

Mthatha stakeholders want better protection for visiting tourists

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Politicians, officials, business owners and ordinary citizens spoke with a unified voice and embarked on a walk through the streets of Mthatha on Thursday, calling for more protection for the tourists who flock to tourism destinations in the Eastern Cape, particularly along the Wild Coast.

So bad have been the attacks on tourists that many tour operators are now threatening to take their businesses to other provinces, according to the Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism Agency (ECPTA).

The 6km walk from the Shell Ultra City along the N2 to the Nelson Mandela Museum in Owen Street was led by the agency in partnership with the Nelson Mandela Museum, King Sabata Dalindyebo local municipality, OR Tambo district municipality, national department of tourism, police and other stakeholders, including the Eastern Cape Gambling Board, as part of a campaign to raise awareness on tourism safety and security.

ECPTA tourism development senior manager Fezeka Mlungu said: "As stakeholders in the tourism sector, we cannot just sit and fold our arms while they [criminals] run rampant.

"In Mthatha and towards the Wild Coast criminals targeting tourists has got out of hand in the past few years.

"They are mugged, robbed and hijacked. There are card scammers who stop tourists [as they enter] Mthatha and rob them off their money.

"It is killing our economy and unemployment is huge in our province. If tourism businesses have to close down, it means whoever is employed in this sector will lose their jobs."

Though she was unable to provide full details, Mlungu said there had been about five incidents reported on the Wild Coast involving tourists since the start of the year.

In one incident, an overseas tourist was scammed of R90,000 after being stopped by criminals masquerading as traffic officers.

Also earlier this year, a group of tourists were reportedly hijacked near Mdumbi Beach near Coffee Bay.

Last week a tourism accommodation business was broken into and tourists who were staying at the facility had been assaulted by a band of criminals, she said.

Mlungu said they suspected there were organised syndicates in Mthatha who targeted only international tourists, though "we do not know how they see them when they are driving through Mthatha".

KSD municipality local economic development portfolio head and mayoral committee member Nkosi Dudumayo said a single tourist visiting the region created about seven job opportunities for locals.

He urged everyone, including community members, to become tourism ambassadors in both the KSD and OR Tambo districts.

They should partner with law enforcement agencies to fight the scourge of attacks on tourists and also had a role to play in marketing their district as a tourism-friendly destination.

Dudumayo said safety started with tourists being able to travel on safe and proper roads to tourist destinations.

"If a tourist has to stop, get out of the car and change a flat or damaged tyre and somebody opens

the door and steals their stuff, they won't be eager to return and that could affect tourist numbers."

Speaking during the walk, Mlungu confirmed some businesses in the tourism sector were threatening to pull out due to rampant crime.

She warned the Eastern Cape was competing with other provinces' tourism destinations.

"There are many tourist destinations that we have to compete with," she said.

"As destination marketing organisations we go out and tell people what we have and why they should come to our shores.

"We have an amazing cultural heritage; we also have Tata Nelson Mandela who grew up here, but when they do come, they find criminals waiting for them and ready to pounce."

She said there were many areas across the province that had been identified as crime hotspots and they were working closely with the police to stop the problem.

This included encouraging tourists to use the services of only ECPTA-registered tour operators and guides.

A cellphone app had also been designed which tourists who travelled alone, without any tour operators, could use to ask for assistance if they ran into trouble. Awareness campaigns were also undertaken in car hire businesses where tourists were likely to rent cars once they got to the province.

Qunu village pensioner Nontle Ngxekana, 69, who has been running her homestay business since 2018, said they were worried that if the crime problem was not addressed, it could reduce the number of tourists who booked into their establishments.

She was among many elderly women who took part in the walk.