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## **Developing sustainable palaeotourism in South Africa. The Kitching Fossil Exploration Centre, in the Eastern Cape as a case study.**

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Geotourism is defined as “tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place — its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents.” Palaeotourism or fossil tourism is an activity which can have considerable impact on enhancing the geographical character of a place, creating public and political awareness of palaeontology, helping to protect fossil sites, leading to local economic development, creating jobs and also developing the South African tourism history as a whole. South Africa is fortunate in that it has an incredibly rich fossil record and is the only place in the world where you can see fossils ranging from the origin of life, through the origin of dinosaurs, mammals and humans. In recent year there have been fossil discoveries that have made headlines all over the world. Despite South Africa’s extraordinary fossil record, palaeotourism sites have not been easy to sustain. This paper describes one of these sites, the Kitching Fossil Exploration Centre (KFEC) in Nieu Bethesda in the Eastern Cape, as a case study of a palaeotourism site which may be on the path to sustainability after 10 years of operation.

The KFEC palaeotourism experience comprises a visitor centre, demonstration of fossil preparation and a fossil safari to the nearby river bed to see real fossils. The Center employs three guides and a manager from the local community who have no formal palaeontological qualifications. In 2005, despite the tough economic climate, KFEC received more than 5000 visitors, the first time in eight years, and for the first time in eight years the Centre is approaching break-even point, and will, hopefully, in the next year or so be financially sustainable.

Our experience at the KFEC suggests that the ingredients of success at a site like this are:

- Being part of community that offers many different types of experience to tourists; the number of people visiting the Nieu Bethesda just to see fossils would be small indeed.
- Careful choice of guides from the local community, ongoing training and consistent high quality experience for tourists.
- Strong relationships with other tourism organizations in the community.
- Careful financial management and controls.
- Enthusiastic and dedicated management.

Examples are given of all of these factors for success, and the argument is made that they apply elsewhere in South Africa and probably the world.

