

AN ECOTOURISM MODEL FOR SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL PARKS

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ABSTRACT

South Africa boasts with twenty-one national parks which are under the management of South African National Parks (SANParks). SANParks is the leading conservation organisation in South Africa and also the largest provider of ecotourism experiences in the country. Ecotourism has become one of the world's major economic sectors with the capability to play a significant role in the sustainable development in areas where nature attracts tourists (Powell & Ham, 2008:467; Fennel, 2002:12). As an ecotourism provider it is important that SANParks implement an ecotourism model to successfully develop and manage its ecotourism products. The absence of such a model can constrain tourism products' functionality to deliver a competitive product in an extremely competitive industry (Cloete, 2001:2). Although the core pillars on which SANParks management operations are based, are aligned with ecotourism principles, it was found that no concrete model is currently in place to show how ecotourism should be developed and managed in South African National Parks. Hence the aim of this study is to determine what the key aspects for an ecotourism model in South Africa would be.

KEYWORDS

Ecotourism, Responsible Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, National Parks, Model.

1. INTRODUCTION

South Africa's natural resources form the basis of the tourism industry; attracting millions of local and international eco-tourists every year. One of the largest conservation and ecotourism providers in South Africa is South African National Parks (Myburgh & Saayman, 2002:261; SANParks, 2008:2). The appeal of ecotourism as a conservation and development tool derives from the related benefits and perception that it is a feasible alternative to the more conventional and destructive mass tourism form of tourism development (Powell & Ham, 2008:468). It is for this reason that Buckley (2001:25) suggested ecotourism product owners (in this case SANParks) need a model for best practice that can be used as a benchmark to judge environmental performance and assist in planning new ecotourism products responsibly.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ecotourism forms part of the sustainable tourism paradigm and although both have attracted numerous attention, little progress has been made in the tourism industry to implement their objectives (Wight 2003: 51; Fennel, 2002: 26 & Telfer & Sharpley, 2008: 42). To date there is no universal definition for ecotourism (Pforr, 2001:70). Ecotourism was first defined by Ceballos-Lascurain in 1987, quoted by (Diamantis, 2004:5) as: “travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals”. Fennel (2008:24) aimed to define ecotourism, after conducting a content analysis of 85 definitions, as: “a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally oriented (control, benefits, and scale). It typically occurs in natural areas, and should contribute to the conservation or preservation of such areas”.

From these definitions it is clear that the following are key principles of ecotourism: it should foster a genuine interest in nature; contribute to conservation; respect and conservation of the local culture; the non-consumptive use of natural resources; benefits accrue to the local community; create tourist awareness of conservation and local community issues. Due to the fact that ecotourism tends to occur in naturally and culturally sensitive areas, it makes the need for an appropriate and comprehensive ecotourism model in such areas imperative (Edgell, 2006: 122; Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006: 490; Honey, 2008: 447; Keyser, 2009: 34 & Davis, 1999: 520). When studying South African National Parks (SANParks) business operations one finds that they are based on three core pillars, namely conservation, nature-based tourism and community which are aligned with the core pillars ecotourism is based on (SANParks, 2008: 2).

South African National Parks’ current ecotourism/tourism management strategies were analysed as reflected in the “Parks Management Plan,” and it was found that aspects listed don’t give clear guidelines regarding the management of ecotourism in South Africa National Parks. A more holistic approach is needed to explain how ecotourism principles fit together and particularly lay down specific conditions under which ecotourism should be managed (Edgell, 2006: 122; Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006: 490; Honey, 2008: 447 & Keyser, 2009: 34). Without this, management, planning and monitoring of ecotourism cannot take place (Davis, 1999: 520). Therefore the question that arises is: what are the key aspects that need to form part of an ecotourism model for South African National Parks?

3. METHODOLOGY

For the empirical part of the study a descriptive research approach was followed by means of a self-administered questionnaire with the aim to determine the perceptions of responsible/ecotourism from a demand and supply side. The importance of 56 constructs pertaining to aspects of responsible and ecotourism were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all important; 2 = slightly important; 3 = important; 4 = very important; 5 = extremely important). The constructs were identified based on the literature review regarding responsible ecotourism and included attributes such as development aspects; local community upliftment aspects; eco-efficient practices; responsible tourism ethics; activities to enhance the ecotourism experience; and policies and legislation (Keyser, 2009:40; Goodwin, 2009; Frey & George, 2009:622; Fennel, 2008:23; Myburgh & Saayman, 2002:24; Powell & Ham, 2008:468; Weaver, 2001:15; Spencely, 2008:5).

The questionnaire was launched on the website of South Africa National Parks during March 2011. A pilot run was conducted in February for two days on SANParks’ website to identify possible constraints and problems. The timeframe for the survey was one month and 993 respondents

completed the questionnaire. Secondly, the same questionnaire was sent via email to the managers of SANParks as well as to key personnel at head office and a total of 25 questionnaires were completed.

In order to determine key aspects of an ecotourism model for South African National Parks, the results of the empirical research were processed by the North-West University's Statistical Consultation Services (Potchefstroom Campus). The data was analysed by means of the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) software programme.

4. MAIN RESULTS

The primary objective of this study is to develop an ecotourism model for South African National Parks. In order to determine key aspects that should be included in the model an exploratory factor analysis was conducted. The pattern matrix with the principal axis factoring extraction method and Oblimin rotation method was used in which six factors were extracted by Kaiser's criterion explaining the 61.95% of the total variance which is seen as good, since more than 50% of the variance is explained (SPSS, Inc., 2009). A Cronbach Alpha (1 = very reliable) and inter-item correlation reliability tests were conducted in which all the factors proved to be reliable.

4.1. KEY ASPECTS OF AN ECOTOURISM MODEL FOR SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL PARKS.

The factors that were identified and should be included as key aspects in the ecotourism model for South African National Parks are as follows:

- ***Responsible ecotourism development aspects:*** important responsible ecotourism development aspects include the following; the implementation of practices to reduce litter and pollution; tourism in national parks must be in support of conservation; actions must be implemented to reduce the carbon footprint; staff should be trained; create awareness to promote environmental awareness and ethics; and responsible ecotourism product must be sustainable in the long run.
- ***Local community involvement:*** community involvement and benefits are considered to be an important factor of responsible ecotourism and include equitable access to natural, historic and socio-cultural sites of significance located in the parks, must be provided to local communities for enjoyment; economic benefits should accrue to the local community; commitment to fair labour practices; educational programmes; and support local suppliers as far as possible.
- ***Environmentally friendly practices:*** environmentally friendly practices should be applied in order to minimise the negative impacts of tourism on the environment and include the responsible use of resources such as water and energy; waste management; the use of environmentally friendly products; environmentally friendly purchasing policies; the use of natural building materials for facilities.
- ***Responsible ecotourism ethics:*** the ethical aspects are considered to be of the most important responsible ecotourism aspects and include no feeding of animals; remain inside the vehicles; no loud talking at sightings; the wise use of resources such as water and electricity; no littering; obey road signs and rules; and no collecting of specimens.
- ***Food and activities to enhance the responsible ecotourism experience:*** important aspects regarding food and activities to enhance the responsible ecotourism experience are considered to be

facilities for interpretation; a variety of activities in usage zones; and the use of free range and/or fresh organic foods where possible.

- **Policies:** transparency and accessibility by all stakeholders; compliance with legislation; credibility; the involvement of stakeholders; and adherence to policies are considered to be important policy aspects.

From the literature it is clear that important aspects of an ecotourism model are the following; management (environment-friendly practices), development (energy-saving developments, natural building material), education (tourist as well as staff), cultural and heritage promotion (learn about local cultures), tourism must have economic impact (job creation) and must provide a tourism experience, to name but a few.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The main expected contribution of this research is to present an ecotourism model for SANParks to be incorporated within the “Park Management Plans”, as no such management plan for SANParks currently exists. This will be the first time for such research to be conducted in South African National Parks. This model can then be used to manage South African National Parks in accordance with ecotourism principles which will add value to the experience tourists will have while visiting South African National Parks. The research will also assist in developing sustainable ecotourism criteria or guidelines for South African National Parks. This will assist South African National Parks to progress closer to the ideally managed system which is in line with sustainably/responsibly managed aspects.

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