

2015 Submission for Responsible Tourism Awards:

Reviving interest in Baleni Sacred Salt



Using ancient skills and traditions, Tsonga women at Baleni harvest a pure salt which has been used for food, medicinal purposes and sacred rituals over the millennia. This traditional harvesting is done from the sacred site of Mukhulu, a geothermal hot spring on the banks of the Klein Letaba River near African Ivory Route's Baleni Camp. The geothermal water's salt deposits into the soil of this Natural Heritage Site provide the raw material from which the traditional salt is harvested. It's a time-consuming, tiring process that gives visitors a good understanding why the expression 'going to the salt mines' is a euphemism for hard work.



In the 21st century, however, the easy availability of cheap, machine-harvested salt has made traditional hand-harvesting financially unattractive, and the number of salt harvesters decreased rapidly. This also impacted on the AIR's Baleni Camp, who relied on interest in salt harvesting to attract visitors.



In 2012 the TFPD Foundation started working with the local community to renew the value of the salt, and increase its market. Today, the salt is used by select Michelin chefs for speciality foods, and sold in attractive packaging by a speciality salt shop in Amsterdam. A custom made website also offers online sales. In addition, due to the product's improved profile, it was included in the Slow Food's Ark Taste and profiled at the Terra Madre show in Turin last October.



The benefit to the producers has come not just with increased volumes, but the TFPD Foundation have ensured that the producer price has doubled in the last two years. This move has been made specifically to acknowledge the back-breaking work of the harvesters, and to increase the attractiveness of learning this ancient tradition for the next generation. All the developments and marketing have been done with a view to keep production levels sustainable.



For the African Ivory Route's Baleni Camp the renewed interest in the salt, and it's harvesting site near the camp on the banks of the Klein Letaba River, has generated a community-wide interest in sharing other traditional crafts and skills with tourists.



What was originally a one-night visit to the camp to observe the salt harvest, itself a seasonal activity is now becoming a multi-day experiential visit. Guests can combine salt harvesting with dancing and cooking lessons, instruction in beading and basic language lessons – a true immersion into current Tsonga traditional life, as practiced by the people who live around Baleni in the Giyani district of Limpopo Province.



The development of the Baleni Salt business by the TFPD Foundation has engaged the local producer-community with the tourism industry, and set the stage for wider community engagement. TFPD Foundation is thus nominated for a 'Best for Engaging People and Culture' Responsible Tourism award.



The TFPD Foundation www.tfpdfoundation.org sources financial support and volunteer assistance for specific projects that will positively support the rural communities that own the lodges that are managed by Transfrontier Parks Destinations (TFPD).

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