

NOT APART BUT A PART

Adventure Guiding, Ubuntu and Conversations with Landscape

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ABSTRACT

Adventure tourism is changing. Visitors increasingly seek not only excitement and risk but meaning, interpretation and human connection. This paper argues that South African adventure guiding has focused too narrowly on technical competence while underdeveloping the deeper interpretive and relational skills that enrich outdoor experience. Drawing on traditions of field guiding, experiential education and African ideas of personhood, the paper explores how adventure guiding can evolve into a more intellectually and emotionally layered profession. It suggests that understanding landscapes - their geology, ecology, history and cultural meaning - intensifies rather than diminishes the zone experience sought by both guides and clients. Ubuntu, with its emphasis on relationship, attentiveness and shared humanity, may offer the basis for a distinctive South African guiding model that combines adventure, interpretation and human warmth.

The problem

South African adventure tourism faces a growing problem that many operators, trainers and senior guides have quietly recognised for years but seldom discuss openly. The modern visitor no longer wants only transport, supervision and adrenaline. Increasingly, tourists want meaning, interpretation, conversation and insight. They want guides who can explain landscapes, answer unexpected questions, interpret history, relate science to daily life, understand culture and read the emotional needs of clients. The experience economy demands far more than basic technical competence.

Yet the industry struggles to produce enough guides capable of this kind of enrichment guiding.

The problem begins partly in the wider education system. Many matriculants emerge from school with weak grounding in geography, history, natural science, language and general knowledge. Reading habits are poor. Confidence in discussion and explanation is limited. Much learning has been based on memorisation rather than curiosity or analytical thought. Adventure tourism then recruits from this same pool. In many cases, guiding attracts people who have practical outdoor instincts but limited educational depth or communication ability.

Different intelligence

Adventure guiding also attracts a particular kind of person, and the industry perhaps too seldom reflects carefully on this. Many guides are not naturally suited to conventional urban or corporate environments. Their office is the river, the mountain, the canyon, the forest or the

open trail. Some are undoubtedly escaping the suffocation of city life - fluorescent lighting, cubicles, repetitive bureaucracy and the psychological abstraction of modern urban existence. They may not always flourish within formal academic systems or conventional business careers, yet they often possess highly developed practical intelligence, environmental awareness, sensory alertness and instinctive leadership ability.

Modern economies tend to value forms of intelligence associated with administration, finance, information processing and customer servicing within tightly controlled systems. A skilled employee in a hardware store, for example, develops specialised applied knowledge: which paint survives coastal weather, which sealant bonds under damp conditions, which materials endure sunlight or corrosion. This too is a form of practical intelligence grounded in experience and application.

The adventure guide likewise becomes a processor of knowledge and applied judgement, though in a radically different environment. A whitewater kayaking instructor understands how hull shape, edge control, rocker profile and boat volume influence performance in different river conditions. A rafting guide learns to read currents, hydraulics, eddy lines, pour-overs and lateral waves almost intuitively while simultaneously coaching nervous crews through big water. A mountain guide interprets weather, terrain, fatigue, morale and risk minute by minute. A canopy tour guide in an ancient Mpumalanga forest may need not only to manage fear and excitement but also to convey something of the ecological and emotional significance of the forest itself - its age, atmosphere, silence, biodiversity and mystery.

This is not the absence of intelligence. It is a different configuration of intelligence: embodied, situational, interpretive and experiential.

Storytelling

Hiking tour guide Johan Outram, known for his interest in Drakensberg history and ecology, raises an important refinement to the question of intelligence. Rather than speaking of the “intelligent guide,” which may sound as though the guides themselves are being judged, he suggests the emphasis should fall on the *informed, knowledgeable or well-prepared* guide. This fits the broader thrust of the paper, which is less concerned with innate cleverness than with habits of preparation, research, judgement and ethical responsibility.

Outram also sharpens the discussion on storytelling. Storytelling lies at the heart of guiding because people remember stories more vividly than facts alone. A landscape, ruin, river crossing or aloe grove becomes meaningful when attached to human memory, drama, struggle or belief. Yet storytelling carries dangers when guides repeat legends, rumours or inherited claims without careful distinction between researched fact, interpretation and folklore. A guide should know where a story comes from, who told it, and whether it rests on documented evidence, oral tradition or personal belief. The skilled guide is therefore not only an entertainer but an interpreter who can acknowledge uncertainty honestly.

His example of aloe plants is especially useful. Aloe vera and related South African aloes have long histories in indigenous healing traditions and household medicine. Modern science has confirmed that some aloe compounds can assist with burns, skin irritation and wound treatment, while research also explores antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties. At the same time, many broader claims about “healing powers” arise from generational belief systems and traditional cultural interpretation rather than controlled scientific proof. Neither viewpoint should simply be dismissed. The guide’s responsibility is to present both carefully and transparently: the traditional understanding as part of cultural heritage and lived experience, and the scientific findings as evidence-based knowledge with limits and qualifications.

This principle extends far beyond botany into history, archaeology, geology and cultural interpretation. South African tourism is particularly vulnerable to oversimplified or romantic storytelling because guides often inherit dramatic tales second-hand and repeat them uncritically. Poorly researched stories can quickly become “tourist truth.” An informed guide therefore develops the discipline to separate evidence from speculation, memory from myth, and interpretation from established fact. Where certainty is lacking, it is better to say so openly than to present invention as knowledge. In this sense, good guiding resembles good scholarship: it balances curiosity, narrative power and respect for evidence. Johan Outram’s comments strengthen the paper by reminding us that interpretation is not simply performance, but a form of intellectual and ethical stewardship.

From procedure to interpretation

The result is that guiding often becomes procedural rather than interpretive. Guides learn safety briefings, equipment systems and route management, but struggle when visitors ask deeper questions: Why is this landscape shaped this way? Who lived here before? How did apartheid affect this region? Why are certain species disappearing? What cultural traditions are linked to this place? How does climate change affect this river or mountain system?

A guide who cannot answer such questions loses authority very quickly in the modern tourism environment.

This challenge has been recognised internationally for decades. Freeman Tilden, widely regarded as the father of heritage interpretation, argued that 'the chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation' (Tilden, 1957). He also stressed that 'information, as such, is not Interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information' (Tilden, 1957).

That distinction is critical.

The challenge is not simply one of knowledge. It is also one of confidence, adaptability and intellectual formation. Guiding cannot be learnt purely by rote. A good guide must think on their feet. They must improvise explanations, read group moods, adapt to different personalities and connect facts into stories. In reality, the best guides are educators, communicators, interpreters, risk managers and performers all at once.

Ironically, safety itself is linked to this deeper intelligence. An intelligent guide is usually better at reading weather, terrain, human behaviour and risk escalation. Good judgement does not arise only from procedures; it grows from broad awareness and reflective thinking.

Research into guide training increasingly supports this broader view of the profession. Betty Weiler and Sam Ham argue that 'tour guiding is an educational activity' and that interpretation is 'an indispensable tool' in ecotourism and sustainable tourism (Weiler and Ham, 2001). Elsewhere, Ham and Weiler describe interpretation as 'the centrepiece of sustainable tourism' because it shapes the quality and meaning of visitor experiences (Ham and Weiler, 2002).

This is remarkably close to what many experienced operators already know instinctively. Clients remember not only the rapid, mountain or trail. They remember the guide who made the experience intellectually alive.

South African traditions

The nearest South Africa currently comes to this kind of high-level interpretive training is probably the FGASA system for nature guiding, where trainees are expected to master substantial environmental knowledge and site interpretation. Even there, however, the industry still battles to move beyond the transfer of information toward true interpretive ability.

South Africa in fact has a long and distinguished tradition of interpretation within game ranging, wilderness trails and field guiding. For decades, guides in the safari and conservation sectors have developed sophisticated skills in animal behaviour, ecology, tracking and environmental storytelling. Visitors to wilderness areas are often introduced not to species lists but to relationships within ecosystems, behavioural patterns, conservation ethics and the emotional experience of immersion in nature. That interpretive tradition has become one of South Africa's tourism strengths.

What has not really happened, however, is a substantial spillover of this interpretive culture into the broader adventure and risk-based recreation sector. In rafting, climbing, canyoning, abseiling, trekking and similar activities, the emphasis has tended to remain heavily on adrenaline, technical competence and risk management. The peak experience - the sense of 'being in the zone' - takes precedence.

Yet the zone is not a theatre of physical excitement. It also implies a temporary sense of unity between person, movement and environment. Part of that experience comes from feeling at one with a landscape that is viewed and understood. A rapid becomes more meaningful when one understands the river system that created it. A mountain gains emotional depth when linked to geology, weather, ecology, history or human struggle. Interpretation therefore does not weaken adventure; it deepens immersion within it.

Adventure with deeper layers

This deeper form of interpretation adds dimensions to adventure without diminishing the thrill that people seek. Riding the rapids of the Grand Canyon is already an intense sensory experience. But understanding the story of John Wesley Powell's expedition through unmapped rapids in 1869, the geological violence that shaped features such as Lava Falls, the immense timescales exposed in the canyon walls, and the Indigenous histories embedded in the landscape changes the quality of that experience profoundly. The rapid becomes more than an obstacle to survive but part of a much larger planetary and human story.

The same principle applies to drifting through the Vredefort Dome Bergland on the Vaal. A float trip changes character when participants begin to understand that the river is cutting through the deeply eroded roots of the world's largest known meteorite impact structure; that the rounded hills were shaped by ice sheets hundreds of millions of years ago; that Stone Age people once occupied the ridges above; that Iron Age communities smelted metal nearby; that the gold economy of Johannesburg was indirectly tied to this ancient impact event. The landscape ceases to be background scenery and becomes a living archive of Earth history and human struggle.

Not apart but a part

Human beings evolved within nature, not outside it. Our emotions, fears, symbols, myths and sense of beauty were shaped over immense periods by mountains, rivers, storms, forests, deserts and animals. Adventure experiences often awaken something ancient within human psychology: heightened awareness, concentration, uncertainty, awe and immersion within elemental forces. Understanding the environment intensifies this response because people feel themselves participating in a meaningful world rather than consuming scenery.

A number of philosophers and environmental thinkers have explored this idea that humanity is not separate from nature but continuous with it. Martin Heidegger described human existence as 'being-in-the-world' - not detached observation, but lived involvement and engagement within an environment (Heidegger, 1962). Maurice Merleau-Ponty similarly argued that 'the body is our general medium for having a world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Human beings do not

stand outside landscapes analysing them intellectually; they dwell within them and derive meaning through practical immersion and encounter. Environmental philosopher Arne Naess warned that the attempt to establish 'a master-slave role' over nature contributed to 'the alienation of man from himself' (Naess, 1989). Deep ecology instead proposed that humans should understand themselves as participants within larger ecological wholes.

Adventure tourism may therefore contain educational and even philosophical possibilities that the industry itself has not fully recognised. At its best, guiding does more than deliver excitement. It reconnects people - however briefly - with landscape, history, embodiment and the deeper environmental conditions that shaped human existence itself.

Promising developments

There are, however, promising developments emerging within South Africa itself. One notable example is the work of John Roff, a specialist geology and nature guide trainer who has increasingly been travelling through South and East Africa conducting lodge-based and field-based training for guides. Roff's work is particularly significant because it explicitly combines science, storytelling, interpretation and emotional engagement rather than pure factual instruction. His courses include geology for guides, advanced interpretation, storytelling, ecology and nature connection. He emphasises helping guides 'bring rocks and landscapes to life' and encouraging 'wonder and curiosity' rather than overwhelming trainees with technical information (Roff, 2025).

Roff emphasises that training in place, as opposed to standing lecturing, delivers real meaning. The trainer takes participants to a site of interest to show and tell, talking with effect because the example can be seen, touched, understood in context. Training in place directly enhances guide awareness and future trail competence by immersing trainees in real environments where they can simultaneously observe, interpret, and respond. They learn to conduct 'conversations with landscape' in Roff's words.

Feedback from senior guides and trainers who have attended his programmes is revealing. Bryan Olver of the &Beyond Inkwazi Ranger Training School described Roff's approach as helping guides 'understand the bigger picture,' while guides from Singita and Marataba spoke of being 're-inspired' and learning to engage guests far more deeply with apparently ordinary aspects of nature (Roff, 2025). These responses suggest that parts of the South African industry are already recognising the need for a more interpretive and intellectually layered approach to guiding.

At the same time, the influence of the Outward Bound philosophy and Adventure Based Learning (ABL) has been significant within South African outdoor education. Kurt Hahn's philosophy of personal growth through challenge, discomfort, teamwork and exposure to nature shaped generations of outdoor instructors internationally and strongly influenced experiential education in South Africa (Hahn, 1957). The emphasis was not simply on recreation but on transformation through meaningful experience.

Wilderness and life

There may be important lessons here for adventure tourism. Adventure operators can learn from educational models developed in wilderness education and ABL, particularly around reflection, mentoring, confidence-building and emotional engagement. However, these approaches cannot simply be copied directly into commercial adventure tourism. Recreational risk tourism still depends heavily on excitement, stimulation and novelty. Adrenaline remains one of its major attractions.

This reflects the enduring Outward Bound principle of encounter-and-solve. The obstacle is not simply imposed for suffering's sake. The participant encounters a real challenge and must respond actively. Learning emerges through engagement rather than instruction.

This approach strongly shaped what later became known as Adventure Based Learning (ABL). In ABL, the activity itself — climbing, rafting, hiking, ropes courses, wilderness expeditions — is not the final purpose. It becomes a medium for self-awareness, problem-solving, interpersonal learning and emotional growth. Facilitators deliberately structure experiences around challenge, reflection and group engagement. The wilderness becomes a living laboratory of human behaviour.

The return to the group afterward often produces strong social bonding. Shared hardship strips away superficial identities based on fashion, status or wealth. People become known instead through endurance, humour, kindness, reliability and courage.

Facilitators repeatedly report that this is often “when the light comes on.” Participants begin noticing stars, wind, insects, moonlight and silence with unusual intensity. Many describe an altered sense of time. Others confront loneliness, fear or unresolved emotions more directly than in urban life. Some discover a surprising sense of calm and resilience.

The solo wilderness night is often among the most powerful components. Participants may spend a night alone with minimal equipment and no food in a carefully supervised but psychologically demanding setting. Initially, many report anxiety, heightened sensitivity and disorientation. Small sounds become magnified. Darkness alters perception. Hunger sharpens awareness. The absence of distraction becomes uncomfortable.

Participants are gradually removed from ordinary securities and distractions. Phones disappear. Urban routines weaken. Physical fatigue, weather, uncertainty and dependence on the group become central realities. What remains is encounter — with terrain, with others and with oneself.

The Journey

These ideas are vividly present in many South African forms of what adventure leaders call “The Journey” — a modern rite of passage for youth. The Journey combines hiking, climbing, kayaking, camping, solitude and group challenge into deliberately structured expeditions for personal development. In many respects, The Journey represents a local continuation of the Outward Bound tradition adapted to South African realities and landscapes.

ABL also developed partly as a response to modern urban alienation. Many educators and therapists argued that technologically mediated urban life disconnects people from embodied competence, direct experience, nature and authentic social relationships. Wilderness challenge was therefore treated as a corrective environment in which participants rediscover attention, interdependence and immediacy (Kolb, 1984; Priest & Gass, 2005).

In many respects Hahn's ideas function less as a philosophy than as a naming convention for life-as-experienced. The expedition becomes a device through which people encounter themselves stripped of ordinary urban distraction and social performance. Wilderness challenge becomes a form of existential pedagogy.

The Outward Bound approach used expeditions, sea voyages, climbing, wilderness journeys and group hardship not just as recreation but as structured situations of encounter. Nature, for Hahn, was not scenery. It was an environment of revelation. Mountains, rivers, storms and fatigue stripped away social pretence and forced immediacy. Participants discovered fear,

resilience, dependence, leadership and courage through lived experience rather than theoretical instruction (Hahn, 1957).

Experiential education

Hahn was not really a systematic philosopher in the formal sense. His ideas functioned more as a heuristic — a practical language for recognising moments when human beings encounter themselves directly through challenge, responsibility and nature. He believed modern industrial and urban society had produced passivity, over-specialisation and emotional insulation. Schools, in his view, too often trained compliance instead of character.

This understanding lies very close to modern ideas of situated learning and experiential education. Knowledge is not transferred into passive minds but constructed through embodied participation in meaningful situations.

For Dewey, learning emerged through action, consequence and reflection within real environments. As he explained: “To ‘learn from experience’ is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence” (Dewey, 1916, p. 140).

Dewey repeatedly insisted that theory only becomes meaningful through lived encounter. In one of his most frequently cited formulations, he wrote: “An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance” (Dewey, 1916, p. 144).

These ideas strongly intersect with the educational philosophy of John Dewey, whose influence extended far beyond philosophy into education, sociology and social psychology. Dewey argued that genuine understanding does not arise primarily through passive reception of abstract information but through active engagement with concrete situations. In *Experience and Education* (1938), he wrote that “there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education” (Dewey, 1938, p. 20).

Flow and zone

Flow resembles this Heideggerian absorption remarkably closely. In the zone, tools, body and environment fuse into a unified field of action. The kayaker does not analytically calculate each current vector while running rapids. The river is experienced directly through embodied responsiveness. The distinction between subject and object softens. One becomes immersed in meaningful action rather than standing apart from it reflectively.

His famous example is the hammer. A skilled carpenter using a hammer fluently does not consciously focus on “a hammer” as an object. The hammer becomes almost transparent within the task. Attention is directed toward the work itself. Only when the hammer breaks does it suddenly become an object of detached awareness.

That point leads directly to Martin Heidegger and his idea of being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*). Heidegger argued that human beings are not detached minds standing outside reality and then intellectually analysing it. Rather, we are already immersed in practical involvement with the world. We encounter things primarily not as abstract objects but as meaningful equipment within lived activity (Heidegger, 1962).

The phenomenon is not confined to sport. Writers, dancers, scientists, wilderness guides, craftsmen and surgeons often describe the same condition. A master carpenter shaping wood or a river guide reading whitewater may not be consciously calculating every action. Knowledge accumulated through long practice becomes embodied and immediate.

Physically, the body enters a highly activated but coordinated state. Research in sports psychology and neuroscience suggests several interacting processes are involved. Stress hormones like adrenaline may rise initially, sharpening alertness. Dopamine activity increases, improving motivation, pattern recognition and reward anticipation. Endorphins and endocannabinoids may contribute to reduced pain perception and feelings of ease or exhilaration. At the same time, some researchers propose that parts of the prefrontal cortex associated with self-monitoring temporarily reduce activity. This theory is sometimes called “transient hypofrontality” (Dietrich, 2004).

People in flow commonly report several striking characteristics. Attention becomes completely absorbed in the activity. Internal chatter diminishes. One stops monitoring oneself from outside. The distinction between “I am doing this” and “this is happening” weakens. Time may seem to slow dramatically or disappear entirely. Movements feel smooth, precise and unforced. Fear recedes, though not necessarily awareness of danger. There is often a paradoxical sense of both heightened control and surrender.

Psychologically, the flow state occurs when several conditions align simultaneously. The task must be challenging enough to demand total attention, but not so difficult that it creates panic. Skill and challenge must roughly balance each other. There must also be clear goals, rapid feedback from the environment, and intense concentration without distraction. Under these conditions, consciousness narrows and becomes highly ordered (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

Yet flow is also more than a measurable mental state. Philosophers, phenomenologists, outdoor educators and athletes alike have recognised in it something deeply existential: a temporary collapse of the ordinary separation between self and world.

The “zone” — often called flow state — is widely regarded today as a real and observable psychological phenomenon, not merely a poetic metaphor for peak experience. The modern scientific concept was most famously developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who studied artists, climbers, musicians, chess players, surgeons and athletes who described moments of intense absorption in which action seemed effortless, time altered, self-consciousness faded, and performance reached unusually high levels (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Ubuntu as a guiding model

Let us explore one intriguing possibility. We could well try to plumb the depths of African traditions of personhood and community spirit to develop a unique guiding culture based on Ubuntu. This deserves attention because it may represent South Africa's most distinctive contribution to the future of adventure tourism. At present, fragments of this already exist informally in parts of the industry.

Ubuntu is a foundational Southern African philosophy meaning “I am because we are.” Our sense of existence is reciprocal, community based, an expression of “humanness”. This idea frames the interconnectedness of humanity, community over individualism, and the fulfilment of personhood through empathy, respect, and mutual support (Khoza 2012, 2024). In tour guiding, particularly adventure tourism, it transforms the guide’s role from a paid provider of information and logistics into a facilitator of genuine human connection and shared experience.

An Ubuntu-inspired guide prioritises authentic relationships, fosters group cohesion, practices deep empathy and cultural sensitivity, and invites travellers to engage respectfully with local people, landscapes, and wildlife as part of a living whole. This approach offers South Africa a distinctive contribution to global adventure tourism by cultivating a unique guiding culture

rooted in African traditions of personhood and community spirit, moving beyond Western technical models toward more relational, hospitable, and regenerative experiences. While elements of this philosophy already appear informally among many South African guides, formalising it could create a powerful, authentic differentiator that turns every tour into an opportunity for profound human connection.

Many African guides display remarkable warmth, emotional intelligence, attentiveness and generosity toward guests. These qualities are often not learnt through formal training manuals but cultivated through deep cultural traditions of hospitality, relational awareness and communal identity.

Africa has long been associated internationally with human warmth. Visitors frequently speak not only about scenery and wildlife but about encounters with people - humour, patience, storytelling, resilience, informality and emotional openness. In many African societies, personhood itself has traditionally been understood relationally rather than individualistically. The well-known Ubuntu expression, 'a person is a person through other persons,' captures this worldview. John Mbiti expressed it succinctly when he wrote: 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am' (Mbiti, 1969). The individual is not conceived primarily as an isolated competitor but as part of a web of reciprocal human relationships.

This may have profound implications for guiding culture.

Much adventure tourism internationally still operates within an individualistic and technical framework. The guide manages risk, delivers procedures, controls logistics and supervises clients. But an Ubuntu-informed guiding model could place far greater emphasis on human connection, shared emotional experience, attentiveness to group wellbeing, mutual respect and the creation of temporary communities within the journey itself.

In practical terms, this may already be visible in subtle ways. Some South African guides instinctively treat guests not as customers but as companions temporarily incorporated into a shared social space. Humour, storytelling, collective encouragement, emotional checking-in and the informal sharing of food, songs or local knowledge often create experiences that visitors remember long after the technical details of the activity fade.

This does not replace professionalism or safety. On the contrary, it may strengthen them. A guide strongly attuned to group mood, fear, fatigue and interpersonal dynamics is often safer precisely because they are reading people relationally rather than mechanically. Ubuntu potentially offers not a rejection of international adventure standards but a humanising layer upon them.

An Ubuntu-based adventure model could therefore combine several dimensions at once: technical competence and safety, interpretive depth, emotional intelligence, environmental understanding, storytelling, and relational personhood. That combination may ultimately prove more distinctive and internationally competitive than simply attempting to imitate Euro-American adrenaline tourism models.

The irony is that South Africa may already possess many of the raw cultural resources needed for such a model. What remains uncertain is whether the industry can consciously recognise, cultivate and professionalise them.

Examining training models

Meanwhile, at Adventure Standards Africa, efforts have also been made to coach guides in detailed interpretive guiding linked to the unique geology, ecology, archaeology and cultural history of the Vredefort Dome. The Dome itself provides an unusually rich training environment

because guides are required to move continuously between astronomy, geology, river systems, ecology, gold mining history, colonial conflict, African history and modern tourism interpretation. This kind of integrated field interpretation may offer important clues for broader industry development.

This raises difficult questions about current training models, including some aspects of competency-based systems linked to the QCTO. Competency systems are useful for standardisation and minimum safety benchmarks, but they can unintentionally encourage checklist thinking. A trainee learns how to tick boxes rather than how to think, interpret and engage deeply with guests.

The core problem may therefore lie in the difference between instruction and education.

Instruction teaches a person what to do. Education develops the ability to understand why things matter.

Adventure tourism increasingly requires both.

Internationally, some countries have already recognised this shift. In New Zealand, outdoor and adventure education programmes strongly emphasise practical workplace learning, interpretation and leadership development alongside technical skills. Employment advertisements for guides frequently require knowledge of geography, ecology, history and culture in addition to operational competence.

This is highly revealing. It suggests that the international industry increasingly views guiding as an intellectual and interpretive profession rather than just an operational one.

Elsewhere, countries facing educational unevenness similar to South Africa have also grappled with this issue. In India, some ecotourism and heritage programmes have shifted toward community storytelling, local interpretation and experiential learning rather than memorised speeches. In China, the rapid growth of geoparks and nature tourism has pushed training systems toward stronger grounding in geology, heritage interpretation and visitor communication.

What becomes clear internationally is that enrichment guiding cannot be produced simply by classroom lectures or manuals.

Mentoring is clearly part of the answer, but mentoring alone is insufficient. Many experienced guides possess instinctive abilities that they themselves cannot easily explain or transfer. If mentoring is informal and unstructured, much knowledge remains trapped inside individuals and disappears when they leave the industry.

Where to from here

The training model itself may need to change.

Firstly, trainees need much more exposure to real interpretive situations. Instead of simply learning facts, they should repeatedly practise explaining sites and situations to different kinds of audiences. They should learn how to answer difficult or unexpected questions. They should be encouraged to connect geology, ecology, history, politics and culture into coherent stories.

Secondly, training should become more question-driven rather than answer-driven. A guide who fears questions becomes defensive and mechanical. A guide trained to explore questions becomes confident and conversational.

Thirdly, trainees should spend more time observing master practitioners in the field. Not only safety systems, but pacing, humour, emotional intelligence, interpretation and guest interaction should be consciously analysed and discussed.

Fourthly, the industry may need to encourage a stronger reading and discussion culture among guides. Guides who read widely generally guide better. This includes not only outdoor manuals but history, anthropology, politics, ecology and literature.

Finally, South Africa may have an opportunity to develop something distinctive rather than imitating foreign adventure cultures. The philosophy of Ubuntu - with its emphasis on relationship, attentiveness, mutual recognition and shared humanity - could potentially become part of a uniquely African guiding culture. Visitors increasingly seek authenticity and human connection, not simply technical competence.

The problem, however, remains urgent. South Africa possesses extraordinary natural, geological and cultural resources, yet the industry risks under-utilising them through shallow interpretation and weak educational preparation. If this continues, the country may steadily lose ground to competitors who understand that modern adventure tourism is as much about intelligence and insight as excitement.

The challenge now is deciding how the industry wishes to respond. Does guiding remain a low-status activity occupation built mainly around procedures and minimum compliance? Or does it evolve into a respected profession requiring intellectual depth, interpretive skill and broad human understanding?

That discussion may be one of the most important conversations the adventure tourism industry now needs to have.

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