Agreement of the international avitourist market to ecotourism principles: A South African development perspective

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Despite the rapid growth of avitourism (birding tourism) globally, the international market potential of avitourism in South Africa, with its remarkable birdlife, is not yet being utilised to its full potential. The purpose of the research reported in this article was to investigate international avitourists perceptions on ecotourism principles to develop sustainable avitourism in South Africa. Primary data was gathered by distributing questionnaires at the British Birdwatching Fair and Dutch Vogelfestival. These two bird fairs attract exhibitors and birders from all over the world. Exploratory factor analyses were applied. The relationships among the nine variables that were measured with 5-point Likert scale to rate the participants’ views of ecotourism principles were investigated. Results indicated that the international avitourist regarded two constructs, namely the conservation of nature and the support of local communities, as being important. These ecotourism principles should therefore be applied to ensure sustainable development of avitourism in South Africa. Results support the notion of avitourism development in South Africa in guiding government and avitourism managers in policy, product development and destination marketing.

Key words: Avitourism (birding tourism), ecotourism, sustainable development, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

"Niche tourism is garnering an increasing critical international scholarship" (Rogerson, 2011: 199). As South Africa has a remarkable wealth of birdlife and because birding is one of the fastest growing niche tourism markets around the world, avitourism (birding tourism) provides an opportunity in terms of economic value and development impact. It also offers significant growth potential. The government of South Africa supports tourism development as it has the potential to help reduce widespread poverty and high levels of unemployment, as highlighted in the National Tourism Sector Strategy (DoT, 2011a: 7). Tourism can play a significant role in the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of reducing the greatest threats to people and our planet, including poverty and social and environmental challenges (Christie, 2008: 427). Avitourism has become incorporated into national tourism planning for South Africa – the final draft of the National Avitourism Strategy of South Africa set out the country’s vision of “positioning South Africa as a globally competitive avitourism destination” (DoT, 2011b: 12).

However, as tourism continues to grow, the pressures on the environment and birdlife simultaneously increase. This, in turn, may destroy the very things that people

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value and which are key assets of avitourism (Tapper, 2006: 5). For example, birding may have a negative impact on the environment and birdlife if it occurs during sensitive times of the year, such as the nesting or breeding season, or if it involves close approaches to birds for purposes of identification or photography (Newsome et al., 2005: 67; Knight and Cole, 1995: 55). Avitourism that is properly planned and managed and that is based on ecotourism principles such as conservation and local community involvement may relieve pressures placed on birdlife and the environment (Biggs et al., 2011: 84; HaySmith and Hunt, 1995: 217). The greening of the tourism industry through low-impact activities and environmentally and socially responsible actions are proposed for long-term sustainability (Biggs et al., 2011: 87; HaySmith and Hunt, 1995: 212). Therefore, the application of ecotourism principles in developing avitourism is imperative.

Ecotourism is a sustainable, non-invasive form of nature-based tourism that focuses primarily on learning about nature at first hand, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive and locally orientated (with respect to control, benefits and scale) (Fennell, 2008: 24). According to Sekercioglu (2002), avitourism can be defined as a component of ecotourism that is focused specifically on birds and birding as an activity. Avitourism based on ecotourism principles has the potential to contribute to local communities, educate local people about the value of biodiversity and create local and national incentives for the preservation of birds and natural areas (Sekercioglu, 2002: 282). These benefits could be summarised as economic, social and conservation benefits induced from avitourism. South Africa could enhance its share in these benefits by developing avitourism in a sustainable manner.

However, one may ask to what extent these ecotourism principles are important to the avitourist and whether they would influence such tourists to travel or not. An attempt to develop avitourism in South Africa without consulting the international avitourism market would be fruitless, as the international avitourist is the target. The need to consider the avitourism market and its requirements is supported by Biggs et al. (2011: 88) who contend that increased commercial viability will increase the prospects of avitourism initiatives surviving in the long term. Therefore, contrary to the aim of Biggs et al. (2011: 88) who investigated community-based avitourism projects in South Africa (supply perspective), the purpose of the research that informed this article was to determine the international avitourism market's level of agreement to ecotourism principles (demand perspective). In order to consult with the international market, data was collected at two international bird fairs, namely the British Birdwatching Fair (2008) in Rutland (England) and the Dutch Vogelfestival (2008) in Lelystad (Netherlands). Using exploratory factor analysis, the international avitourists’ perceptions of the most important ecotourism principles are presented in this article.

A better understanding of international avitourists’ perceptions regarding ecotourism principles could assist government, avitourism management and marketers of birding products in enabling decisions and policy choice. The results could provide guidelines for effective planning, management and marketing of avitourism and help to develop products that meet the needs of avitourists for a more enjoyable experience at the birding destination.

A literature review on avitourism, ecotourism and sustainable tourism development is presented in this article. The empirical design and method applied are discussed, followed by an analysis of data and avitourism results. The article closes with conclusions and recommendations for sustainable avitourism development in South Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW: AVITOURISM, ECOTOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Avitourism context and definition

Tourism is described as the largest and fastest-growing economic sector in the world (WTTC, 2011: 1). This continued growth of tourism, both domestically and internationally, has resulted in fundamental changes in the needs, demands and expectations of tourists (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2009: 33, 4). Niche tourism is described as a response to the demands of the postmodern tourist (Lew, 2008: 412) who chooses to engage with a product or service that satisfies particular interests and needs (Derrett, 2001: 3). Avitourism (travel for the specific purpose of birdwatching), an example of niche tourism, is identified as a growth area and a trend in tourism (DoT, 2011: 10; Wheeler, 2008: 208; Cordell and Super, 2004: 135).

The literature review of avitourism reveals that birding or birdwatching is the act of observing and identifying birds in their native habitats (Sekercioglu, 2002: 282). These experiences stimulate people to travel for the purpose of observing birds. Benchmarks concerning the travelling experience were identified. According to La Rouche (2003: 4) birding or birdwatching is referred to as avitourism if the birder takes a trip a mile (1.6 km) or more from home for the primary purpose of observing birds. Lindsay (n.d: 1) describes avitourism as “overnight travel to experience birds in a natural setting”. Furthermore, Hvenegaard (2002: 21) and Sekercioglu (2002: 282) classify avitourism as a component of ecotourism since it is expected to contribute to ecotourism’s goal of enhanced conservation and wellbeing of the local community. Currently in South Africa, avitourism is defined in the National Avitourism Strategy (DoT, 2011: 10) as travel outside of a person’s usual environment for the purpose of viewing birds in their natural habitats.

In summary: for the purpose of this article avitourism is
defined as being an activity of observing and identifying birds in their native habitats where birders need to travel outside their usual environment for the primary purpose of observing birds. Furthermore, it is a component of ecotourism that is focused specifically on birds and birdwatching as an activity.

The relationship of avitourism to ecotourism principles

Since avitourism forms part of ecotourism, the principles of ecotourism are applicable. As a guiding conceptual principle, ecotourism can be regarded as tourism that occurs in natural settings with an attempt to increase benefits to the economy, society, and environment through sustainable educational practices from locals to tourists and vice versa (Diamantis, 2004: 5). Figure 1 illustrates the ecotourism tetrahedron.

Figure 1 illustrates the four components of ecotourism, namely ecotourism industry, tourist, resource base (environment) and local community. Ecotourism could provide economic benefits to the ecotourism industry including foreign exchange earnings, contributions to government revenue, generation of employment and income, and stimulation of regional development (Queiros and Wilson, 2005: 208; Lickorish and Jenkins, 1997: 63). Ecotourists should participate in non-consumptive use activities, in which the environment or organism is not affected by human interaction, for example in the case of birding (Diamantis, 2004: 9). Education and interpretation will make both tourists and local community aware of the environment and how their actions can contribute to conservation of the environment. Ecotourism needs to be incorporated into the social and economic life of the local community (Diamantis, 2004: 12).

It is evident that various economic, societal and conservation benefits are linked to avitourism, but sustainability and responsibility of the different role-players in ecotourism are regarded as being very important. Therefore, it is imperative to apply ecotourism principles in avitourism. The main principles of ecotourism include the following (Fennell, 2008: 21; Queiros and Wilson, 2005: 208; Diamantis, 2004: 5):

- ecotourists who seek an enlightening, interactive, participatory and educational travel experience
- protection and enjoyment of natural and cultural environments or systems
- sustainable use of resources and mitigation of negative impacts on the environment and local community
- economic opportunities for industry and local communities
- sound environmental management of the resources beneficial to all tourism role players

Various authors (Biggs et al., 2011; Sali and Kuehn, 2007: 324; BLSA, 2006: 13; Hvenegaard, 2002: 21; Scott et al., 1999: 50; McFarlane and Boxall, 1996: 1) investigated some aspects of ecotourism principles, such as the importance of conservation and local community guides to avitourists and this is reported in the literature. A summary of each of these studies is provided as follows.

- Biggs et al. (2011: 80) investigated community-based avitourism projects in South Africa. Conservation benefits

![Figure 1. The ecotourism tetrahedron (Queiros and Wilson, 2005: 209).](image-url)
were measured and the relationship between conservation and income benefits and project characteristics were explored. The research concluded that with adequate long-term support, avitourism projects can be a way to create jobs and deliver conservation and human development benefits.

- Sali and Kuehn (2007: 324) employed a qualitative approach in order to understand in depth the various reasons for participating in birding. Conservation of birds was identified as a motivation to participate in birding.
- BirdLife South Africa (BLSA, 2006: 13) conducted, as part of a feasibility study, a birding route evaluation survey for South Africa to establish why birders would use a local bird guide.
- Hvenegaaard (2002: 21) examined how conservation involvement varies among novice, advanced-active and advanced-experienced birders. Results indicated that specialisation level was positively, but weakly, related to conservation involvement.
- Scott et al. (1999: 50) examined the motivations for participating in a major birding competition (Great Texas Birding Classic, New Jersey). Results revealed that the majority participated because they enjoyed contributing to wildlife conservation.
- McFarlane and Boxall (1996: 1) examined birders’ participation in wildlife conservation activities. Results show that birders made substantial contributions to conservation.

Most of these studies focused on one aspect of ecotourism principles, namely the conservation of the natural environment and bird conservation. However, it seems that there is little information on other components of ecotourism, such as local community involvement in avitourism development.

The implementation of ecotourism principles is more necessary than ever before as poverty, hunger, gender inequality and environmental degradation can be alleviated through the sustainable development of tourism (UNWTO, 2010: 4).

**Importance of sustainable avitourism development**

There is a global concern about the ability of the earth’s environment and resources to sustain the continued expansion of economic activity (Page, 2009: 6). Various definitions of sustainable development exist. According to the Brundtland Report, where it was first defined, sustainable development is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UN World Commission for Environment and Development, 1987, cited in Keyser, 2009: 20).

Travel and tourism was identified at the Earth Summit, which was held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), as one of the sectors able to make positive contributions to achieving sustainable development. As a result a growing range of reports or events have focused on sustainable tourism development, including the Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry in 1996 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002 (Keyser, 2009: 20). The UNWTO Committee on Sustainable Development of Tourism revised definition (at a meeting in Thailand in March 2004) of sustainable tourism (UNWTO, 2004) and the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC, 2008) emphasised a balance between the environmental, social and economic aspects of tourism. Avitourism could also derive several environmental, social and economic benefits.

Various authors (Tapper, 2006: 32; Zeppel, 2006: 53; Ellis and Vogelsong, 2004: 204 Cordell and Herbert, 2002: 55) refer to benefits that could derive from sustainable avitourism development. The three major benefits of avitourism identified in the literature are summarised as follows:

- Economic benefits – foreign exchange earnings from money spent on birding trips, including travel costs, accommodation, food and beverage, and sales of souvenirs, among other things; government income taxes; and employment generation.
- Social benefits – stimulation of regional and rural development; alternative sources of income and employment for local communities; participatory tourism planning processes and the involvement of relevant stakeholders; local communities gaining a greater awareness of conservation of the natural and cultural resources, thus integrating conservation and rural development; cooperation of local communities through tourism awareness and benefit-sharing.
- Conservation benefits – local awareness of the values of biodiversity and the conservation of natural resources and bird species; guiding and good interpretation, providing high-quality visitor experience and ensuring good visitor behaviour.

On the other hand, inappropriate avitourism development that is not properly planned and managed may put pressures on birds and the environment resulting in negative impacts (HaySmith and Hunt, 1995: 217). For example, birders seek out rare or spectacular species to view. Certain birds such as cranes are sensitive to disturbance from visitors, including flash photography, noise and coloured clothing (Tapper, 2006: 44; Knight and Cole, 1995: 55). Furthermore, according to Sekercioğlu, (2002: 284) the involvement of international tour operators often result in less local control and smaller economic returns to local communities. The application of sustainable avitourism development through low-impact activities and environmentally and socially responsible actions can minimise negative impacts on birds and their habitat and maximise local involvement in avitourism (Sekercioğlu, 2002: 284).
Table 1. Impact of birding and recommendations for optimal birding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive impacts of avitourism</th>
<th>Negative impacts of avitourism</th>
<th>Recommendations for optimal birding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A link between avian diversity and local income</td>
<td>Disturbing birds by playing audio-tapes and by approaching</td>
<td>Adhere to and insist on ethical birding conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A financial incentive to conserve wildlife</td>
<td>Increased nest predation and nest abandonment</td>
<td>Avoid nests and young as much as possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less impact and more income than typical tourism</td>
<td>Increased disturbance of rare and/or threatened birds</td>
<td>Show particular care with threatened and rare species</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased local control due to unique bird species</td>
<td>Visitor-related population and habitat destruction</td>
<td>Minimise audio-tape use and try to minimise being seen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visitation of areas outside traditional tourist itineraries</td>
<td>Cash leaks from local communities</td>
<td>Do not approach further once a bird notices you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection of unprotected areas with desired species</td>
<td>Resentment by excluded locals</td>
<td>Stick to established roads/trails/walkways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuation of local natural history knowledge</td>
<td>Cultural degradation associated with tourism</td>
<td>Use scopes for observation and photography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and employment of local guides</td>
<td></td>
<td>Educate locals about birds and their financial benefits to the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation of funds for bird conservation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Support local and low-impact establishments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution to ornithological knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td>Contribute to NGOs that are active in bird conservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Make use of local tourist guides for bird and natural resource interpretation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sekercioğlu (2002: 284) suggests some recommendations for optimal birding through minimum-impact birding practices. The positive and negative impacts of avitourism and recommendations for optimal birding are summarised in Table 1.

Sustainable avitourism is an approach that tries to reduce the negative impacts to a manageable level and to make sure that both the natural environment and the local culture of a tourist destination do not suffer any significant or long-term damage. Sustainable avitourism also tries to maximise the benefits of tourism (Bellamy, 2009: 9). The research method is discussed in the next section.

RESEARCH METHOD

In this empirical study a survey was used to collect primary data. The population for this study comprised international birders who attended two international bird fairs, namely the British Bird watching Fair (2008) in Rutland (England) and the Dutch Vogel festival (2008) in Lelystad (Netherlands). As a sampling frame was not available, the numbers of visitors attending both fairs in 2007 was used as a guideline and the total population (N) was 27 000 bird fair attendees. Guidelines for determining sample size of Cooper and Emory (1995: 207) and Krejcie and Morgan (1970: 608) were used and for a population N of 30 000 the recommended sample size is 379. The information reported in this research was provided by a total of S = 439 respondents (birders).

A non-probability sampling method, purposive sampling, was used. The British Bird watching Fair and the Dutch Vogel festival were chosen for the specific purpose of selecting the international birding population that was most likely to be found at these events.

Questionnaires that relate to the research objectives were developed. The research objective (one section in the questionnaire) and the focus of this article were to identify the international tourist’s level of agreement to ecotourism principles.

Since no scale was available to measure the perception of ecotourism principles, questions were developed choosing variables of each component of ecotourism, namely tourism industry, tourist, environment and local community (Fennell, 2008: 21; Queiros and Wilson, 2005: 208; Diamantis, 2004: 563). Nine statements describing ecotourism principles were provided and a Likert scale used to rate level of agreement or disagreement with the statement on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Four academics, who were also avid birdwatchers, were identified and asked to provide their opinion on the questionnaire (Coetzee, 2008; Crosbie, 2008; Hugo, 2008; Milstein, 2008). Content validity was established in that four academics examined the questionnaire. Minor modifications were implemented based on their recommendations, where after the study was pre-tested. It was not possible to conduct a pilot study overseas; therefore the author randomly selected 14 birdwatchers in South Africa to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire was also tested on a family of four that visited South Africa from the Netherlands at the time of the pilot test (July, 2008). The questionnaires were analysed and minor changes were made.

The data was collected by means of self-administered questionnaires that were distributed to birders at the Bird...
Table 2. Eigenvalues and total variance explained by exploratory factor analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Initial eigenvalues</th>
<th>Rotation sums of squared loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>% of variance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.416</td>
<td>49.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.199</td>
<td>13.320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>.851</td>
<td>9.452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>.685</td>
<td>7.616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>.474</td>
<td>5.267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>.388</td>
<td>4.308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>.366</td>
<td>4.067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>.320</td>
<td>3.556</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>.301</td>
<td>3.350</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extraction method: Principal axis factoring.

Life South Africa stand at the British Bird watching Fair and the Dutch Vogel festival. Bird fair organisers granted permission to distribute questionnaires only from the BLSA stall. However, respondents were selected on the basis of passing the stand, irrespective of their intention to visit the stand. Screening questions were used to select the target population.

Once the data was coded, captured and cleaned, it was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences program (SPSS 17.0). To establish validity with statistical evidence, a factor analysis was performed. Furthermore, an item analysis was performed on the questions to determine Cronbach’s alpha values in order to test the reliability of the questionnaire. The statistical method applied was exploratory factor analysis. The aim was to investigate the underlying structure and whether or not it can be simplified into one or more factors. The relationships among the nine variables that were measured with 5-point Likert scale to rate the participants’ views of ecotourism principles were investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. The set of items was subjected to Principle Axis Factoring (PAF). The results of the exploratory factor analysis are presented in the following section.

RESULTS OF INTERNATIONAL AVITOURIST’ AGREEMENT TO ECOTOURISM PRINCIPLES

Respondents at the British Birdwatching Fair and Dutch Vogelfestival were asked to reflect on their agreement to ecotourism principles.

Inspection of the correlation matrix revealed the presence of many coefficients of 0.3 and above. Additionally, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was 0.861, exceeding the recommended minimum value of 0.6 (Kaiser, 1974, 1970) and the Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) reached statistical signiﬁcance, p<.001, supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix.

Since the communalities of all the items were above 0.31 and they all demonstrated loadings of more than 0.31 on one of the two extracted factors, all items were retained for further analysis. Table 2 shows eigenvalues and the total variance explained by exploratory factor analysis.

Table 2 shows that PAF revealed the presence of two components (conservation of nature and support of local communities) with eigenvalues exceeding 1, cumulatively explaining 51.29% of the variance in the data. The first two factors cumulatively accounted for at least 62% of the variation in the factor space, before rotation. After rotation, 51.29% of the variance was explained by the rotated factor solution. The eigenvalue of factor 1, namely conservation of nature was the highest at 4.42 and explained most of the percentage of variance (49.07). This factor was therefore the most important factor to the respondents. The second factor, namely support of local communities, showed an eigenvalue of 1.20. Using Catell’s (1966) scree test, it was decided to retain two components for further investigation.

To aid in the interpretation and scientific utility of these two components, Varimax rotation was performed. Table 3 indicates the rotated factor matrix.

The rotated solution revealed the presence of a simple structure (Thurstone, 1947), with both components showing a number of strong loadings.

The subscales for the two extracted factors were obtained by calculating the mean of the items loading on each of the subscales or factors. These two factors were named 1) Conservation of nature and 2) Support of local communities. Table 4 indicates the reliability statistics for the two extracted factors.

Table 4 indicate that both factors, conservation of nature (0.83) and support of local communities (0.76), demonstrate acceptable internal consistency as illustrated by the Cronbach’s alpha coefficients and the corresponding means and standard deviations.

Level of agreement to ecotourism principles was indicated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), where the higher mean score indicated a stronger agreement to the factor. The respondents agreed to both conservation of nature (4.299) and support of local communities (3.968). Participating birders at the British Birdwatching Fair recorded average scores of 4.38 and 4.06 respectively on the Likert scale for the conservation of nature and the
Table 3. Rotated factor matrix: Principle axis factoring with Varimax rotation (Kaiser normalisation).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items used to construct a factor</th>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F6: The tourism industry should always contribute to the conservation of nature</td>
<td>.714</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1: My choice of destination would be influenced by whether the venue practises responsible tourism principles with respect to the environment</td>
<td>.700</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F2: Accommodation providers should operate in an environmentally friendly way by applying ecotourism principles, even if this is more costly</td>
<td>.681</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F7: Tourists should always minimise their impact on the environment</td>
<td>.640</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F3: Tour operators should encourage interaction between local communities and birders</td>
<td>.593</td>
<td>.495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F9: Tourists should always support the local community, for example, by buying local products, or buying arts and craft products, even if they do not need them</td>
<td>.668</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F4: As a birding tourist, it is important to learn about the local community on each trip</td>
<td>.373</td>
<td>.637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F8: Tourists should always make use of local guides</td>
<td>.588</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F5: I would prefer a destination that supports social development in the area in which it operates</td>
<td>.522</td>
<td>.538</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cumulative percentage variance explained

| 29.999 | 51.289 |

Table 4. Reliability statistics for the two extracted factors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>No. of items</th>
<th>Cronbach's alpha</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F1</td>
<td>Conservation of nature</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.832</td>
<td>21.47</td>
<td>2.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F2</td>
<td>Support of local communities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.757</td>
<td>15.87</td>
<td>2.635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>All dimensions</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.858</td>
<td>37.36</td>
<td>4.738</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

support of local communities. On average, respondents at the Dutch Vogelfestival recorded Likert scale scores of 4.12 and 3.76 respectively for the two factors. Thus, the results indicate that the respondents at both fairs felt strongly about conservation of nature and the support of local communities as the two principles of ecotourism.

**DISCUSSION OF INTERNATIONAL AVITOURIST’ AGREEMENT TO ECOTOURISM PRINCIPLES**

Based on the findings of this article, two main factors were identified, namely conservation of nature and support local communities. In the literature review various motivations to participate in birding were identified, namely the conservation of birds (Sali and Kuehn, 2007: 324), that birders enjoy contributing to wildlife conservation (Scott et al., 1999: 50) and that birders make substantial contributions to conservation (McFarlane and Boxall, 1996: 1). Consistent with the literature, the results of this article suggest that avitourists support the conservation of nature.

Little information on local community involvement was found in the literature. Biggs et al. (2011: 80) investigated community-based avitourism projects in South Africa and concluded that avitourism projects can be a way to create jobs and deliver conservation and human development benefits. However, the question remains, to what extent is local community involvement important to international avitourists, who are the target market? Biggs et al. (2011: 88) support the need to consider the avitourist market and its requirements. The results presented in this article suggest that the support of local communities is important to the international avitourist.

Since respondents at both fairs considered both the conservation of nature and the support of local communities to be very important, the time and effort already spent by BLSA and other avitourism role-players in promoting these aspects are regarded as being valuable and the correct route to take. These support efforts should continue to improve the image of South Africa to the foreign tourist, while simultaneously benefiting local communities and the surrounding environment. These results are also consistent with international tourism trends which suggest that tourists’ awareness of social and environmental issues is growing and that these matters are becoming more important (Yeoman, 2008: 37). There is gradual growth in the numbers of environmentally friendly tourists, who are often referred to as ‘green’, ‘responsible’ ‘eco’, ‘ethical’ or
‘alternative’ (Yeoman, 2008: 37).

According to Buhalís (2001: 76), environmental concern and preference will increasingly dominate consumers’ choices and will also determine their willingness to pay, as well-preserved destinations will be able to charge premium prices. BLSA’s support efforts should continue to enhance the image of the country to the foreign tourist, while simultaneously benefiting local communities and the surrounding environment. It is suggested that BLSA and the avitourism industry should strive to increase the contribution of avitourism to rural communities and local grassroots organisations in view of the significant potential of avitourism to generate income through the protection and promotion of natural areas.

CONCLUSION

In South Africa, as in the rest of the world, tourism remains one of the fastest-growing economic sectors, with great potential for future job creation, social inclusion and conservation (DoT, 2012: 3). Avitourism is recognised as an important niche market with high potential to generate economic, social and conservation benefits for South Africa and to contribute to the realisation of the MDGs. The remarkable wealth of birdlife in South Africa necessitates an investigation into sustainable development of avitourism in South Africa. To unleash this potential and to position South Africa as a globally competitive avitourism destination, information is needed from the target market – the international avitourist. The research on which this article is based focused on the international avitourism markets’ level of agreement to ecotourism principles.

Based on the results obtained from questionnaires completed at the British Birdwatching Fair and the Dutch Vogelfestival, this article focuses on international avitourists’ perceptions of ecotourism principles. The results of the analysis suggest that respondents at both the British and the Dutch birding fairs perceived ecotourism principles as being important. The international avitourist regarded the conservation of nature and support of local communities to be very important principles of ecotourism. These results are also consistent with international tourism trends which suggest that tourists’ awareness of social and environmental issues are growing and are becoming more important.

It is suggested that avitourism developers and managers should take the conservation of nature and the support of local communities into account when developing avitourism products for the international market. The information could help plan for more enjoyable experiences at the birding destination, and provide guidance regarding the marketing and promotion of South Africa as a birding destination and provider of avitourism products. The information could assist avitourism management and government in decision-making or policy concerning avitourism in South Africa, thus enhancing effective planning, management and marketing of the industry.

The literature suggests that ecotourism principles be applied to enhance sustainable tourism development. This international research for the South African avitourism market confirms that the international avitourist market also perceives ecotourism principles as being important. South Africa has the opportunity to capitalise on their remarkable wealth of birdlife by developing avitourism, while simultaneously improving the economic, social and environmental well-being of the country. This could lead to a win-win situation – an enjoyable birding experience for the avitourist and the continuing presence of birds to be watched.

REFERENCES


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