



**MINISTRY OF TOURISM
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

Private Bag X424, Pretoria, 0001, South Africa. Tel. (+27 12) 444 6780, Fax (+27 12) 444 7027
Private Bag X9154, Cape Town, 8000, South Africa. Tel. (+27 21) 469 5800, Fax: (+27 21) 465 3216

Speech by Deputy Minister Fish Mahlalela on the occasion of the Makhonjwa Geo-Trail Gala Dinner with tourism and geology students, Barberton

29 April 2021

**Programme Director
MEC of Economic Development and Tourism in Mpumalanga
Executive Mayors
MMCs present here
Chairperson of the MTPA Board
Our Beloved Geology and Tourism Students
Members of the Media
Ladies and Gentlemen**

Good evening

Programme Director, let me first start by acknowledging a remarkable woman who defied all odds to contribute to the fight for the emancipation of our country, Charlotte Maxeke.

Her initiatives were always echoed by the words, "If you can rise, bring someone with you". We need to draw lessons from her as we implement government programmes towards achieving social and economic justice for our people.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

The world we live in is full of uncertainties and COVID 19 made us realise, how fragile it is, not to live a normal life. The association of the COVID 19 variant with our country has had a negative impact on the brand South Africa. International travel bans on our country as well as lockdown restrictions enforced in line with the evolution of the virus continue to affect the tourism ecosystem.

To mitigate the effects of this pandemic, the sector developed a three-pronged Tourism Recovery Plan, which I will reflect more about it when I engage stakeholders during my Budget Vote Debate engagements. However, our students may take solace from the fact that governments are very hard at work to ensure the resilience of the tourism sector is enhanced, and therefore continues to immensely contribute to our country's efforts to economic recovery and reconstruction.

Programme Director, it is worth noting that my department funded initiatives to enhance the tourism experience at the Barberton Makhonjwa Mountains prior to the listing of the site as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS). A total of R24 million was spent between 2012 and 2014. The project was implemented by the Barberton Chamber of Business in partnership with the Barberton Tourism and Biodiversity Corridor Programme and was supported by the provincial government and local municipalities.

The project deliverables included the development of a geo-tourism route, signage, beautification and signposting at the main Barberton entrance intersections, conceptualisation and initial designs for the WHS Interpretation Centre, alien invasive cleaning programme as well as institutional strengthening of communities benefiting from the project.

This initiative falls under the Domestic Tourism programs aimed at providing access, reduce seasonality, address matters of affordability and tackle the uneven geographic spread of tourism activity in the country. By exposing and giving the youth access to the World Heritage Site we believe our efforts will contribute to the overall efforts being made to improve domestic tourism numbers, thereby entrenching a culture of travel and tourism amongst the youth who are our present and future market.

We have specifically selected geology and tourism students to come here because this site is of particular interest to them given its importance for present and future generations. There are opportunities for some of these students to bring other university students from different countries and it can only be yourselves who will as from tomorrow understands the geological aspects of the site that can give a lasting impression to visitors. Thus, increasing tourism activity at this site and its surrounding areas.

Programme Director.

The virus will still be with us for a while and might be contained and brought to lower levels across the globe by late 2022.

South Africa, as the rest of the world is on a crusade to vaccinate health workers and its citizenry. The vaccination process will be a determinant on how quickly our sector can recover.

Everywhere else I have gone during Domestic Travel Activation Campaign, I emphasised on the importance of investing in domestic tourism as part of the recovery process. South Africa is a country rich with natural and heritage history. We should continue to promote and protect the biodiversity of our hidden gems, like the Makhonjwa Mountains in this area of Mpumalanga.

This UNESCO heritage site offers spectacularly scenic wilderness of immense geological importance. The Makhonjwa Mountains are a major drive for both domestic and international tourism and they take you on a journey into the mists of an impossibly distant past of more than three point five billion years.

To our fellow students,

As government and the tourism sector, we do share your frustrations and difficulties as you continue to do your research and scholarly work. However, you need to appreciate that lockdown restrictions are not aimed at punishing South Africans but to ensure that we manage the virus, reduce the loss of life and lower the infection rates.

Scientists have also advised the country of a third wave and government is currently monitoring the surge of this virus in three provinces, the North West, Northern Cape and Free State.

Throughout these difficult times, you learned to stay in balance. You must always challenge yourself to produce a final product that you could be proud of and that will make a positive impact on society.

The world survived SARS, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in 1921 and other pandemics that followed like Ebola and N1H1. I am hopeful that we will also survive this devastating disease for as long as we all play our part and observe all the health protocols.

Please note that education does not stop after you complete your academic programme but is continuous learning that adds to the immense knowledge of humankind.

The longest-serving President of our liberation movement and the current governing party, Oliver Tambo, once said: "The children of any nation are its future, a country, a movement, a person that does not value its youth and children does not deserve its future"

I would like to leave you with that important message!

I thank you