

## **ROBBEN ISLAND – DEVELOPING AN INTEGRATED ENVIRONMENTAL AND HERITAGE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Robben Island is best known for its significance in South Africa's struggle for democracy and as the place where prisoners, among them former South African President, Mr. Nelson Rohihlahla Mandela, were incarcerated. It is regarded internationally as a place where the triumph of the human spirit over adversity can be best reflected and represented. It is for this reason that Robben Island has been declared as one of South Africa's first World Heritage Sites.

However, in addition to its status as an international icon, research on Robben Island has revealed that we have a multitude of natural resources that are of significance, both nationally and internationally, and which we would like to showcase in various ways.

Thus, Robben Island is unique in supporting large populations of breeding seabirds, as well as a viable population of cervid species and three species of antelopes. It is the only accessible place in the world where several thousand penguins can be readily seen by the public. Evening viewing of large congregations of penguins on the beach north of the harbour is a spectacular wildlife experience that at present can only be repeated at remote Punta Tomba in Argentina or at sub-Antarctic and Antarctic destinations.

Rather than being indigenous, all large mammals have been introduced to Robben Island. In terms of the significance of some animal populations we can mention 37 bontebok, a species endemic to the Western Cape and classified in the South African red data book as rare. Robben Island is important as a site for sea birds; it is one of only three sites in the world where the population of African Penguin, which is classified as an endangered species, is increasing. It hosts half of the South African population of Swift tern, one third of the world's population of Hartlaub's gull and 2% of the world's population of African oystercatcher.

Robben Island's plant life and vegetation also reflect centuries of human intervention. Its natural vegetation is classified as West Coast Strandveld, but exotic trees and shrubs have been introduced and have considerably changed the landscape.

Some of its natural resources, like penguins, peacocks, ostriches, fallow deer and bontebok can be regarded as part of the archaeological and historical record, as they provide us with evidence of human occupation and behaviour on the Island over the years, since these resources were all imported by humans for some historical reason or another. For example, European rabbits were introduced to the Island in the 1650s and the European fallow deer in 1869.

The known historical record of Robben Island can be described broadly, as in the World Heritage application, in the following terms:

- ❖ Settlement by indigenous Khoisan people, as the Island was originally connected to the Mainland and may have been accessible at times when the sea-level was lower.
- ❖ From 1498 onwards, when the first European explorers stopped at the Cape, the Island provided food and shelter for sailors.
- ❖ Use as a colonial prison from 1657 to 1921.
- ❖ Establishment of a colonial hospital from 1846 to 1931, including a General Infirmary, Mental Asylum and Leper Hospital.
- ❖ Use as a military installation and naval base, from 1939 to 1959.
- ❖ And, eventually, an Apartheid prison.

These historical periods are reflected not only on the various buildings on the Island, but also on other sites, such as mines, quarries, roads, dumps, shipwrecks, cemeteries, inscribed shale, military structures from WWII, railway lines, piers and also historically landscaped gardens and planted trees.

As a site with both natural and cultural national treasures, Robben Island is directly protected by the National Heritage Resources Act, the Cultural Institutions Act, the Environment Conservation Act, the National Environmental Management Act and the World Heritage Convention Act. This legislative framework ensures that Robben Island's resources are preserved and protected for future generations. Operating within this legislative framework, the goal of the Robben Island Museum, with an integrated management policy, is to preserve and manage in an integrated and sustainable way the diverse cultural and natural heritage and resources of Robben Island, and to enable people to experience, discover, interpret and utilise these in a dynamic way.

In 1997, the Robben Island Museum Council mandated the Museum to pursue the following basic tenets as its main functions:

- To maintain the political and universal symbolism of Robben Island.
- To promote Robben Island as a platform for critical debate and life-long learning.
- To manage the Robben Island Museum in a manner that promotes economic sustainability and development.
- To conserve and manage Robben Island's diverse natural and cultural resources in an integrated manner.

Based on the above basic tenets, the Museum was also mandated to develop an Integrated Environmental Management Plan for Robben Island with financial assistance from the Norwegian government. An Integrated Management Plan is required by the South African World Heritage Convention Act of 1999 and also by the National Environmental Management Act of 1999, and is also required if certain listed development activities are planned. Because Robben Island was on the nomination list for World Heritage Site status, to be evaluated and declared in December 1999, development activities were to be assessed before planned development was to take place.

At Robben Island Museum, achieving a balance between tourism and conservation has the highest priority. We know that if our cultural and natural resources are exploited in an uninformed manner, there will eventually be no resource to exploit. The key objective in finding a balance between tourism and sustainable environmental management has been to develop an interpretive strategy that could encourage tourists to experience and approach the island with a respectful attitude. The integrated nature of planning would be reflected in the following ways:

- Both NATURAL and CULTURAL resources on Robben Island are integrated into the Museum's activities;
- Various functions of the Museum take into account the impacts they have on each other;
- The integration of the Museum's various activities and functions are taken into account, so as to minimise the negative impact on the environment and to maximise the positive impact.

The Integrated Environmental Management Plan and the Conservation Plan would therefore include a key component on interpretation.

As the first step towards developing the Environmental Management Plan, baseline studies were commissioned to identify and describe all the cultural and natural resources on Robben Island. These baseline studies aided in the development of a State of the Environment report, which details all the natural and cultural environmental resources and their current condition, and recommends a policy for their management.

The Environmental Policy developed for Robben Island Museum in 1998 states that the management of RIM is committed to applying the following principles in all decision-making, planning and activities:

- Inter-generational equity
- Custodianship
- Stakeholder involvement
- Integrated management philosophy
- Accountability
- Planning and Impact Assessment
- Continuous improvement
- Compliance with legislation

The baseline studies for the State of the Environment Report included:

- *colour aerial photographs*
- *tourism impact study*
- *geological and geohydrological investigations*
- *vegetation survey and rehabilitation study*
- *terrestrial vertebrates survey*
- *archaeological survey*
- *marine ecology survey*
- *building conservation survey*

The State of the Environment report includes a baseline study on built cultural resources, which essentially identifies the buildings and unexcavated archaeological sites on the Island. A Conservation Policy and Use Plan for each of these sites is operated through a Site Register database, which has been developed and draws on historical records, plans, photographs and oral histories, which are the result of an ongoing research programme driven by the Museum to record peoples' memories of their experience of the Island. It is planned that the Site Register database will be incorporated into the Robben Island Museum's Geographic Information System, which will promote effective management decisions for the use and management of all the resources identified on the Island.

One of the many aspects of Robben Island Museum's Memories Project is the collection of oral histories of people who were once associated with the island, especially ex-political prisoners. These oral histories form an important component of the Site Register, as do descriptions, chronological and contextual information, as well as an assessment of vulnerability of each individual element on the Island.

### INTERPRETATIVE STRATEGY

The Robben Island Memories Project is also an essential cornerstone of the interpretative strategy. Within the Integrated Management Plan, Robben Island Museum's interpretative strategy has been the most crucial factor in communicating and educating the public, both national and international, about the natural and cultural resources on the Island and their significance.

The development of the interpretative strategy followed a process whereby various platforms were organised over the past two years in the form of public symposia, workshops, meetings, and evaluations concerning exhibition development. Various ideas have emerged continually and from various constituencies during the exhibition development process.

A conceptual framework was used to develop briefs for each of the exhibitions/presentations developed to date by Robben Island Museum with various partners.

### THE INTERPRETATIVE CONCEPT OF PILGRIMAGE

The concept of pilgrimage had been mooted by various constituencies and at various times in the process of developing an interpretative strategy.

A pilgrimage is a journey, a quest for spiritual enlightenment. If triumph of the human spirit over adversity is the significance of Robben Island, then pilgrimage is the method we use in our quest to experience that triumph. Visitors who come to Robben Island are invited to become pilgrims. Each site for the presentation of Robben Island's message becomes a stage in the pilgrimage.

During their incarceration, prisoners experience pain, suffering and daily hardships that are difficult to imagine for those who have never been imprisoned. We can only learn about a prisoner's experience second-hand, by reading or listening to descriptions from ex-prisoners. Robben Island Museum could provide another avenue for learning about and from these prison experiences, by developing a unique, interactive museum experience. Because the visitor cannot literally undergo the past experiences of prisoners who lived on the Island, their pain and suffering, but may wish to empathise with this experience, a facility that encourages a metaphorical journey similar to the prisoner's experience, has to be developed. Rather than appeal to the mind with reams of historical information, the development of such an experience should appeal to the visitor's emotions, heart and the universal need for spiritual fulfilment.

Victor E. Frankl, who was also imprisoned for political reasons in a Nazi death camp, has provided a psychological perspective of the prisoner's experience that complements Mandela's political perspective. He describes the prisoner's experience as follows:

"The prisoner who had lost faith in the future - his future - was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual world; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay." .....and....." this intensification of inner life helped the prisoner find a refuge from emptiness, desolation and spiritual poverty of his existence, by letting him escape into the past."

Robben Island, historically, had been a place for incarceration for almost four centuries. Many people have experienced imprisonment, both explicit and implicit, on its shores.

For Robben Island political prisoners during the last three decades, it seems that refuge from that emptiness and spiritual poverty was sought by focussing on a common political objective. The attainment of this political objective is considered as the triumph of the human spirit over adversity. Nevertheless, the psychology of this experience is universal and could therefore be the concept that Robben Island Museum invites each visitor to share.

However, Robben Island has been characterised as a place of emptiness, barrenness, pain and suffering. Without a doubt, the spirit of the people who were incarcerated there and the positive energy, which they generated in their attempts to overcome an oppressive social and political order, is what transformed the Island into a site of pilgrimage. Prisoners, through the ages, came to the barren site that is Robben Island. There, they experienced hardship and suffering. In more recent years, political prisoners found hardship and suffering but, due to their individual and collective spirit, they were able to transform themselves and society. This process of transformation constitutes the historical event that visitors come to "experience", see, find and celebrate.

Therefore, it is this message of transformation which the Museum has attempted to facilitate for its visitors. Robben Island Museum has engaged in a process that therefore explicitly and implicitly encourages visitors to transform themselves on their pilgrimage to the site and thus perhaps encourage them to transform society -to contribute their positive energy to the triumph over oppression.

However, as for all pilgrims, the quality of the experience depends on the individual and his or her own life-goals. The exhibition design process should invite visitors to build on the building blocks that were left behind by prisoners in a literal or metaphorical way.

The concept of a methodological pilgrimage allows us to enhance the "sacredness" and "preciousness" of the site. Sites of pilgrimage are, after all, inherently sacred. On a practical level, therefore, the Museum should practically prepare visitors to actively preserve the site when they are preparing to make a pilgrimage to it. One of the underlying narratives of the exhibition design should be an emphasis on the protection and conservation of the site and its collection, in addition to the protection and enhancement of its "site of pilgrimage" spirit.

**A trend in conservation of World Heritage Sites promotes the idea of developing an information/ education/entertainment area outside of the Site, so as to encourage visitors to focus on this centre, rather than on the site itself. For Robben Island, such an area would be the exhibitions installed at the Nelson Mandela Gateway at the Waterfront. This is where much contextual information is provided, as opposed to the Island site, which is reserved for enhancing the experience.**

The process of PILGRIMAGE would be reflected on the visitor's journey to the Island, and includes the following stages:

1. **Preparation** through the accessing of contextual information.
2. **Separation** from normal life in the ferry journey away from the mainland.
3. **Confrontation** with the historical conditions of life on the Island.
4. **Acknowledgement** of change with new information.

#### THE ONGOING CHALLENGE FOR BALANCE

The Integrated Environmental Management Plan has been completed and a conservation management plan, as required by legislation, has been submitted to the relevant authorities. The challenge lies now in implementation.

However, since Robben Island was opened to the public as a tourist destination only a month after it was decommissioned as prison in December 1996, the impact of the demand of tourism has only increased over the last seven years. In the first year, the number of visitors was limited to 300 per day. At the end of 1997, after an initial environmental impact assessment, it was decided to increase visitor numbers to 1200 per day. At present, numbers are kept constant at 1500 visitors per day. In 2001, Robben Island received its millionth visitor.

Robben Island Museum has now completed its first phase of development. It has constructed an information centre in the form of the Nelson Mandela Gateway at the Waterfront, where the ferry journey begins and ends. At the Nelson Mandela Gateway visitors are able to access information about the Apartheid System and the role of Robben Island as a place of incarceration over the centuries by interacting with various multimedia exhibitions. The challenge now is to introduce a sense of "pilgrimage" into the journey to the Island site, for which a tour package already exists.

The pressures introduced by tourism development have presented a constant challenge to the implementation of an environmental management system based on the existing plan, which includes a conservation approach and interpretive strategy as described above, and which can be implemented successfully given the day-to-day pressures of maintaining the current tour package. A change management system that successfully handles the incorporation of new information into existing tours, and that introduces sustainable conservation practices, will be an ongoing endeavour.

#### ABSTRACT

*In 1996 Robben Island Prison was handed over by the Department of Correctional Services to the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology to be developed as a museum, national monument and World Heritage Site. In January 1997, Robben Island opened its doors to the public as a tourist destination. In 1999, Robben Island was declared South Africa's first World Heritage Site.*

*Since 1997, the Robben Island Museum has been developing an integrated environmental management plan and system, in line with new South African environmental and heritage legislation, which sets out to manage development on the Island with a conservation approach. This paper describes the process adopted by Robben Island to ensure that it is managed to World Heritage standards, and that specifically looks at the approach that integrates the natural, environmental and cultural resources on the Island. In identifying the rich cultural heritage of the Island and its political significance as a place where the "human spirit triumphed over adversity", the conservation and interpretative strategies that have been developed have focused on intangible heritage, which is encompassed in memory and oral tradition and therefore contributes to the development of a site of living memory.*

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Juanita Pastor-Makhurane has:

- Master's Degrees in Adult Education/Archaeology (University of Cape Town, South Africa) and Museum Studies (University of Leicester, UK);
- Specialist training and experience in Heritage, Conservation and Museum Management;
- Two years of experience in the National Department of Environment Affairs and Tourism, with responsibility for projects in the Cultural Resources Management Sub-directorate. (1995-1997)
- Five years of experience as Heritage Resources Manager at Robben Island Museum - this entailed being responsible for the development, conservation and management of the cultural and natural resources on the Island site, its interpretation and project management and implementation of exhibits, research strategies and collections management.