

-RESEARCH ARTICLE-

CHALLENGES OF ECOTOURISM AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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—Abstract —

The basis of ecotourism is associated with poverty alleviation across the world. That is, ecotourism is believed to be significant for the generation of income, improvement of the standards of living of people, sustainability of the environment, political enablement of local societies as well as for educational purposes. In South Africa, ecotourism is believed to be flourishing and as a result, it is seen as a great strategy towards poverty alleviation. The aim of the study is to investigate the challenges of ecotourism towards poverty alleviation. Theoretically, the study will adopt the desktop study from which data will be obtained by means of literature review through scholarly articles, newspapers and government documents. Ecotourism is believed to be associated with various challenges which are environmental deterioration, inability to contribute to local economy as, well as cultural exploitation and deterioration. The challenges of ecotourism delay the process of poverty alleviation. Therefore, a balance between development and the environment should be created. There should be promotion of sustainable development and stewardship of the environment. Regardless of the challenges ecotourism has, the paper concludes that ecotourism positively contributes towards poverty alleviation in South Africa.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The foundation of ecotourism is associated with poverty alleviation all over the world (Ocampo, Ebisa, Ombe and Escoto, 2018; Ma, Cai, Zheng and Wen, 2019). That is, ecotourism is believed to be significant for income generation, improvement of people's standards of living, sustainability of the environment, political enablement of local societies as well as for educational purposes (Osman, Shaw and Kenawy, 2018). The interaction between tourists and poor local communities through ecotourism has an immense potential to enhance the political, economic, social and cultural aspects of those poor local communities (Jones and Lalley, 2013). However, ecotourism is still faced with challenges associated with its intentions for poverty reduction (Tella, Akande, Adigun, Odunola, and Stella, 2017; Zhou, Guo and Liu, 2019). Additionally, poor local communities are still deprived chances to interact with the tourists nor have access to the ecosystem for poverty reduction purposes (Brand, De Beer, De Villiers and Van Marle, 2013). Ecotourism has been regarded as a paramount activity for income generation, employment creation and foreign exchange in order to help boost the economy in most developing countries such as South Africa, Botswana, China, Indonesia and Nepal, among others (Iasha, Yacob, Kabir and Radam, 2015; Lee and Du Preez, 2016; Walter, Regmi and Khanal, 2018; Ma *et al.*, 2019). In different countries, the government together with international donors called for a robust consideration of ecotourism as an effective mechanism to reduce poverty (Manwa and Manwa, 2014). In some developing countries ecotourism could account for about 25 percent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Modiri, 2015; Ma *et al.*, 2019; Hsu, 2019). The contribution was recognised as the major viable and sustainable development action, which focuses on the improvement of standards of living of people and capacity building while ensuring the environment's conservation and/or protection (Zhou *et al.*, 2019).

Prior the apartheid era in South Africa, black communities were having access to the ecosystem without restrictions (Ocampo *et al.*, 2018). The black communities used the forests to fetch firewood, traditional medicine and hunting animals (Osman *et al.*, 2018). Of late, parks were established with an idea of ecotourism. With a focus of generating income and preserving the environment, especially for poverty reduction (Jones and Lalley, 2013). However, this has led to black communities losing their livelihoods, as they were deprived access to their land

since it was their main source of decent standards of living (Kepe, 2016; Blackmore, 2017). It is against this background that the aim of this paper is to investigate the challenges of ecotourism towards poverty alleviation in South Africa. This paper is theoretical by nature therefore, it relied on desktop research and used existing data from various databases on arguments about the challenges of ecotourism towards poverty alleviation. That is, the collective strengths of scholarship synthesis and content analysis will be adopted in order to be able to achieve the aim of this paper. Literature from scholarly journal articles, newspapers and other government documents was used. The paper consists of six sections inclusive of this introduction and the conclusion. The second section outlines the theoretical groundings of ecotourism. In the third section, the nature of ecotourism which focuses on principles, approaches and activities of ecotourism is discussed. In the fourth section, the challenges of ecotourism with a focus on South Africa are discussed followed by recommendations towards successful ecotourism presented as section five. The last section concludes that ecotourism is essential, and it can help in reducing and alleviating poverty when conducted appropriately.

2. THEORETICAL GROUNDINGS OF ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism has been brought forward as a form of sustainable tourism that is anticipated to enhance conservation and the improvement of disadvantaged communities (Chiutsi, Mukoroverwa, Karigambe, Mudzengi, 2011). For the purpose of this paper, ecotourism theory, stakeholders' theory and sustainability theory are discussed in order to provide the theoretical grounding of ecotourism. The ecotourism theory has put emphasis on the need for ecotourism to provide all the tourists and nearby communities with education concerning the environment (Giampiccoli, 2015; Mosammam et al., 2018). The theory further hopes to ensure that its benefits are shared with all disadvantaged and nearby rural communities for the purpose of poverty reduction, environmental conservation and educational experiences (Tella et al., 2017; Dube et al., 2018). The stakeholder theory originated in the business management field with the aim of identifying key stakeholders (Nicholas, Thapa and Ko, 2009; Greff, 2013). A combination of a broader literature review on stakeholder theory shows that the idea of stakeholders' identification is very significant (Benn, Abratt, Abratt and O'Leary, 2016). Hence, the stakeholder theory puts emphasis on the need to ensure that there are multiple stakeholders who are involved in the management process of any project (Nicholas et al., 2009). In the case of this paper, stakeholders are all the people directly and indirectly affected by ecotourism. The stakeholder theory speculates that managers should have a relationship with other stakeholders

(Nicholas et al., 2009). The stakeholder theory argues that the stakeholders' participation in a project should be beneficial to those stakeholders (Greeff, 2013). Local communities, municipalities and other stakeholders should be taken into consideration and benefits should be shared with them.

The sustainability theory seeks to create a balance between development and the environment (Van Zijl, Wöstmann and Maroun, 2017). It puts emphasis on the need for development activities to pay attention to the environment (Jenkins, n.d. and Ben-Eli, 2006). Activities of poverty alleviation should not cause destruction to the environment. In other words, there should be recognition and promotion of sustainable development whereby the needs of the current generation are met without compromising those of the future generation. Within the sustainability theory, the ecological model will be adopted in this proposed study. The ecological model calls for a need to safeguard ecological integrity (Jenkins, n.d.). That is, paying attention to the living world's health with an emphasis on the need to maintain all significant assortment of all practices of life on earth.

3. THE NATURE OF ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism could be defined as the act of traveling in areas of high prestige, relatively undisturbed, conserving the environment while improving the standards of living of local communities (Ocampo, Ebisa, Ombe and Escoto, 2018). It involves traveling to areas that consist of fauna, flora and cultural heritage (Ma, Cai, Zheng and Wen, 2019). Ecotourism focuses on the interaction of biotic components of the environment (Shi, Weaver, Zhao, Huang and Liu, 2019) and it is also associated with different activities that should be guided by principles and undertaken through different approaches. This section will discuss the principles, approaches and activities of ecotourism as follows:

- Principles of Ecotourism

The principles of ecotourism include environmental protection, education about conservation, management of ecological funds and its benefits to the community (Santarem, Campos, Pereira, Hamidou and Brito, 2018). Environmental protection emphasises on the need for ecotourism in avoiding negative impacts on the environment (Osman et al., 2018). Furthermore, environmental and cultural awareness should be built while physical, behavioural, psychological and social impacts are diminished (Phiri, and Okeyo, 2015; Mosammam, Sarrafi, Nia and Heidari, 2018). Ecotourism should make proper assurance of maintenance of the natural environment. The second principle, education about conservation, highlighted that ecotourism should provide all the tourists and nearby

communities with information based on the issues of conservation of natural areas, among others (Giampiccoli, 2015; Mosammam et al., 2018). It also asserts that people should have full and important knowledge concerning ecotourism (Shi et al., 2019). Ecotourism should create conservation awareness through providing education to tourists and local communities. In South Africa, the Department of Environmental Affairs has provided guidance in environmental management, conservation and guard concerning sustainability in order to advantage the country's citizens and its environment (Gilder and Dhladhla, 2013).

The third principle which focuses on management of ecological funds has put emphasis on the need for funds to be directly generated for environmental conservation (Santarem et al., 2018). In other words, income generated from ecotourism activities should be utilised for management of the protected natural areas (Shi et al., 2019). The fourth principle asserts that its benefits to the community has contended that ecotourism should generate income that could be used to improve the standards of living of poor local communities located nearby the conserved areas (Tella et al., 2017). That is, ecotourism should put much of positive effects on the lives of the poor local community members (Dube et al., 2018). It emphasised on the need to ensure that community members are included in decision making processes concerning matters of ecotourism that affect their ways of living (Prinsloo, Marokane, Street, 2018). Furthermore, ecotourism should provide respect for the livelihoods and beliefs of the people in different communities (Santarem, Saarinen and Brito, 2019).

- Approaches to Ecotourism

Ecotourism is undertaken through different approaches which include industry-oriented approach, physical or spatial oriented approach and community-based approach (Wilson and Letsosa, 2014). The industry-oriented approach which is also known as the economic-oriented approach, focuses on financial incentives, private markets and other parts of government to achieve the objectives of ecotourism (Mosammam et al., 2018; Osman et al., 2018). Environmentalists and development practitioners criticised the approach for its failure to practice its theory (Phiri, and Okeyo, 2015). The industry-oriented approach to ecotourism is believed to be turning a blind eye on the improvement of the standards of living of poor local communities (Osman et al., 2018). In practice, it promotes private-ownership of nature reserves. Since this approach was criticised, it flagged a way for the introduction of the physical-oriented approach also known as the spatial-oriented approach. The physical or spatial approach to tourism, assumed that ecotourism's attention should be put on the protection of the environment

(Mosammam et al., 2018). It has also put emphasis on the need to pay special attention to the social, physical and environmental capacity when undertaking ecotourism. (Santarem et al., 2018). The physical-oriented approach has been criticised to be ignoring development. It is said to be bias on the environment (Mosammam et al., 2018). The spatial-oriented approach has been criticised to be ignoring development and to be bias on the environment (Mosammam et al., 2018). This disadvantaged the poor local communities which has led to the introduction of the community-based approach. The community-based ecotourism stressed the need for the development of the poor local communities and called for the need to allow community members to be involved in ecotourism matters affecting them too (Eshun and Eshun, 2014). It embraces individual initiatives in the local communities, and it should foster sustainable use and collective responsibility in matters involving both protected areas and the local communities (Phiri and Okeyo, 2015). With this approach to ecotourism, local communities share some of their daily activities with the tourists (Phiri, and Okeyo, 2015).

- Activities of Ecotourism

Ecotourism is practiced in different ways which include cultural ecotourism, endangered wildlife ecotourism and adventure ecotourism. The cultural ecotourism involves coming across cultural assortment while keeping in mind the need to be conscious about the environment (Grieves, Adler and King, 2014). It puts emphasis on the need for the selected environmentally friendly tour operator to assist in sustaining employment with local guides as well as making sure that the tourists and local residents gain positive experience (Gonzales, 2018). The second activity of ecotourism, which is endangered wildlife ecotourism, is an activity whereby tourists visit endangered wildlife parks responsibly. In South Africa, organisations work hand-in-hand with wildlife reserves with the aim of mapping the wildlife (Hirtenfelder and Hirtenfelder, 2014; Kennedy et al., 2013). This activity allows tourists to assist in conducting animal behavioural research that will in turn help them in learning about tracking the identification of animals (Korth, 2016).

The third ecotourism, which is adventure ecotourism, involves upholding the character of ecotourism while walking up the adventure during travels (Santarem et al., 2018). It puts emphasis on the need for tourists to make an effort of minimising and completely avoiding negative impacts on the environment during terminus activities (Saayman and Giampiccoli, 2015). This is done in order to make sure that upcoming tourists enjoy and experience the same adventures. This ecotourism is one of the fastest growing ecotourism activities (Rogerson, 2007).

South Africa signifies an evolving ending point for adventure ecotourism in Africa. This activity of ecotourism did not play a big role in the massive development that took place during country's international tourism economy around 1994 (Rogerson, 2007). However, the adventure ecotourism industry in the country is currently displaying signs of amalgamation and development (Rogerson, 2007).

4. ECOTOURISM FOR POVERTY REDUCTION IN SOUTH AFRICA: SYNOPSIS OF THE CHALLENGES

Ecotourism is believed to be associated with a variety of challenges which include environmental deterioration, inability to contribute to local economy as well as cultural exploitation and deterioration, among others. The challenges are discussed below as follows:

- *Environmental Deterioration*

Shi, Weaver, Zhao, Huang and Liu (2019), contend that “the main aim of ecotourism is to promote conservation of the natural environment”. However, ecotourism affects the natural environment (Osman, Shaw and Kenawy, 2018). The tourists interrupt wildlife during the process of feeding the animals and breeding environment (Gonzales, 2018). During walking eco-tours, most tourists tend to put on heavy boots that temper with the soil, plants and insects. Other tourists scrap the beauty nature such as rocks by writing their names (Giampiccoli, 2015). Different natural floras end up being picked as result of admiration or lack of courtesy (Mtapuri and Giampiccoli, 2019). Seemingly, environmental protection mechanisms exercised during eco-tours are inadequate, especially with nature reserve parks. South Africa too, has raised concerns with regard to environmental protection and management which is mostly seen to be inconsistent and indecorous (Loubser, Le, Mouton and Nel, 2001). There has never been a steady setting in the administration and management of ecotourism in environments of South Africa (Sebola, 2008).

- *Inability to contribute to local economy*

It is believed that ecotourism is significant in growing the local economy (Walter, Regmi and Khanal, 2018). However, worldwide corporations and external developers herd to prevalent destinations and their hotels and lodges take money that is supposed to benefit the local economy (Giampiccoli, 2015; Walter, Regmi and Khanal, 2018). Most nature reserves are privately-owned (Korth, 2016). As a result, their main aim is to make profit that will in turn benefit only them. Although, some of the reserves in countries such as South Africa pay taxes, there

is still a robust effect that the nature reserves have on the economy (Giampiccoli, 2015). Ecotourism became a strategy for many large and private companies to improving their image and generating income for themselves whereas it failed to make sure that local communities are involved in experiences and that they are the beneficiaries of economic growth (Mtapuri and Giampiccoli, 2019). Sebola (2008) argues that tourism at large seemed to have failed to meaningfully contribute to the economy of South Africa. The responsibility of the administration and management of ecotourism issues was scattered around different departments such as Departments of Agriculture, Water and Sanitation and Health as well as Mineral Affairs (Sebola, 2008). This arrangement has caused discrepancies, disorganisations and ineffectiveness of ecotourism in contributing to the country's economy. Additionally, South Africa did not have a well-developed national ecotourism plan and or policy and this also resulted in the current situation of ecotourism's inability to contribute to the country's economy (Sebola, 2008).

- *Cultural Exploitation and Deterioration*

Ecotourism causes cultural exploitation and deterioration (Grieves, Adler and King, 2014). Original residents lose pasture and crop land when more accommodation is built for a large number of tourists. During eco-tours in local communities, other tourists go to an extent where they even reach places of high prestige as considered by the community members (Hirtenfelder and Hirtenfelder, 2014). The tourists tend to disrespect the way in which different community members live and or do their things (Santarem, Campos, Pereira, Hamidou and Brito, 2018). One of the principles of ecotourism which is, its benefits to the community has contended that ecotourism should generate income that could be used to improve the standards of living for poor local communities located near the conserved areas used for ecotourism purposes (Tella *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, ecotourism should have much positive effects on the lives of the poor local community members (Dube *et al.*, 2018). However, ecotourism has affected the local communities' cultural heritages although ecotourism also has the ability to provide support to native beliefs and outdated livings for local communities (Santarém, Saarinen and Brito, 2019). Ecotourism actions have the ability to cause cultural conflicts and tremors between Eco tourists and native communities whenever particular features of local lifestyle are in antagonism with values defended by Eco tourists (Santarém, Saarinen and Brito, 2019). Literature argues that ecotourism assists in terms of supporting ancient practices meanwhile in practice it does not.

5. TOWARDS EFFECTIVE ECOTOURISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

This paper found that ecotourism causes environmental degradation and deterioration. The management of the ecotourism in the environment of South Africa has always been seen to be inconsistent and inappropriate. There has never been a steady setting in the administration and management of ecotourism in environments of South Africa. As a result, appropriate legislations to protect the environment should be put in place and assurance to their adherence should be made. There should be a balance created between development and the environment. In other words, environmental sustainability should be ensured while sustainable development is also ensured. It has been found that ecotourism does not contribute to the economy of South Africa. Most ecotourism parks are privately-owned, and the main aim of private companies is to make profit that will later benefit themselves. It is advisable for the government of South Africa to merge and work with all the ecotourism parks. By so doing, no private company will turn a blind eye on the economy of the country.

During eco-tours in local communities, other tourists tend to disrespect the way in which different community members live and or do their things. Therefore, there should be guides for the tourists who wish to visit local communities to see heritage places, cultures and traditions of the local communities. Tourists who happen to destroy any asset of the local communities should be fined and the victim should be the beneficiary of the fine. Eco tourists should devote time understanding and learning local communities' ways of living, cultures and traditions. This will help in terms of respecting the local communities' cultures, traditions and ways of living. It is believed that ecotourism should provide education not only to tourists but also to people living in local communities. In practice, there has been complaints made by rural communities next to the ecotourism parks that ecotourism provides more education and skills to the tourists and this disadvantages them in their poverty reduction process since education and skills are known to be some of the strategies to help tackle poverty.

6. CONCLUSION

South Africa is believed to be having great potential for ecotourism. Ecotourism is believed to have the ability to reserve the desert biome and at the same time provide support to native beliefs, outdated livings and sustainable development. It produces a plethora of ecological, economic and socio-cultural effects that should be taken into consideration when evolving tourist undertakings in desert environments. However, poverty alleviation is still argued to be a problem across South Africa because the challenges of ecotourism delay the process of poverty

alleviation. Different scholars argued that ecotourism and poverty reduction are two activities that are linked together and should not be put asunder. Ecotourism can provide an appropriate tool for the positive contribution of the welfare of poor local communities. With all the negative and positive effects of ecotourism on poverty alleviation, this paper concludes that ecotourism is essential, and it can help in reducing and alleviating poverty when conducted appropriately.

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