

*Full Length Research Paper*

# The theory and practice of ecotourism in Southern Africa

Simon Chiutsi<sup>1\*</sup>, Memory Mukoroverwa<sup>2</sup>, Pauline Karigambe<sup>2</sup> and Boycen Kumira Mudzengi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Travel and Recreation Management, Chinhoyi University of Technology, Zimbabwe.

<sup>2</sup>Dept of Tourism and Hospitality, Management, Chinhoyi University of Technology, Zimbabwe.

<sup>3</sup>Department of Physics, Geography and Environmental Science, Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe.

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Ecotourism has been advanced as a form of sustainable tourism that is expected to boost conservation and development in the rural communities of Southern Africa. In order to evaluate the contribution of ecotourism to conservation and communities' development, an in-depth analysis of two ecotourism case studies was conducted from both South Africa and Zimbabwe respectively. A literature review of the ecotourism discourse was executed to highlight the theoretical framework of ecotourism development in Southern Africa. A review of literature on ecotourism indicates that the concept and context of ecotourism has not evolved uncontested. Through this study, it can be concluded that lack of consensus on what ecotourism represents has led to many tourism products and services designed under the banner of ecotourism, yet they represent everything against conservation and communities' development. It is therefore the contention of this paper that the concept of ecotourism development will hover at the rhetoric, unless the multiplicity of stakeholders involved in the tourism matrix are agreeable on the boundaries of what constitutes ecotourism and what does not. Establishment of consensus on the ecotourism dynamic will contribute immensely on the crafting of policies that will help institute appropriate frameworks to guide ecotourism development in Southern Africa. Furthermore, an in-depth research of two case studies informing this paper indicates that the international condemnation of Zimbabwe's land reform programme compounded with perceptions of poor governance has had a negative impact on Zimbabwe's ecotourism sector. South Africa also suffered a similar tourism down turn due to the international condemnation of its discriminative apartheid policies and its role as an instigator of conflict in Southern Africa. It is therefore concluded that good governance, positive international relations and policies that are not confrontational with the West remain a major factor in determining the overall viability and sustainability of the ecotourism sector, hence facilitating sustainable development.

**Key words:** Ecotourism, sustainable development, community tourism management.

## INTRODUCTION

The definition of ecotourism is not uncontested. Multiple definitions and often contradictory definitions of what ecotourism is have been proffered and there is no single agreed definition of what it means. A study by Fennel (2001) unearthed 85 definitions of the term ecotourism

premised on the variables of conservation, education, culture, benefits to locals and reference to where ecotourism occurs, especially in the natural areas.

However, one of the widely embraced definitions of ecotourism is one developed by Ceballos-Lascuran (1993) which focuses on the importance of natural areas. Ceballos-Lascuran unbundled ecotourism as traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective studying, admiring, enjoying

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [schiutsi@gmail.com](mailto:schiutsi@gmail.com).

the scenery, wildlife and any existing cultural manifestations. While this definition is effective in capturing the essence of what ecotourism is, it falls short in that it exclusively focuses on the motives of the traveler and not on the impacts that such travel has on the cultural and ecological environments of the setting.

Ecotourism in all its forms is often proposed as being able to ensure environmental conservation while enabling economic benefits to accrue to the local communities. The most common denominator with respect to ecotourism is that it is nature-based (Cater, 2006). Arguably, community based approaches to tourism development has been advanced as a prerequisite to sustainability. Admittedly, ecotourism has been subject to shifting representations of meaning and the absence of general theoretical and practical consensus (Fennel and Nowaczek, 2010).

The rise of sustainable tourism discourse in Southern Africa has seen the development of a multiplicity of tourism projects packaged under ecotourism as a more sustainable form of tourism than mass tourism. It has been noted that developing an ecotourism enterprise is a complex and difficult undertaking often involving a thorough understanding of market principles and business fundamentals involving building strong, lasting and equitable partnerships with local communities (Parker and Khare, 2005). The argument that has been propounded being that sustainable development implies moving towards intra-generational equity of access to resources and respect for environmental limits (Hunter and Green, 1995).

However through an in-depth of analysis of the Mahenye ecotourism venture in Zimbabwe and Makuleke ecotourism venture in South Africa, it can be concluded that the sustainability of ecotourism in Southern Africa is dependent on the support from the West as the major ecotourists generating regions. The other factors relate to good governance as a new attraction factor and general security and safety issues in Southern Africa.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Ecotourism: The theory and practice

The ecotourism theory suggests that economic development and natural resources conservation are compatible goals (King, 2010). Accordingly, recent definitions of ecotourism have centered on conservation, education, ethics, sustainability, impacts and local benefits as the main variables. In line with the conceptualization of ecotourism over time, Weaver (2008) underscored that ecotourism is a form of tourism that fosters learning experiences and appreciation of the natural environment, or some components thereof, within its associated cultural context. It is further reiterated that ecotourism is managed in accordance with industry best practice to

attain environmentally and socio-culturally sustainable outcomes as well financial viability (Weaver, 2008). This definition is quite fundamental to this discussion as it envisions ecotourism as nature based tourism, conservation supporting and sustainably managed to achieve social, environmental, cultural and economic sustainability. Weaver (2008) recognizes the importance of an operation's financial sustainability as a major component of ecotourism. This view can be traced to Buckley, Pickering and Weaver (2003) who propounded that with respect to ecotourism development, there has to be a positive link between environmental, economic and socio-cultural sustainability on the one hand and financial stability on the other.

The view to be advanced in this paper is that ecotourism is a form of tourism which minimizes negative impacts, contributes to conservation, directs economic benefits to local people and further provides opportunities for local people to enjoy natural areas (Fennel, 2001). The concept of ecotourism as supportive of local community livelihood goals is further reiterated by Godwin (1996) in Weaver (2008: 7) who defines it as low-impact nature tourism which contributes to the maintenance of species and habitats either directly through a contribution to conservation or indirectly by providing revenue to the local community sufficient for local people to value and therefore protect their wildlife heritage as source of income. Ecotourism is therefore largely associated with small scale community controlled and long term social well-being (Reichel and Uriely, 2008). The activities that have emerged through ecotourism initiatives include village cultural tours, sport hunting, photographic safaris, fishing and a lot of other down stream activities which support the eco-tourist during the communal tours.

Jafari (1990) advances that the tourism sector has evolved through four platforms trying to explain the field of tourism starting from the advocacy platform right through to the knowledge based platform. Through the advocacy platform tourism was widely regarded as an ideal activity that resulted in many positive consequences for destinations and a few negative consequences. The potential benefits envisaged in the advocacy platform include direct revenues and employment, indirect revenues and employment through the multiplier effect, stimulation of development in peripheral areas, promotion of cross cultural understanding and incentives to preserve a destination's culture and history.

The second platform that contributes to a better grasping of ecotourism discourse is the precautionary platform which is premised on Butler's 1980 life cycle model. The critical underlying assumption of Butler's model is that tourism carries the seeds of its own destruction unless carefully planned and managed (Weaver, 2008). The concepts in this model which tend to influence a broader understanding of ecotourism is that the tourism industry is largely environment dependent and resource based, rendering it capable of disrupting

ecosystems and having significant impacts on the tourist destinations. In recognition of this potential tension between tourism and the environment, concepts of sustainability have been embedded in ecotourism. It is against this backdrop that the concepts of ecotourism and sustainable tourism have been gaining prominence since the mid 80s as a panacea for the destructive impacts of conventional mass tourism. It is notable that while there are divergent views on what ecotourism is there is consensus that to a large extent ecotourism is perceived as small scale, locally controlled type of nature-based tourism that complements the local economy and blends into the local cultural landscape (Weaver, 2008).

Ecotourism is further associated with the adaptancy platform which regarded it as a form of alternative tourism (Weaver, 2008). Under the adaptancy, platform ecotourism is contrasted with a mass tourism model perceived to be inherently unsustainable. Ecotourism is considered to be small scale with limited ecological and social impacts when compared to traditional tourism. Ecotourism limits the number of guests who visit a destination as there is adherence to the physical carrying capacity of the tourist resource base. Jischa (1998) defines the carrying capacity as the quantity of visitors that can be entertained and accommodated within a destination while maintaining a high degree of satisfaction for guests and impacts on resources. However, it is notable that by the mid 1990s, it became apparent that both alternative and mass tourism could generate both positive and negative consequences and therefore that the ideologically dogmatic platforms of the past were insufficient for dealing with the actual complexity of the tourism sector (Weaver, 2008). It is against this background that the knowledge based platform was coined. The knowledge based platform tries to unveil a more objective and holistic approach that recognizes the strengths and weaknesses of all types of tourism and utilizes scientific knowledge to determine the best combination of tourism modes for each destination.

The knowledge based platform captures the essence of what ecotourism entails and is associated with the emergence of the sustainable development paradigm which advocated a measured growth approach that takes into consideration a destination's environmental and socio-cultural carrying capacity (Weaver, 2008). Sustainable development has been described as the parental paradigm of sustainable tourism (Butcher, 2007). Harris et al. (2002) argues that sustainable development is the new conventional wisdom which encourages business to move away from a sole focus on profit but the triple bottom line that is financial, social and environmental performance. Ecotourism is therefore linked to the parental concepts of sustainable development and sustainable tourism. The concept of sustainability first appeared in the public scene in the report put out by the World Commission on Environment

and Development (Brundtland Commission) in 1987. The commission report advances the idea of sustainable development by noting that economic growth and environmental conservation are not only compatible but they are necessary partners. One cannot exist without the other (Harris et al., 2002).

### **Elements of ecotourism and its place within sustainable development and sustainable tourism**

Literature scans have established that the sustainability criterion of ecotourism includes economic and socio-cultural dimensions further to the ecological dimension. Notable is the emphasis that the tourism industry can only be sustainable if local communities derive revenue through tourism. Weaver (2008) makes reference to Northern Tanzania, where a case study of three villages revealed that support of wildlife conservation is directly related to the benefits that village residents obtain from ecotourism. Against this backdrop ecotourism has been embraced as a key development strategy for developing countries as it is widely recognized as a key generator of foreign exchange and jobs. Countries in Southern Africa especially South Africa and Zimbabwe possess ecotourism prime destinations because of its abundant wildlife. The White Paper of Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa states that the attractiveness of the region is based on relatively accessible wildlife, beautiful scenery, unspoiled nature, diverse traditional and township cultures and pleasant climate (Government of South Africa, 1996).

An integral part of ecotourism that fosters and embraces the sustainable development paradigm is interpretation and community involvement. Interpretation is an educational activity aimed at revealing meanings and relationships to people about the places they visit and the things they see and do there (Harris, 2002). Through interpretation of the natural and cultural heritage of the destinations for visitors, it is argued that ecotourism lends itself better in fostering sustainability and environmentalism. This comes against the widely held view in ecotourism literature that in terms of demographics, the consumers of ecotourism products are portrayed as educated and well off individuals mainly from advanced societies (Reichel and Uriely, 2008). With respect to meaningful interpretation of the ecotourism resource base (natural and cultural heritage) to the visitors, it is argued that local residents provide authenticity and value to the ecotourism experience through their intimate knowledge and sense of place of the local environment (Weaver, 2008). This will ultimately lead to the viability of ecotourism ventures as high levels of tourist satisfaction are facilitated thereby generating financial profit for the ecotourism industry in the communities.

The other fundamental attribute of ecotourism is local community involvement. According to the Quebec

Declaration on Ecotourism cited in Weaver (2008), ecotourism is tourism which includes local and indigenous communities in its planning, development and operation and contributes to their well-being. The idea of meaningful community involvement is largely understood as an integral component of sustaining the tourism sector through conservation of the natural environment and generating economic benefits to the local people. Harris et al. (2002) notes that people with local knowledge and with a passion for the place in which they have grown up and come to love, training them as guides and interpreters represent an important sustainable development strategy. It is noted that for the local residents employed in the ecotourism industry, the economic value of protecting their very livelihoods is compelling as the locals become important allies in the protection of both the natural and cultural environments that form the basis to the wildlife industry (Harris et al., 2003). Understandably, local communities have the most to lose from engaging in unsustainable activities and the most to gain from operating in a sustainable manner.

The other key consideration to community involvement in ecotourism is the claim that local residents provide authenticity and value to the ecotourism experience with their deep and privileged knowledge about their culture and overall tourism resource base in the destination area. Weaver (2008) however notes the difficulties of defining which individuals comprise the community that will have privileged access to participation, funding and the dissemination of any benefits that are generated. Weaver (2008) argues that in almost every situation identifying and defining the community can be extremely complicated and contentious thereby increasing the likelihood of conflict and ultimate failure of the ecotourism project.

This trend can be noted in Zimbabwe's once vibrant Campfire programme, which initiated a number of ecotourism projects in Mahenye and Chipise communal areas. It is noted that the communities involved had bad experiences of wildlife management initiatives as the financial rewards generated have generally been seen as insufficient to compensate for costs in the form of crop and livestock raiding by wildlife and coercive controls on natural resource use such as hunting, fishing and pole collection (Wolmer, 2003). Due to the difficulty in defining 'community' and because even a clearly defined community is usually characterized by factionalism and inequality, Fennel (2008) is of the view that it may be preferable to focus instead on the more inclusive and socially neutral term 'local residents' when describing the population on which any given ecotourism initiative is focused.

One of the key attributes of ecotourism that runs through the literature is that it is managed in accordance with industry best practice to attain environmentally and socio-culturally sustainable ecotourism outcomes as well as financial viability (Weaver, 2008). The importance of an ecotourism operation's financial sustainability cannot

be underestimated in facilitating sustainable tourism and development. For financial viability to be guaranteed, it is critical for the destination to have attractions capable of sustaining the ecotourism sector. Proximity to a large national park could be a major advantage for wildlife based ecotourism ventures. This is the case with the Mahenye and Malilangwe (which operates safaris in Zimbabwe's Eastern highlands) due to its proximity to the Gonarezhou National Park and the South African settlement of Mavhulani which owes its status as one of the very few examples of successful ecotourism largely to its proximity to the Kruger National Park (Weaver, 2008).

The other factor crucial to the financial viability of ecotourism and overall sustainability of tourism development is skills and capacity acquisition. Kiss (2004) cited in Weaver (2008) argues that tourism is an extremely complex sector which may be an inappropriate entry level activity for communities with few business competencies, even when they possess local skills and knowledge that confer competitive advantage through their ability to convey a destination's unique sense of place and authentic culture to visitors. There is need to train local residents in customer care and in appreciating the service dynamics of tourism so that communities are able to create and sustain demand by providing high levels of guest satisfaction. Heher (2004) argues that joint ventures with experienced private businesses is an effective way of introducing and maintaining quality standards appropriate for high value visitors from the more developed countries.

In addition, the success and viability of ecotourism lies in right-sizing the operations and in generating direct financial benefits to the local residents. It is further observed that no matter how environmentally and socio-culturally sustainable its apparent impact, ecotourism will survive only if it is also sustainable as a business enterprise (Weaver, 2008). The feasibility of ecotourism, therefore largely depends upon financial sustainability and high levels of tourist satisfaction.

This view is further supported by Reichel and Uriely (2008) who buttresses that the viability of ecotourism is attributed to high levels of tourist satisfaction and a large number of visitors to generate financial profit. Accordingly, there is stronger advocacy for 'soft' versions of ecotourism that do not necessarily stand in total contrast to the features of conventional mass tourism (McNamara, 2008).

However in terms of attracting tourists to community based tourism projects, the first requirement is political and economic stability. Spenceley (2003) argues that tourism is a very fickle industry and the occurrence or even threat of political unrest or violence in a given country usually leads to sharp decline in incoming tourists (Van Amerom, 2006). A notable case is the closure of once flourishing ecotourism ventures under the Malilangwe Trust and Mahenye communal area due to the perception of Zimbabwe by the international tourists

as volatile and unsafe tourist destination. Considering that the majority of overseas tourists to Africa come from the West, the prospects of ecotourism development are considerably dependent on Western economic and political support (Van Amerom, 2006).

## METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study is premised on an extensive literature review of the ecotourism discourse in Southern Africa and further embarks on an in-depth analysis of the Mahenye ecotourism venture in the south-eastern part of Zimbabwe and the Makuleke ecotourism venture in South Africa. Relevant literature on ecotourism was reviewed to give insight on the cutting edge issues of sustainable tourism, community tourism sustainability and the overall political and macro-economic factors that impact on the competitiveness of Southern Africa as an ecotourism destination. The case studies were chosen as they strategically represent Southern Africa's marginalized border regions endowed with great ecotourism potential due to their proximity to the Great Limpopo Transfrontier park. Research techniques for this study included desk top research, key informant interviews and the author's own experiences on the dynamics of ecotourism development in Southern Africa. In addition, tourism statistics from both South Africa and Zimbabwe were used to analyse and to estimate the overall performance of Southern Africa as an ecotourism destination.

### Case study one: The Mahenye ecotourism venture in Chipinge district, Zimbabwe

The Mahenye ecotourism venture is a joint venture agreement between the local Shangaan people and African Sun Limited (formerly Zimsun Limited), which owns a chain of hotels in Zimbabwe has seen the development of tourist lodges on Shangaan land. It is situated on an island at the junction of the Sabi and Runde confluence. Up until early 1990s, the Shangaan have poached extensively from the neighboring Gonarezhou National Park, from which many of them were evicted and their villages burned to the ground when the park was created in 1966 (Scheyvens, 2000). The villagers poached as means of survival and in the hope that if they killed no more, tourists would come and the National Park would be eventually closed (Scheyvens, 2000).

However, through the joint venture the lodges provide access to Gonarezhou National Park and are part of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park (GLTP). The main attraction in this ecotourism venture is bird photography and identification in the beautiful riverine woodland. Other additional tourist activities include game drives, fishing in Runde and Sabi rivers, boat cruises. The local people are heavily involved through cultural tourism and are employed as tour guides in the of village tours. The Mahenye lodge started off with an eleven bed facility and was eventually extended to a forty bed facility. Notable is that the current phase of the operation is largely small scale causing serious viability problems. The challenge therefore is to sustain this operation against the backdrop that in order to succeed an ecotourism operation must be economically sustainable as a business.

### Community benefits in Mahenye ecotourism venture

The lodges have so far provided some tangible benefits in the form of the following:

1. The lodge has provided training and employment opportunities

for local people in tour guiding, service arena and cultural tours. However employment has been heavily biased in favor of men. At one time at Mahenye lodge, only three out of fifteen positions were filled by women while at Chilo lodge, four out of thirty eight (38) positions were filled by women (Scheyvens, 2000). Such gender disparities threaten the overall sustainability of sustainability of the ecotourism venture.

2. The agreement with Zimsun Limited has brought a lot of infrastructural improvements to the area including tarred roads, piped water supply and electricity.

3. The Mahenye community benefited significant sums from lease payments by Zimsun Limited thereby providing direct economic benefits to the local people.

On the whole, the Mahenye initiative was very positive in terms of promoting development in an economically marginalized communal area, encouraging sustainable use of natural resources and enhancing the control of local people over development in the surrounding areas.

### Potential threats and challenges

The macro-economic challenges in Zimbabwe have been a major threat to this ecotourism venture. This is compounded by sanctions which have resulted in important sources of foreign exchange and foreign direct and portfolio investment drying up (Ferreira, 2004). The subdued macro-economic environment has negatively affected the tourism sector in the country and ecotourism ventures like the Mahenye have not been spared. Against this background, Zimsun (now African sun) Limited pulled out of the joint initiative citing viability concerns due to the collapse of Zimbabwe's tourist industry triggered by the political crisis (Wolmer, 2003). Consequently, the conservation project in Mahenye has degenerated as a model example of Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE program. The economic benefits to the local communities have deteriorated sharply from conditions described in earlier studies (Balint and Mashinya, 2006). The local failure of leadership and combined with the withdrawal of African sun limited and other conservation agencies contributed to the poor performance of the ecotourism venture.

The lessons to be learnt from the Mahenye ecotourism venture as it relates to Zimbabwe and Southern Africa region is that local communities alone without technical support, business marketing and promotion assistance from established tourism enterprises cannot facilitate economic viability and overall sustainability of ecotourism ventures. Even in apparently successful conservation and development projects, local participatory decision making institutions are fragile and require continuous external support and capacity development in managing and marketing the ecotourism ventures (Balint and Mashinya, 2006).

In addition, one crucial lesson emanating from the Mahenye case study is the importance of the Western market in sustaining the ecotourism industry. Zimbabwe's tourism woes are closely linked to the anti- Western stance taken by the political leadership leading to the broader international market boycotting Zimbabwe as a tourist destination. Zimbabwe has been largely perceived as an unsafe tourist destination by the international market resultantly undermining the ecotourism sector. In addition to the possession of attractive natural areas there is need for Zimbabwe to boost its security image and improve relations with the West.

### Case study 2: The Makuleke ecotourism initiative in South Africa

The Makuleke ecotourism initiative arose as a result of the land restitution process, in which the Makuleke won back full ownership of their land. A condition of the restitution process was that the

Makuleke community would continue to utilize their land for conservation purposes (Mahony and Van Zyl, 2001). The region constitutes about 24,000 ha bounded by the Luvuvhu, Limpopo and Pafuri rivers. It is co-managed by the Makuleke Communal Property Association (CPA) and SanParks, the parastatal that manages all national protected areas (Turner, 2006). Due to the fact that the CPA does not have sufficient conservation expertise or manpower to manage the ecotourism ventures without assistance, SANparks is responsible for day to day conservation management. The joint resolution between Makuleke and SANparks requires that the Makuleke region is to remain a conservation area in perpetuity and all commercial ventures must be consistent with conservation. The CPA therefore presents all commercial plans to the Makuleke-SANparks management board, compare proposals with conservation management plans and conduct environmental impact assessments for each proposal.

### Main ecotourism attractions

The region is ecologically rich; it is home to a wide range of flora and fauna, including the Big Five and many bird species (Turner, 2006) due to its proximity to the Kruger National Park (KNP). The KNP is the largest national park in South Africa and is a significant tourist destination for both local and international tourists (Mahony and Van Zyl, 2001). It is argued that due to the international branding of the KNP, the value of the land in the Makuleke Region is significantly higher than it would be if Makuleke were not incorporated into the KNP. It has been estimated that almost 75% of all flora and fauna species found with the KNP are also found within the Makuleke Region (Mahony and Van Zyl, 2001). Due to its diversity of flora, fauna, geomorphology and unique raw African culture, the Makuleke Region is endowed with the following ecotourism attractions:

1. Safari hunting: The region is located along a wildlife migration route and limited sustainable trophy hunting is promoted. To raise revenue from hunting the CPA partnered with a private firm that advertised, organized and managed the hunt. The Makuleke have been quite effective in forging partnerships with local and international conservation and development agencies (Turner, 2006). The conservation plan for Makuleke region permits limited hunting, but the first elephant hunts in the area produced outcry among hard-line conservationists.
2. Lodgings: The area is endowed with high value game lodges targeting at high value foreign and domestic tourists. The Makuleke CPA reached an agreement with Matswani safaris to build one high end lodge, a tent camp and a museum. Lodging has been one of the simplest services that the community is providing.
3. Cultural and village based tourism opportunities like the Makuleke bed and breakfasts.

The Makuleke is also part of the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park (GLTP), a mega boundary less park involving South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe (Turner, 2006) and thus ideally positioned to capitalize on increased tourism flows to the region. The GLTP is a result of the joining of three parks namely, Gonarezhou National Park in Zimbabwe, Limpopo National Park in Mozambique and Kruger National Park in South Africa (Parks and Wildlife Management Authority, 2003). In the GLTP visitors to Southern Africa will have the opportunity to experience a wide range of activities across very different ecological environments.

### Community benefits

The community has gained greatly by regaining its land rights in 1998 and has subsequently pursued economic development

through conservation. However, most community benefits originate from government, private sector projects and income from consumptive and non-consumptive tourism ventures. The Makuleke CPA has received grants from government agencies, NGOs to support conservation and rural development programmes. The external subsidies to the communities participating in the conservation initiatives are usually viewed as short-term and unsustainable. This has been evident in the Zimbabwe based conservation programmes whose performance has declined due to the withdrawal of donor funding. Just like the Mahenye ecotourism venture in Zimbabwe, the Makuleke community members have been hired to work in the lodges and employed as local tour guides in and around Kruger Park. Matswani Wilderness Safaris, a private sector partner for the Makuleke Community offered vocational training programs so that the Makuleke could serve as tour guides, hospitality staff and managers (Turner, 2006). In addition, after each safari hunt, animal meat is shared among the community members.

### Community challenges

While there is an established and lucrative market for game hunting, conservation principles and other hard-line constituencies constrain the potential for profit. The conservation plan for Makuleke region permits limited hunting, but elephant hunts have faced serious resistance from animal rights groups. This largely militates against the viability of these community based tourism ventures.

The Makuleke have been quite effective in forging partnerships in their ecotourism ventures thereby getting subsidies and support for their conservation efforts. However, the community's interactions with conservation managers, donors and advocates, government and private sector entrepreneurs are largely structured by their relative poverty, limited technical expertise and insecure title to a valued conservation area. Against this background, the risk of exploitation and unequal partnership is a continuing concern (Turner, 2006). In addition, the structure of the tourism sector makes it difficult for communities to capture substantial benefits as tourism is a complexly structured industry. Emmerton (2006) notes that tourism benefits often flow away from communities through leakages. The individuals or firms that manage tours, arrange transportation, accommodation, guides and schedules often capture much of the revenue. The communities can basically provide lodging facilities against a background of a situation where most of the ecotourism revenue is generated through transport and tour management. Transportation and tour management are the most profitable in the tourism chain. However the community investment capacity and skills base is limited for them to delve into transportation and tour packaging. It is in this area that community capacity needs enhancement.

## ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper uses the data and experiences of two Southern African countries, South Africa and Zimbabwe to assess the practice of ecotourism. The evaluation criteria hovered on issues to do with the theoretical frameworks informing ecotourism development, ecotourism effects on communities, conservation practices, employment and financial sustainability of the ecotourism ventures. A review of literature indicates that both South Africa and Zimbabwe have successfully marketed their counties as competitive international ecotourism destinations due to their abundant nature resources. While

Southern Africa has great ecotourism potential, the challenge that applies to both case studies in this paper which could work against the economic viability of ecotourism in the long run is the general political, macro-economic conditions in the Region and how the international community responds. The sites that tourists select are influenced by international trends and events. Notable is the unfavorable macro economic conditions in Zimbabwe which had a biting effect on the overall performance of the tourism industry, which has been experiencing decline in arrivals since 2000 (ZTA, 2004). The situation in Zimbabwe, unlike South Africa is compounded by the development that there is no vibrant domestic tourism base which could cushion the tourism industry when the country goes through an unfavourable international rating. South Africa's domestic market stands at 70% while Zimbabwe is at less than 30% due to the prevailing macro-economic challenges particularly poor incomes.

The international condemnation of Zimbabwe's land reform programme compounded with perceptions of poor governance has had a negative impact on Zimbabwe's ecotourism sector. Good governance has become a key factor in determining the competitiveness of a destination in the international community. South Africa also suffered a similar tourism down turn due to the international condemnation of its discriminative apartheid policies and its role as an instigator of conflict in Southern Africa (Van Ameron, 2004). It is therefore clear that Western sanctions imposed on Southern African countries restrain the growth of ecotourism as has been evidenced by the slump in tourist arrivals to Zimbabwe. The ultimate effect of the decline in arrival is to suffocate the ecotourism ventures run by the local communities. To direct tourism flows or hinder tourism flows to Southern Africa, Western States can use the granting or withdrawal of aid to tourism projects as tool. Notable is the case of Zimbabwe where conservation agencies and NGOs have pulled out of the country citing poor governance, poor human rights record and unstable macro-economic environment. As a result of lack of conservation support by international agencies and projection of Zimbabwe as an unsafe tourist destination by the international media institutions, major ecotourism ventures have been crippled financially.

High crime rates in South Africa have negatively impacted on the potential of South Africa as an internationally competitive ecotourism destination. The way the South African government has prioritized dealing with crimes has been highly commendable. These are some developments which local community management boards have no direct control but have a bearing on the overall performance of community based ecotourism ventures. Tourist markets are highly sensitive to international and national factors and events that are highly outside the control of tourist sites and host communities (Turner, 2006). Against this backdrop, the political challenges in Zimbabwe need a long lasting resolution as the continued decline of the economy,

worsening social conditions may eventually affect the destination competitiveness of Southern Africa with the ultimate effect of undermining the sustainability and economic viability of ecotourism ventures that have been initiated by the local communities.

There is need by the governments to promote domestic tourism in the region so that many locals can afford to be tourists themselves thereby making a huge contribution to the industry. There is also need for political leadership in Southern Africa to embrace and promote good governance as over the years the international community has developed a strong moral attitude towards destinations, and will quickly rally support for destinations that are perceived to be well governed and boycott those perceived to be associated with poor governance. It should be noted that tourism is a fiercely competitive business between tourist destinations throughout the world. Accordingly, competitive advantage is no longer natural but increasingly man made driven by technology, innovation and good governance.

## Conclusion

This discussion has reflected through the case studies of the Mahenye and Makuleke ecotourism ventures that ecotourism promotes a sustainable method to earn revenue through conservation and protection of resources by the communities that own them. It is also noted that the critical success factors for the economic sustainability of the ecotourism ventures in Southern Africa are the national and regional political stability and the quality of relations with the eco-tourist generating regions (the west). Positive international relations, good governance and policies that are not confrontational with the west remain a major factor in determining the overall viability and sustainability of the ecotourism sector, hence facilitating sustainable development. A review of literature on ecotourism indicates that the concept and context of ecotourism has not evolved uncontested. Through this study, it can be concluded that lack of consensus on what ecotourism represents has led to many tourism products and services designed under the banner of ecotourism, yet they represent everything against conservation and communities' development. It is therefore the contention of this paper that the concept of ecotourism development will hover at the rhetoric, unless the multiplicity of stakeholders involved in the tourism matrix are agreeable on the boundaries of what constitutes ecotourism and what does not. Apart from the challenges outlined in this presentation, ecotourism to Southern Africa has been hailed as a promising strategy for providing sustainable development. The main benefit of ecotourism as reflected in the case studies being its potential for providing needed capital for local and national economies without exceeding ecological and cultural carrying capacities. However, in order to succeed an ecotourism operation must be economically viable as a business, conserve the

natural environment and provide tangible benefits to the local people.

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