

Situational analysis of hiking in SA: *Quo Vadis?*

Executive summary

Hiking is not high up on the agenda of government. Communicating with government is problematic as we do not have a strong unified voice from all hikers and trail owners. HOSA is an umbrella organization striving to represent the total hiking industry for the purpose of supporting interactive communication between all role players as well as with governmental bodies and other decision makers in order to foster and develop the hiking sport. It needs the full support of all involved in hiking.

Background.

By and large hiking is, barring some efficient hiking clubs, a fairly unorganized unstructured recreational activity in the country; with no legislation or other guidelines guiding it. For any industry to grow and be successful there is a need for a strategic approach and a solid supply-demand structure. "Supply" being the trails; the "demand" being the hikers. For both of these there is a need for management structures if we are motivated to make hiking a long term successful/ sustainable activity in our country. It is however also acknowledged that many (most?) hikers have limited vision (geographically as well as strategically) and are thus not motivated to apply this approach and are satisfied with a *laissez-faire* approach of just "doing their own thing" within their own club and their own region. This letter will not be of interest to this group.

Role players: a brief historical perspective:

There used to be a *Hiking Federation of SA* who tried to merge all hikers into one organization so as to have some form of organizational structure for the management of hiking. This was later changed into *Hiking SA* to get rid of the negative legacy that followed the SAPerm's R1m sponsorship debacle of the 1980's. Hiking SA was also soon disbanded.

An attempt to create an organization for trail owners was launched in the 1990's: SAHTOA = *SA Hiking Trail Owners Assn.* which also had a life span of approximately 10 years. It was never disbanded but ceased to function actively.

Due to the inability of these groups to get organized on a national level, an initiative was subsequently taken to get an overarching body going which can speak for the whole industry- although there are not yet separate structures neither for hikers nor for owners in place. Thus was formed the *Hiking Organization of SA = HOSA*, with its vision being: "*To create a vibrant and sustainable yet lucrative hiking industry for the benefit of all in southern Africa*".

The Organization's main objective is to serve as umbrella body for all interested and involved in the hiking industry – to get ALL involved in communicating with each other.

Official situational analysis

After the *Hiking Way Board* of the 1990's was replaced with the *Forest Access Committee* of the new government, nothing happened. At the moment the government has very little

interest in hiking. (They have given money to some black individuals to develop new trails without any experience or knowledge e.g. Maluti Cave and Tstisa trails).

At the moment there is no quality control on the issue of trail provision, no legal requirements for hike leaders, no marketing strategy. The hikers and the trail owners are running their own “businesses”; very much everyone on his/her own.

In a certain sense this is good for we might not want interference from government at this point in time; BUT: should they do, as they did with the 4x4 group, enforce unilateral legislation on us, it will be a bad day for hiking. It can place a lid on our activity that can be very irritating and limiting us as to how we want to hike and where we want to go. Unless we can show government that we are well-organized and things are running smoothly, adding to the country’s tourism potential and community upliftment, they might leave us alone and even give us some support!. If however something unfortunate happens and they start to interfere, they might make life for us difficult. As far as I understand, the trail runners have suddenly found themselves put under the *Athletics Olympic Committee* to ensure “good order”! The freedom of the 4x4’s has been curtailed. What will they do with us?

If “something” happens we must be well-positioned to speak with power, representing, if at all possible, ALL hikers and ALL trail owners in the country. We thus have to be truly representative and speak out of one mouth.

How can we on a pro-active way influence decision makers?

One of the aims in the HOSA constitution states: *To obtain representation on committees and boards that have been established by the Government, provincial, regional, local authorities and other organizations and which could influence the hiking industry; and in cases where such representation is not possible, to provide these authorities with information towards decision making to benefit the hiking industry as a whole.*

The previous actions to form a mouth piece (“spreekbuis”) for the hikers as well as one for the owners, has failed miserably. The creation of HOSA was to fill this gap. Instead of assistance from club members for HOSA there has been a feeling of apprehensiveness and even criticism towards this initiative. There is no personal gain for anyone in this non-profit venture; the organizers have nothing in mind but furthering the cause of hiking.

May we then summarize what is the (potential) value of a strong organization such as HOSA:

As a first step there is the re-creating of a solid supply-demand system in the country by assisting role-players in organizing the hikers and the owners to form their own strong organizations to represent themselves and through a unified body (HOSA) addresses these issues at government level with authority. As one of HOSA’s aims it is stated in their constitution: *To serve as a one-stop point of service and liaison for hiking trail owners, public authorities and decision makers, where advice is available regarding all aspects of the hiking trail industry and to assist existing hiking clubs and hikers in forming a unified body representing hikers in the country.* And also: *To serve as link and forum for discourse between the organized trail-users (the demand part of the market) and the trail owners (who represent the supply part of the market).*

Someone has to take the lead in this process which has stagnated. What thus is the role of HOSA who has embarked on this road?

1. Creating internal unison amongst hikers.

It has already established membership relationship with a number of hiking clubs in order to start to create a platform to be able to assess generic problems and visions/aims of us as hikers. This ought to develop into an independent body for hikers in time to come. HOSA thus is not a club, neither (should it have) hikers as individual members. It thus in no circumstance should compete with existing clubs.

2. A new initiative to start the rebirth of SATHOA(trail owners) is required.
3. HOSA thus has to position itself as a powerful mouth piece to speak to various levels of government. Actions in this regards have been forthcoming, albeit at a slow pace due to very limited assistance from the rest of the hiking community.
 - HOSA is in the process of arranging a meeting with the Department of Tourism via one of our councillors (advocate Louis van der Westhuizen) and our President (Albert Bossert) to have us as hiking community recognised as an independent well-organized part of the SA tourism sector.
 - In order to show to them that we are striving towards responsible and sustainable practice, we have had meetings with the Tourism Grading Council on various occasions in the past. A new initiative is on the cards yet again.
 - On International level die World Trails Network has asked HOSA to become the Southern African hub for this world-wide organization. This needs to be in place if we want to expand our trail market to the international hiking community.
4. Marketing hiking activities has also been one of the activities of HOSA:
 - A presentation was made to 50/50 on the value but also the dangers of hiking on poor quality trails. A programme is bound to appear in the future.
 - The Discovery Vitality programme and Liberty Life has been approached to have them incorporating their health improvement points systems to hikers.

Readers should note that in all these initiatives there was no financial incentive to any of the board members whilst it cost them exceptional amounts of their private funds and time.

5. Expanding the industry through research and development has been initiated by HOSA. HOSA do not run such activities itself but tries to initiate it. The **Green Flag** movement has been monitored and backed by HOSA because of the potential it has shown to become a major local and international system to improve hiking trails and thus enhances the experience of hikers. Poorly managed hiking trails have been, and are, a big problem for hikers that should insist on a "value-for-money" product. Green Flag has not led to increase of hiking fees as the additional hikers/bookings that a trail owner receives through Green Flag, offsets the cost of accreditation within the first month. GF has also not led to the closure of any trail due to them being audited. It merely led to trails being better marked/signposted, safer and well-managed.
6. Training courses on trail development: including the planning, building and auditing of trails by individuals that HOSA can vouch to in terms of their expertise; have also been supported by HOSA. The same goes for hike leadership courses. Minimum standards for building of trails have been developed by KZN-Ezemvelo in consultation with some of our board members. This 360 page manual is now

promoted by HOSA as a guide for such work. This is the first step in ensuring good quality path conditions on trails for us as hikers.

7. In furthering hiking, it has been long overdue for us as hikers to establish a culture of hiking amongst school children. HOSA has been instrumental in encouraging some of its members in taking school groups on trails (e.g. on the Fish River clean-up projects by our President).
8. Increasing feet on trails has been the purpose of the *Treasure Hike* project also by our President, run as a project of HOSA and run under its auspices to give credibility to it.
9. The creation of a website and associated blog and Facebook is part of the activities rendered by Board members in their private capacity without any remuneration.

All these projects and activities are in need of a “stamp of approval” from a knowledgeable and professional body in order to be credible to the government and other decision makers. This is perhaps the most important the role of HOSA. Nobody else is acknowledged as forming a core of experts to whom the regulating bodies can turn to for advice.

Closing comment:

It is NOT the stated aim of HOSA to deliver services to the industry. It however realises the need to get expertise organized to assist role players in whatever way possible. It is said in the constitution: “*Using research to develop joint strategies for matters such as the establishment of standards, application of quality management (accreditation, auditing), market research and the implementation of these by means of joint marketing (locally and overseas). To set standards and provide information for the building and maintenance of hiking trails*”. The wording might well be adapted to express the real aim which is to only “**assist” and not deliver the services by itself.**

I trust that this exposition might clear all questions as to the necessity of an organization such as HOSA and to motivate all who has hiking at heart to become active supporters. The question to ask is thus not “What does HOSA give to me?” but rather: “What can I do to strengthen the arm of hiking through HOSA? “ As we believe that all hikers have this aim at heart, we take the liberty to attach an application form to this letter and trust that we will receive positive feedback from your club.

We will be willing to send one of our Board members to visit your club to answer questions and discuss HOSA and Green Flag with you.

Sincerely

.....
A. Bossert
President HOSA

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Leon Hugo
Quality control committee: Leon Hugo
Pretoria,
24 June 2015).