Guide* (1998), www.kwathabeng.co.za; own calculations.

fascination with remote, harsh and arid environments. This paper set out to assess the fortunes of the Karoo as a tourist destination.

This paper provided three types of evidence to argue the case that there has been a systematic development of the Karoo as a tourism destination over the last two decades. This trend can be

seen in the rhetoric and discourse about the Karoo in a variety of literary sources; it is also reflected in the evidence of a growing appreciation (“demand”) for Karoo tourism experiences, and the number of Karoo accommodation establishments (“supply” of tourism product). The dimensions of supply and demand are of

course closely linked, because it is likely that improved supply may lead to improved demand, or that improved supply is a result of improved demand. But these linkages may develop in an uneven way. There may well be cases of unappreciated tourism attractions (*supply exists without sufficient demand*), such as local cultural festivals which do not attract urban visitors (perhaps due to insufficient marketing). There may also be cases of tourists who actively seek out attractions which the local people have not really made much of (*demand exists without effective supply*), such as the growing demand for Anglo-Boer War historical sites. The paper found that, since roughly 1990, both demand and supply of tourist facilities have grown in the Karoo, although there appears to be much more scope for growth.

The overall impression is that the Karoo is no longer seen as a hostile, dangerous or boring region; it is increasingly considered to be interesting, appealing and even spiritual. This is a profound shift in *zeitgeist*, which deserves additional research in future. Issues such as the quality of tourism offerings, the changing nature of niche markets in the Karoo, the domestic and international profile of tourists, and the economic impact of Karoo tourism all merit much further investigation. This article provides a framework against which such issues can be further explored.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaridenv.2015.12.006>.

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