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# Local development through ecotourism in South Africa: opportunities for botanical gardens, game reserves and national parks

## Abstract

This paper presents practices of some high profile ecotourism attractions in the provinces of South Africa. The attractions were famous, and were marketed nationally and internationally. Some had received merit awards from tourism indorsing agencies. The study questioned how they practiced tourism, and how far they treasured the local communities. Purposive sampling was used to select some thriving ecotourism attractions in all the nine provinces. The attractions were found to be disregarding to empower or involve local communities. They were also suspected to be denying the locals the monetary shares due to them. The study suggests development of an ecotourism policy that is driven by community involvement, and a vigorous monitoring and control for policy execution.

**Keywords:** economic empowerment, local community, social responsibility, sustainability.

**JEL Classification:** O13, P28, Z32.

## Introduction

Ecotourism is a tourism practice relating to visiting delicate, original, and moderately intact natural areas that is intended as a low-impact niche tourism (Bhuiyan, Siwar, Ismail & Islam, 2012). It generally educates travelers, provides funds for ecological conservation, directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities, and nurtures respect for different cultures, among others. Sadry (2009) states that generally, ecotourism deals with living parts of the natural environments, centers on socially responsible travel, personal growth, and environmental sustainability. Ecotourism classically entails traveling to destinations where flora (vegetation), fauna (wildlife), and cultural heritage are the major attractions. Ecotourism is intended to offer tourists insight into the impact of human beings on the environment, and to foster a greater appreciation of our natural habitats.

When planned and executed properly, ecotourism signifies a workable economic alternative for local ecotourism destinations. As Buckley (2011) insinuates, responsible ecotourism reduces the harmful aspects of tourism on the environment, and enhance the cultural integrity of local people. It evaluates factors of the environment and culture. It also supports recycling, energy efficiency, water conservation, and creates economic opportunities for local communities, thus inspiring entrepreneurships. Hence, ecotourism appeals to environmental and social responsibility. Furthermore, Honey (2008) also points out that in addition, ecotourism builds environmental awareness, and supports human rights and democratic movements.

## 1. Stimulating improving sustainability

**1.1. Rules and education.** A strategy to protect the environment should ensure that ecotourists do not cause any harm to the environment (Nowaczek, 2010). Informative drives are needed to improve ecotourists' awareness, inform them of environmental issues, and inspire that they care about the places they visit. Tour guides can communicate awareness (Wheeler, 2007). They can mitigate negative environmental impacts by providing information and regulating tourists on the rules and policies of the attractions they visit.

**1.2. Local ecotourism niches.** Sustainability deficiency encourages locally based ecotourism entrepreneurships, which are small scale slowly growing ecotourism attractions (Karlan & Valdivia, 2011). Local people are usually interested in the wellbeing of their community. They can therefore be more accountable to environmental protection than multinational corporations whose hostile effects harm the environment, culture and traditions. Bansal and Kumar (2011) point out that the amplified contributions of communities to locally managed ecotourism could produce viable economic opportunities. These include high level management positions, and reduction of poverty and unemployment in the surrounding areas. Furthermore, in ecotourism, facilities and infrastructure can be simpler and less expensive than for Western tourism standards. There is more multiplier effect on the economy, because local products, materials and labor are used (Dinç & Kocan, 2012). Profits accumulate locally and import outflows are reduced. When these investments are made, communities should find investors who reflect the philosophy of ecotourism. These are investors who align with community concerns and cooperate optimally.

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## 2. Natural resource management

Natural resource management is a specialized ecotourism development approach (Clarkin & Kähler, 2011). Many places exist around the globe where natural resources are plentiful. As humans intrude and habit, these resources are diminishing. Improper utilization of resources extinguishes them. Also, it destroys floral and faunal species. Ecotourism platforms can be introduced to conserve these resources (Gültekin, 2010). Plans and suitable management packages can be introduced to ensure that these resources are unharmed.

**2.1. Ecotourism in South Africa.** Several researches (Miller, 2007; Saayman & Rossouw, 2012) established that over 50% South Africans live below the international established poverty line. They view ecotourism as useful to stimulate tourism into the country without affecting a nation's natural economy by merely promoting and supporting its biodiversity. They appreciate it as a niche to attract eco-friendly clients. Ecotourism can permit tourism without weakening the country's ecological and natural resources. However, it can deliver a pleasant image to the world.

**2.2. Economic development.** Proper management and planning at both local and regional levels can enable ecotourism to protect biodiversity and lessen poverty in South Africa. Ecotourism can bring money into the economy by creating jobs. The local people living in and around the destination can be included in planning, implementing and maintaining the ecotourism attraction (Adetola & Adediran, 2014). The destitute local people can have a say in how they would like to develop the local attraction to protect the land they live in, and to develop it into a profitable form.

**2.3. Current situation.** The South African Tourism Services Association (SATSA) is a non-profit association representing the South African private sector of travelers into the country dedicated to provide and maintain high quality standards in the South African tourism industry (SATSA, 2007). SATSA focuses on accountability, integrity, and quality control of the South African tourism industry, and their associated companies and associations. The Conservation Corporation Africa (CCA) is a privately funded organization operating in South Africa (among other African countries) (CCA, 2002). CCA supports land refurbishment and encourages biodiversity. Furthermore, CCA brings an economic benefit to South Africa by engaging in awareness campaigns to the local communities. CCA initiatives include building and upgrading schools and classrooms, funding clinics for expectant mothers, spread awareness about HIV and AIDS the foundation, and distributing condoms annually. CCA has also assisted communities by dona-

ting rollers for water to local communities (Joshi, 2011). In ecotourism therefore, CCA promotes travel to the region, educate travelers, promotes restoration, and bring a higher standard of living to the communities by creating jobs and using the local economy.

According to Baobab (2007), Baobab is a UK ecotourism operator conducting responsible ecotourism in South Africa. Baobab founders are aware that travel and tourism can have a huge economic impact. They also know that it can cause a permanent damage on the environment and local communities. Thus, Baobab practices sustainable tourism that has no negative impact on the environment or the local communities. Baobab benefits the local economy and people by providing alternative employment and income opportunities, as well as appreciating and observing nature. Baobab also avoids the resorts that are made for tourists, and introduce travelers to the local people, nature and culture for people to learn about their cultures and traditions.

**2.4. Economic benefits.** Ecotourism can lessen poverty in South Africa by bringing money into the economy and creating jobs. Entrepreneurial opportunities exist for people to exploit ecotourism to ensure that the people living in the visited areas are benefiting from the economic growth. Eco-tourism can be used to including the local people. The country can reinvest some ecotourism earnings directly in the communities living next to the tourist destinations to alleviate poverty. Ecotourism attraction set up responsibly can generate jobs, income and economic livelihoods (Manu & Kuuder, 2012). If the local people are involved in the ecotourism attraction creation and maintenance, there can be increased employment and income. There are jobs in building the park structure and in giving toured guides of the land plus many other opportunities.

**2.5. Biodiversity and South Africa.** South Africa is the seventh most biodiverse country in the world (Baobab, 2007). It is important to protect biodiversity in South Africa. Many people still depend on natural resources for food and medicine. Plants and flowers are extensively used for traditional medicine and treatment for some diseases. Mammals such as hyenas, lions, hippopotamus, rhinos, elephants and giraffes dwell in parts of South Africa. Many invertebrates also provide functions such as decomposition and pollination which are necessary for life. Losing biodiversity for wildlife will damage the ecosystem and humans. The residents along the country's coast depend on fish as a substantial part of their diet.

South Africa's forests are under pressure due to the increasing population and economic reasons. Rural populations depend on agriculture and grazing both

of which require adequate space. Overgrazing can destroy the soil. The world's rising timber demand also decreases native forests (Kiper, Özdemir & Sağlam, 2011; Roxana, 2012). The timber industry is an important part of the South African economy. There are, however, many environmental consequences associated with logging. Losing forests leads to losing wildlife as well.

**2.6. Study context.** For ethical reasons the names of the attractions are withheld. However, 13 visited ecotourism places of the study are distributed as follows: two in each of the Eastern Cape, North-West, Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal Provinces and one in each of the five remaining provinces (Free State, Gauteng, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and Northern Cape). The aim is to explore these attractions' approaches to economic development approaches for building the local communities.

### 3. Research methods

**3.1. Design.** The study wanted to elucidate the current South African ecotourism system against successful global ecotourism systems. Therefore a qualitative method was used (Morrow, 2006), requiring answers of non-numeric form to assist strategic focus for developing these attractions into sustainable developmental centres for local communities. Benchmarking is always suitable to raise standards.

**3.2. Population and sample.** People with insight information about the study topic on the ecotourism attractions and local benefits were targeted as the study respondents. The study therefore, required purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method can be used when only those elements of the population have a relevant characteristic required for the study (Baldwin, 2008). These attractions are famous and well marketed, and from the tourism consumers' viewpoint, they are impeccable. Some of them have also received awards for 'best practice' from the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) and/or its representatives. The CEOs of these attractions, local chiefs and/or headmen (where applicable), school principals, local business owners, officials from government departments and educated community members around these attractions were considered more knowledgeable and/or more informative for the study issues. They were targeted for discussions to inform this research. This was a minimum of 104 targeted respondents. In the interest of development and research there were no barriers to respond to questions that were not compromising the attractions' reputations. They all indicated that they were available.

**3.3. Instrumentation.** Archival records and marketing documents of these attractions constituted secondary

data collection. Primary data collection consisted of unstructured questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. These aggregated information and ideas are from the different sources. The CEOs, principals, some business owners, government officials and enlightened community members were able to respond to the questionnaires at their leisure. The chiefs and headmen were only able to respond to verbal communication, hence the interviews. The entire data collection took over 13 weeks to complete.

**3.4. Data analysis.** A reflexive diary (Brannick & Coglán, 2006) was used to establish responses' usage and then put into application. These were done through personal expertise assessment, respondents' feelings, reflections and interpretations of results. In this study the diary delivered a prospect to incite a continuing dialogue about the experience and a significant enabler of reflexivity throughout the research. Entries in the diary were made frequently and were motivated by observations, thoughts, and experiences that might inform subsequent discussion.

### 4. Results

The study secured 81 of targeted 104 responses, making 77.9% of response rate. Respondents came from all attractions, and all categories were represented, albeit in diverse dispersals. They viewed ecotourism as a vital strategy for community development. Consultation with communities was viewed as a natural and necessary means to find ways for community development. Projects in the attractions were perceived as necessary, and the involvement of local community members into them was advocated. Empowering and employing these members were viewed as honest and practical means which lead to sustainable growth of the attractions.

Violations by attractions were noted by community members. These were also acknowledged by some senior members of attractions. These were apparently caused by slow pace of lack of locals to invest in large projects, lack of trust on managements of attraction by members of communities, slow development of policies on community development by attractions, and lack of proper and courteous consultations of communities and their leaders.

There was an unanimous idea converging that a policy and a monitoring tool were necessary to community ecotourism development. Suggested policy inclusions were community empowerment, employment, community project development, conserving and encouraging community participation, among others. The negative attitude of communities to flouting attractions was offset by the attractions taking a new approach by consulting communities.

The attractions' challenges included ignorance of community members, funding of projects to meet community needs, gaining and/or improving trust of communities, proper communications with communities, lack of understanding of local authorities, and sometimes indefiniteness of local leaderships.

Apparently, there had been agreements between local communities' representatives and the attractions that some small percentage (about 10%) of gate-takings generated earnings should go to communities. The attractions claimed that these were given to communities. While the communities agreed that they were given some portion they believed it was the above-mentioned 10%, there was no community representative to corroborate that it was indeed 10%. The locals claimed that they were refused to peruse financial statements of the attractions. Also, for the purpose of the research no permission was given by any of the attractions to look at the financial books.

Another shocking result was that some attractions were created on the graves of the indigenous people 'by force'. The possibilities of areas' protection and connection the attractions with the heritage of the land were possible. The locals were given no options and the politics dictates gave the investors the options without local communities' involvement. Some emerging stories indicated that some of the chiefs and/or headmen were not interested in the local people's welfare. Apparently they had been placed by politics to be in charge of people against the rightful ones who were seen as being defiant.

Lastly, local communities were not properly empowered. The chiefs and headmen also made the mistake of identifying relatives instead of capable people to work in the attractions when asked by these attractions to identify capable youth. Appropriate entrepreneurs for ecotourism did not emerge as local people were not trained. Environmental education also did not start, even though the resources on issues of recycling, energy efficiency and water conservation were available. These could enable creation of economic opportunities for local communities to inspire entrepreneurs.

### Discussion

The involvement of local communities in ecotourism is one of its core precepts. However, the attractions managements did not seem to open up transparently in fear of losing some money through profit sharing with the communities. The management approach was not democratic as they lacked transparency and were elusive. Refusing to reveal financial books was such indication.

Generally, the ecotourism attractions did not impress on 'a united, sustainable and competitive tourism industry in South Africa to lead to 'practice in social,

entrepreneurial and culturally responsible tourism' (DEAT, 1996). The local communities were not trained or employed in these attractions at the levels where they could influence the formations of the attractions.

Lack of transparency and openness seemed to have been barriers in the attractions. These barriers lead to failure to embark on any of tourism education, training, ecotourism awareness, or environmental protection. The funds and land were improperly used. The managements did not show efforts of ecological sustainability as no efforts were visible to balance the ecosystem, conservationism, and environmentalism, among others. Some attractions seemed to have taken advantage of community ignorance of their rights, and their lack of ecotourism awareness. The ecotourism practices in the attractions lacked human rights protection for the local communities.

### Recommendations

A human rights guarded policy should be developed for ecotourism attractions. The local communities should be involved, and be guided by unbiased legally and tourism educated support persons. Local communities' involvement should top policy formulations. Practices in the attractions should be transparent for the community and the regulatory government department. The ecotourism policy should also include an effective monitoring and control manager to ensure that all practices are undertaken as dictated by the policy guidelines. It should also include clear guidelines on local shareholding and/or benefits, ecological sustainability, empowerment of local communities, entrepreneurship prioritisation, social responsibility, sustainability guidelines for the attractions.

### Conclusion

Ecotourism is an immaculate prospect for economic enhancement of local communities. However, many ecotourism attractions of South Africa are developed on selfish lines of disregarding local communities in their tourism package. This trend was also observed in this study as locals were denied their proper shares by ecotourism business owners.

Tourism developers and planners should heighten and facilitate local community involvement. The investigated ecotourism attractions can involve local communities by approaching local leaders and then empowering the locals by helping them to engage in ecotourism entrepreneurs. In order to develop sustainable ecotourism attractions, the host communities should be given a sense of ownership and control over the community resources and environment. The government, through its regulatory and enabling bodies, should also develop measures and policies to ensure desirable practices and address/offset the negative practices that actually occur.

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