

# Images of the Natal Drakensberg

*It is a pity indeed to travel and not get this essential sense of landscape values. You do not need a sixth sense for it. It is there if you just close your eyes and breathe softly through your nose; you will hear the whispered message, for all landscapes ask the same question in the same whisper. 'I am watching you - are you watching yourself in me?'*

*L. Durrell, 1969, p. 158.*

Present attitudes towards the Drakensberg suggest that it is a valued and important place for at least a section of the population.<sup>1</sup> In a recent questionnaire survey of 1 142 people in the Drakensberg<sup>2</sup> 94.0% thought the Drakensberg was quite important or very important to them, and as a whole respondents ranked the Drakensberg as the most beautiful area in South Africa (Figure 1).

This paper will lay out some of the more important influences on the way we now see the Drakensberg, and will then outline the present view of the area as expressed by visitors in the Drakensberg.

For travelling explorers in the first half of the nineteenth century colonial-romantic conceptions — valuing the wild and sublime in the landscape — were prominent in South Africa. Such early travellers as Arbousset and Daumas, Gardiner, and Bell, who passed into and through the ‘terra incognita’ of the Drakensberg in the 1830s, reflected these conceptions as they described the expected fear and horror of the new and wild places — so prevalent in earlier explorations of the Cape Province (Pickles, 1978) — but here tinged with expressions of wonder and delight.

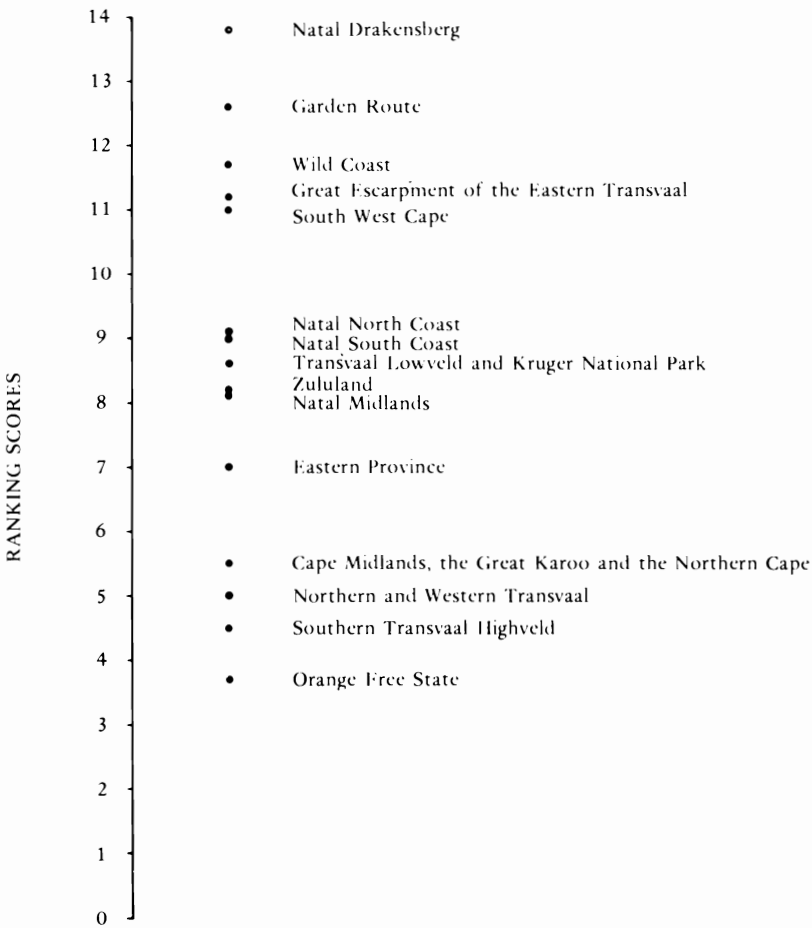
Arbousset and Daumas in 1836 travelled across what is now Lesotho and visited the ‘Blue Mountains’ “which so far as known, no European foot had yet trode.” (Arbousset and Daumas, 1968, p. 42).

There appeared to be nothing before us but a world of mountains piled one above another in strange confusion, which seemed to rise and recede from us as we approached. When we thought we were ascending, we were only going around a peak, or laboriously winding about so as to pass a link of the chain. We were ever reaching new ridges, new precipices, new defiles; there seemed to be no end to them . . . Here everything around conspires to plunge the soul into deep thought and dreams of the past. The profound silence of the solitude is scarcely disturbed by the murmur of the river . . . In the state of mind into which the contemplation of this scenery had thrown me, little was wanting to bring my emotion to a height, and to burst the floodgates which pent up the feelings rising in my heart.

Arbousset and Daumas, 1968, p. 44.

At the same time to the north increasing numbers of Voortrekkers were moving over the Drakensberg and entering Natal. The view from the brow of the Drakensberg reputedly was “the fairest prospect” that Retief had ever

FIGURE 1 SCATTERGRAPH OF RANKING SCORES FOR LANDSCAPE AREAS OF SOUTH AFRICA



Ranking Score = 
$$\frac{\sum (\text{Frequency of each Rank} \times \text{Inverse Rank Number})}{N}$$

set his eyes on (Nathan, 1937, p. 174); the place subsequently has been known as 'Blyde Vooruitzicht' (Pleasant Prospect). The Voortrekkers had traversed the mountain foothills to the south and west of the Malutis and this prolonged contact was probably instrumental in their ready acceptance of the Drakensberg foothills for farming — an acceptance reflected in their choice of farm names<sup>3</sup> such as Great Happiness, Harmony, Beautiful View, Peace Fountain, Luck and a thankfulness following the hardships of the trek such as Rest, Well Earned, Long Awaited. Typically, however, there were hardships and there were strong memories of past hardships; Misfortune, Battle Laager, Desert, Hungry Ravine, Struggle Corner, False Hope.

The implementation of a formal colonial administration with the British entry into Natal resulted in an increase in the number of travelling observers — topographers, tourists, officials. Many of these paid little or no attention to the Drakensberg area; an area designated as 'Nomansland' and regarded as a buffer zone between different population groups, and as a landmark in discussion of settler activity along its fringes.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in 1855, Holden could claim,

The natural features of the Sovereignty are on a bold, broad scale. But little of the picturesque and beautiful presents itself to the eye of the traveller, bald monotony prevailing, except in some favoured spots. The plains, or "Flats", as they are generally called in South African phraseology, appear interminable. The mountains rise high, until cloud-capped; the giant Quahamba is lost in the heavens; whilst Moshesh's heights look blue, almost frowning black, in the distance.

Holden, 1855, p. 339.

But, at the same time, Dr W.H.I. Bleek records that,

The mountains are steep everywhere, with almost perpendicular precipices. A correct picture of the country can only be drawn by imagining it as mountain scenery in the Alps or Cordilleras Mountains, which run precipitously and steeply towards the sea. Many parts of Western America, Chile, for instance, could be compared with this scenery . . . Consequently, the scenery is very beautiful.

Bleek, 1965, p. 39.

The period following the mid-1850s saw the extension of settler influence into the Drakensberg as the Bushmen were 'eradicated', as farming interests expanded into the foothill areas, and as the inner reaches of the Drakensberg were better surveyed. This was paralleled by the widening of attitudes towards the landscape, and increasingly detailed and later poetic descriptions of their qualities. The increasing concentration on the individual features of the landscape expressed by artists such as Gen. G.H. Gordon (1865) and T. Baines are followed by increasing interest shown by natural historians and natural philosophers such as the German traveller Fritsch, who outlined a model of formation for South African mountain forms as he passed through the northern Drakensberg (Fritsch, 1868).

As contact increased British settlers moved into the foothill areas, making their new homes as 'familiar' as possible. The naming of places and farms can be used to reconstruct this process of encounter and familiarization and the attendant impressions of this new landscape. Most farm names recalled places from the settler's past, facilitating the acceptance of a strange and unknown area as a home and known place, but some reflected the landscape

— Twin Stream, Sylvan Cliffs, Game Pass; some the experience of the landscape — Arcadia, Compensation, Contention, Good Hope; others the feeling of exile — Solitude, Forlorn, Forget Me Not. This practice of making the unknown known and familiar was also clearly evident in the promotional literature of the time, to encourage immigration to the new colony.

In general, attitudes towards the Drakensberg were considerably ameliorated and enriched during the second half of the nineteenth century. This can be seen in Wolseley's exposition in 1875 of the qualities of the area, a description which articulates some of the experiences commonly associated with the Drakensberg at the present time.

Although we really saw nothing of the great falls, still I never enjoyed a day more; the air at the height we were at about 7 000 feet above the sea was delightful; one felt invigorated by it: drinking it was like drinking some sparkling and exhilarating wine. So much is talked at home about the freshness of the seaside air, but to my mind it is nothing like the air on a high mountain.

Wolseley, 1971, p. 205.

The first systematic investigation of the Drakensberg occurred in 1908 with the combined Basutoland and Natal expedition to traverse along the top of the Drakensberg to identify and block all passes into the Basutoland Protectorate to protect it from an outbreak of tick fever on the east coast. The records of this party were important in identifying previously unknown passes. Furthermore, in the records of this party the reverential fear of the unknown and the sublime are clearly absent, replaced by the business-like acceptance of the dangers of operating in such an environment: an attitude change which was a necessary pre-condition for the large-scale development of mountaineering which was to follow.

All mountains appear doomed to pass through three stages: An inaccessible peak . . . The most difficult ascent in the Alps . . . An easy day for a lady.

Mummery, 1895, quoted in *The Journal of the Mountain Club of South Africa*, Vol. 66, 1963, p. 26.

The changes of attitude wrought by the early mountaineers in the Drakensberg, and the reports of their successes and failures in climbing new peaks,<sup>5</sup> were instrumental in the opening up of parts of the area. The 1930s in particular were the halcyon days of climbing in the Drakensberg; 48% of the major peaks were first climbed between 1920 and 1940,<sup>6</sup> and in the 1930s *The Journal of the Mountain Club of South Africa* reflected, through a number of published articles, general interest in the mountain experience.<sup>7</sup>

Mountaineering experience linked with the development of more widely available photography,<sup>8</sup> stimulated interest in photographs of the landscape, while the technical means of reproducing photographs for mass circulation improved, and the lighter camera became more common (the No. 1 Kodak roll film camera, for example, was introduced in 1888). The net result was to make photographs of the Drakensberg much more widely available, a fact that was to have important consequences for this area.

As information was being disseminated growing consideration was given to why people found this area so interesting:

In approaching the mountains visitors are often disappointed with the distant view, which gives small promise of the variety of outline and wealth of detail which are so impressive when right under Mont aux Sources. There seems to be some quality in the South African sunlight and in the colouring of the rocks which causes many of the rugged features to be invisible from a distance of a few miles, foreshortening and flattening them against their background.

Churchill, 1910, p. 412.

And as a direct result of this sort of questioning there developed a growing concern, first for the over-hunting and decline of some species of animal in the area, and secondly with the visual qualities of the landscape.

This general concern was manifested earlier among Afrikaner communities,<sup>9</sup> but the first conservation areas (game reserves) proclaimed in Natal were undoubtedly influenced by the National Parks movement in Canada, the USA and Britain, and by the conservation movement, particularly in the U.S.A., in the decade from 1900 to 1910.

The creation of game reserves in the Drakensberg seems to have occurred prior to the general recognition of the need to conserve flora or scenery. The proclamation of Giant's Castle Game Reserve, for example, in 1903 by the Natal Government was expressly to protect the eland in the area (Pearse, 1973). Prior to that only limited concern had been shown and indeed only a few people had visited the area. The Mont aux Sources area seems to have enjoyed more contact and awareness of its value by visitors: Pearse (1973) claimed that as early as the 1850s guide books of the period mentioned the Saddleback (renamed the Amphitheatre), the Falls and the Tugela Gorge; the area was surveyed and farms, State land and African Reserve boundaries had been demarcated in 1884. In 1906 its state-owned land was proclaimed a national park, although it was not until 1916 that the park was actually established.

Yet at the time of the formation of these reserves no studies with an ecological basis had been carried out in South Africa (Bews, 1917a).<sup>10</sup> The first 'oecology' of the Drakensberg area was by Bews (1917b) at a time when there were no published topographical maps of Natal. The continued impetus of the parks movement in these early years was instead dependent upon a growing awareness of aesthetic considerations.

I have tried to show in the foregoing pages that we have in our midst beautiful and interesting scenery worthy of being known and enjoyed by a wider circle of South Africans. We all know that the splendid scenery of New Zealand has been made accessible and a great attraction to visitors by the enterprise of its Government. The Canadian Pacific Railways is doing the same thing for the Rocky Mountains, and I cannot do better than quote part of a letter I received some years ago written from the Rockies by Mr L.T. Amery, the "Times" war historian. While out here he had ascended to Mont aux Sources and had been much impressed with the rock scenery, and it was on a suggestion from him that Government sent an expedition to take photographs for a guidebook. Mr Amery says, "The Canadians have a very fine national park here in the Rockies at Banff, and they preserve a herd of their nearly extinct buffalo. They have built a big hotel there and they advertise Banff and all the places along here like

anything. By constant reiteration they are gradually convincing everybody that there is no mountain scenery in the world like the Rockies. My own idea — between ourselves — is that the Drakensberg is quite as fine in its own way and only requires equal advertising to attract people.” The letter proceeds to make suggestions for a hotel at the bottom and a rest hut for sleeping on top. This from an experienced traveller and mountaineer will, I trust, carry weight with the Government. They have an asset in their mountain scenery which has too long been neglected.

Churchill, 1910, p. 432.

It was the emphasis on aesthetic considerations in the growing publicity surrounding the Drakensberg that provided some incentive for the improvement of the communications network in this area. The extension of the rail network of the Natal Government Railways (later South African Railways) near the Drakensberg occurred between about 1890 and 1914,<sup>11</sup> and in the latter year a rough road was built into the Mont aux Sources area from the end of the railroad at Bergville.

The wider availability of photographs and the easier means of transport to the mountains was important in the promotion of the Drakensberg, and was most clearly recognised by the railway authorities themselves, who were concerned with increasing their passenger traffic. With the proclamation of the National Park in 1906 the Minister of Agriculture and Lands in the Natal Government arranged for the Natal Government Railways to send a

Eastern Buttress and Devil's Tooth — Amphitheatre. (Royal Natal National Park).

Photograph by Malcolm Pearce.



photographic team into the area. Their results included many landscape scenes and these were displayed in the Provincial Handbook for the area and in railway carriages of the time.<sup>12</sup>

Alpine and Rocky Mountain landscapes were already better known and more attractive to many tourists, and so it was necessary that the value of the Drakensberg be portrayed as essentially different from these other areas, not only as an area of beautiful scenery but also as an area of untouched wilderness and unclimbed peaks.

... charm and newness for many Alpine tourists has worn off. In like manner, America and Canada, while still comparatively new countries have matured so rapidly that climbers among the Rocky Mountains have long since made what the Mountaineer's soul craves for — the chief joy of the climber's ambition, a 'first ascent' — an event of past history. It is here that the Drakensberg range, particularly that portion known as the Mont aux Sources group, makes its challenge to all lovers of nature in her grandest and most sublime moods. Tourists and mountaineers can no longer be satisfied with repeated ascents of the well-trodden peaks of the continent or Canada now that the beauties of the Drakensberg are making so emphatic a claim to attention.

Tatlow, 1911, p. 321.

Later, even the qualities of the basalt rock, making climbing more difficult and consequently retaining many unclimbed peaks, were invoked in efforts to make the Drakensberg the premier climbing area in South Africa. Furthermore this environment of solitude and challenge became a symbol of a healthy culture in displaying correct and desirable aspirations:

Away to the mountains! I think this is the healthiest aspiration of plain-dwelling humanity.

L.F.W., 1910, p. 556.

— and as a place with a climate beneficial to physical health or recovery:

On health grounds alone the Drakensberg makes its appeal, apart altogether from the challenge it makes to the imagination and intellect.

Tatlow, 1911, p. 323.

The origins of a more popular image of the Drakensberg are linked closely with these transformations of attitudes. Particularly significant has been the changed concept of 'Nature', with the adoption of an 'ecological viewpoint' (Bews, 1931).

Interestingly, the adoption of interpretative services by the Parks Board in an ecological context, explicating basic natural history — topography and geology, climate, vegetation, animal and bird life, history and archaeology, could be seen to have been instrumental in ameliorating conceptions of the area as wild, and its increasing treatment as a 'nature park'. The idea of contained and discrete ecosystems maintained in parks and reserves as show pieces of high quality landscape and valued experience has fundamentally altered the popular image of the Drakensberg.

To some extent wilderness policy management itself has exaggerated this trend by restricting entry points and until recently interpretative and guide facilities.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, other information services are often low key. In the planning of trails, for example, the Natal Parks Board claims to take the mental age of 12 years as its standard for design and informational content (Vincent, 1978). Thus the non-wilderness user attracted to the Drakensberg

is in part subject to de facto control because of the restricted nature of guidance, information and encouragement available. This in turn affects patterns of behaviour in the area, and the result is a further increase in the emphasis placed on a restricted range of experiences, particularly the visual.

This developing pattern of use has come to be seen as a threat by those concerned with the experience of solitude and the sublime in a wilderness environment. In recent years calls for action have been common. Thus, for example, as pressure on the area increases Pearse (1973, p. 265) believes that "if our Drakensberg is to be saved, action must be taken immediately".

Such claims for protection reflect the success of the early mountain-advocates in popularizing the concept of wilderness; a success which now necessitates protection for this experience against a general influx of visitors for whom increasingly the area is seen as a 'nature park', and for whom the parallel image of a gentler mountain environment has become increasingly common.<sup>14</sup>

Our peaks have a friendly air. There is atmosphere, wood, water, campfires, shelter. The Alps lack that. One senses hostility . . .

Versveld, 1932, in Berman, 1966, p. 149.

At least two popular views of the Drakensberg have resulted; one as a wilderness area of solitude and personal challenge, developed in and perpetuated since the nineteenth century particularly by the mountaineering groups, and the other as a nature park holiday resort developed as a direct result of the success of claims about the value of the area, claims which, in their success, have encouraged visitors with different expectations.

Thus, the view of the Drakensberg as 'nature-park' stems directly from the view of the area as 'wilderness'. It arose through the combined desire of those concerned with the experiences of wild landscape to protect that experience, and to do so by gaining public support.

Results from the questionnaire survey seem at one level to verify these claims. The number of people visiting the Drakensberg resorts increased rapidly through the 1960s and 1970s (Figure 2), and their views did differ in some regards from those of a special interest group (composed of planners, environmental managers and mountain club members).

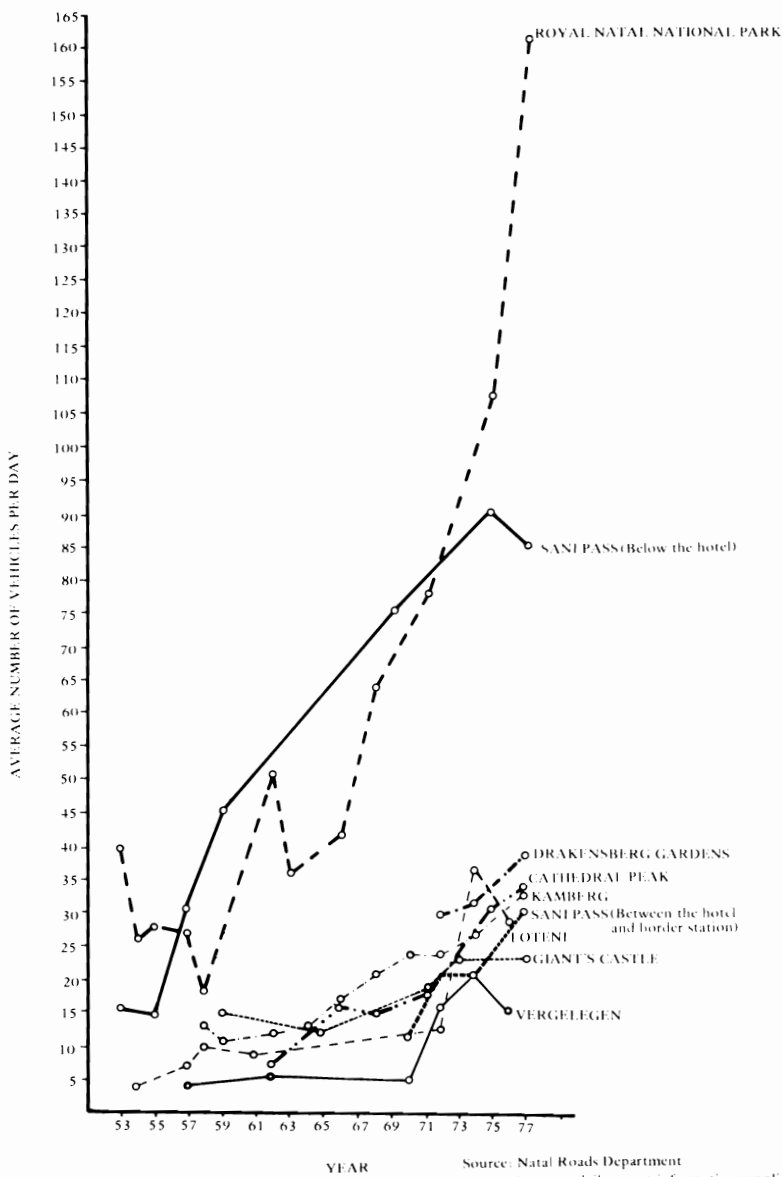
The valued qualities of the Drakensberg landscape were the grandeur, magnificence and the beauty of the landscape (48.7%), the peace and quiet and tranquility of the area (22.2%), its wild, untouched nature (21.6%), varied scenery (12.4%) and its clean air, clear water and freshness (10.0%), that it was away from the city, jobs and other people (11.1%), and was a relaxing and refreshing experience (11.5%).<sup>15</sup>

Of their experiences respondents generally considered the aesthetic to be the most important,<sup>16</sup> with physical, relaxational, solitary and emotional experiences also being valued. Educational, social and anticipatory and reflective experiences were less important. Of particular interest is the difference between the visitor sample and the special interest group sample. For the former solitary and emotional experiences were equally important, for the special interest group solitary experiences were even more important than both emotional and relaxational experiences.

In terms of activity levels and behaviour patterns, whilst the visitor sample regarded themselves to be less active on the whole than the special interest



FIGURE 2 ROAD USAGE FIGURES FOR THE DRAKENSBURG UP TO 1977



group,<sup>17</sup> they nonetheless tended to have hiked high into the mountains (Table 1a) and to have used wide areas of the landscape (Table 1b).

TABLE 1 (a) The highest point ever reached in the Drakensberg.  
(b) The areas of the landscape normally used in the Drakensberg.<sup>18</sup>

	(a)		(b)	
	n	%	n	%
Escarpment top	416	43.3	121	14.5
Sub-peak and ridges below escarpment top	227	23.7	283	28.6
Plateaux of Little 'Berg	168	17.5	558	50.0
Base of sandstone cliffs	149	15.5	969	75.3

On the whole the special interest group tended to respond more strongly than other visitors to questions concerning their experiences, activities and attitudes towards the Drakensberg: they were more strongly in favour of protective measures and against development measures for the future, they were more active, more had hiked higher and used wider and higher areas of the landscape, they held the experience of the Drakensberg more dear and they tended to visit the area more often.

Essentially and in the main, however, the responses of visitors and special interest group seem to be similar in kind, although there are, to a greater or lesser extent, differences of degree. On the whole, however, the world of both groups seems to be a similarly valued and used world. This has important implications for the duality between the view of the Drakensberg as 'wilderness' and the view as 'nature-park'. Historically the latter view developed from the former, as we have seen. Empirical evidence suggests that the two views may be less different than expected. Planners and environmental managers therefore need to be wary about basing their planning considerations on presuppositions which assume a difference in kind, and not just degree, of visitors' appreciation of the landscape and experience of the Drakensberg. On the whole such presuppositions, which might have significant effects on the nature of planning and management proposals, would not seem to be warranted.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The socio-economic profiles of respondents were consistent. Respondents were predominantly young to middle aged, English-speaking South Africans. Mainly from Natal or the Transvaal, they were predominantly urban, highly educated professionals, earning good salaries, or they were students, housewives or retired. They tended to be married with few children.

<sup>2</sup> A further 50 questionnaires were filled in by planners, environmental planners, and mountain club members, in order to represent 'more concerned' views separately. This is referred to as the 'special interest group'.



Head of the Mbundeni Pass. Mbundeni Abbey in foreground. Mnweni Needles in the distance with Mponjwane.

Photograph by Malcolm Pearse

<sup>3</sup> Farm names probably reflect more clearly than other place names individual responses to a landscape. In the Drakensberg place names bear more strongly the imprint of subsequent settler and administrative responses. Farm names on the other hand reflect both early and later Afrikaner contact with the land and seem to have been more enduring.

<sup>4</sup> See Cloete, 1843, in Bird, 1888, pp. 205-6; Bird, 1971, pp. 10-11; Archbell, 1841, in Chase, 1843, p. 183; Baines, 1964, vol. 2, p. 177.

<sup>5</sup> In 1889 the *Alpine Club Journal* recorded several difficult climbs in the Drakensberg, notably those by the Stocker brothers in 1888. In 1891 'The Mountain Club' (later changed to the 'The Mountain Club of South Africa') was formed at Cape Town, and in 1919 the Natal Section of the Mountain Club of South Africa was formed, after the demise of the Drakensberg Club of Pietermaritzburg in 1911.

<sup>6</sup> Based on dates for recorded climbs given in Pearse (1973).

- <sup>7</sup> 'The Poetry of the Mountains' (Pells, 1931); 'Mountain Madness: The Quest of a Reality' (Biesheuvel, 1931); 'The Psychology of Climbing. A Means of Self-Expression' (Biesheuvel, 1934); 'The Physical and Aesthetic in Mountaineering' (Cameron, 1934); 'Sounds and Scents as Factors in the Lure of the Mountains' (Gordon-Mills, 1934).
- <sup>8</sup> The earliest extant photography in South Africa dates from 1845 (Bull, 1973), the earliest known of the Drakensberg — 1873-4 (Dodds, 1975). The Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) stimulated much interest in photographs of South Africa.
- <sup>9</sup> Game preservation, for example, was incorporated into the legislation of the Ohrigstad Volksraad; the Transvaal Volksraad limited game shooting, and in 1870 appointed wardens to enforce the limitations (Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa, 1973). Furthermore it was Kruger who in 1884 proposed that certain areas should be set aside and conserved. It was no accident that the Sabie game reserve (proclaimed in 1897) was later renamed Kruger National Park.
- <sup>10</sup> The first ecological study was that of Marloth in 1908, although an attempt to establish 'floral regions' for South Africa has been made by Bolus in 1905.
- <sup>11</sup> The line from Durban to Newcastle was completed in 1890, and was completed through to the Witwatersrand by 1895. In 1914 a branch railway reached Bergville.
- <sup>12</sup> "Much good work has been accomplished through the Railway Administration encouraging photographers and tourists to visit the Drakensberg, by which means the public has been apprised of the fact that South Africa possesses . . . a natural spectacle of great possibilities. The sombre and remote masses of the Drakensberg were at one time the playground mainly of the hunter or the casual tourist with a taste for exploring or scaling so-called inaccessible heights. But accounts of the district brought back by those explorers, combined with the effect of the fine photographic pictures, served to concentrate widespread and general attention on the Berg . . .".  
South African Railways and Harbours Administration, 1933, p. 8.
- <sup>13</sup> The extreme position was exemplified until recently by Loteni Nature Reserve where, in furtherance of wilderness management policies, the upkeep of footpaths was discontinued. The effect on activity patterns and hence experiences of the landscape was to restrict many visitors to the immediate confines of the camp and the river valley area.
- <sup>14</sup> See, for example, *"The Glorious Drakensberg Mountains of Natal: The Wonderlands of South Africa: Facsimile Reproductions in Colour from Original Paintings"* by A. Grieve (Perry and Co., Cape Town, 1920), where the use of pastel colours, flowing lines and absence of harsh lines in the representation of cliffs and jagged rock surfaces pacify and subdue the Drakensberg landscape.
- <sup>15</sup> Respondents were asked: "Why do you like the Drakensberg?"
- <sup>16</sup> These experiences were derived from previous interview responses and were grouped and described to each respondent as follows:
  1. Physical . . . walking, camping, swimming, sense of challenge, and fulfillment, healthy, recharge of energies, etc.
  2. Educational . . . learning about aspects of nature and about oneself, etc.
  3. Solitary . . . solitude, being alone, away from people.
  4. Anticipatory and reflective . . . planning the trip, travelling to and from, recalling the visit, showing photographs, etc.
  5. Relaxation . . . getting away, having a change, taking it easy, etc.
  6. Aesthetic . . . beauty of nature, magnificence of the mountains, smells, night sky, etc.
  7. Social . . . comradeship, meeting new friends, chatting around campfires, etc.
  - 8 Emotional . . . close to God and/or nature, emotional and spiritual uplift, sense of belonging, etc.
- <sup>17</sup> Using a self-rating activity scale respondents were asked to indicate how active they were on vacations:

	n	%
relaxing	67	5.9
gently active	296	26.3
active	498	44.2
strenuously active	266	23.6
Total	1127	100.0

Non-response = 15
- <sup>18</sup> For the highest point ever reached percentages total 100%, each respondent having reached only one highest point. In the case of the area normally used by respondents, because the chosen categories are aligned along physiographic boundaries many respondents in using more than one such area will be counted in each area they use. Percentages will therefore exceed 100.

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Cathedral Range

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