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ECOTOURISM INITIATIVES CONTRIBUTION TO IMPROVED LIVELIHOODS: A CASE OF UMKHANYAKUDE DISTRICT MUNICIPALITY

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ABSTRACT

South Africa adopted tourism policies that advocate the active participation and involvement of local communities in ecotourism initiatives to improve sustainable livelihoods. This study investigated the contribution of ecotourism initiatives to improved livelihood of UMkhanyakude District Municipality. Eight (8) participants each from four local municipalities, making a total of 32 were purposively interviewed. Data from the participants were processed through the ATLAS TI application. The results revealed that ecotourism contributes to improved livelihood and has also put pressure on community assets such as land, wildlife and cultural practices. The study concludes that despite the prevailing challenges, opportunities exist regarding improvement in the implementation of ecotourism projects and the beneficiation of local communities. The study recommends that ecotourism policy practice at local government level be focused on local communities rather than economy and the tourism industry's commercial sector.

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1. Introduction.

In South Africa, the ecotourism sector has grown considerably since the country's attainment of democracy in 1994 (Nkomo and Adanlawo, 2023; Gumede and Nzama, 2021). Over the period of 2021 to 2023, there was an upward trend in the number of tourists arriving in South Africa, with monthly records showing improvements. 3.5 million travellers were counted at South African ports of entry and exit in December 2023, exceeding the numbers for November 2023 (2.6 million) and December 2022 (2.9 million) (Tan and Nguwi, 2023). The White Paper on the Promotion and Development of Tourism in South Africa (1996) states that tourism fosters small business opportunities, cross-cultural awareness

and understanding, develops a distinct informal sector, aids in environmental preservation, forges economic connections with the tourism industry, agriculture, light manufacturing, and curios (art, craft, and souvenirs); links with the services sector (health and beauty, entertainment, banking, and insurance); and offers respectable employment opportunities (Mnini and Ramoroka, 2020).

Ecotourism has impacted the South African economy, according to StatsSA (2018). The tourism industry directly contributed 2.9% of South Africa's GDP in 2016. As a result, the tourism industry contributes more than agriculture does, but less than other sectors like mining and construction. The tourism sector outperformed other important industries in terms of job creation, contributing slightly over 40 000 new jobs to the economy over the five years from 2012 to 2016, despite the various difficulties it has faced recently. According to Statistics South Africa, 2018-2019, this figure is higher than the number of jobs added in sectors like trade and utilities (such as gas, electricity, and water).

A paradigm shift from traditional tourism centred on the sun, sea, and sand mass to more individualized tourism centered on responsible and experiential travel has been noted in the tourism markets of Southern Africa (Chaka and Adanlawo, 2023). Ethical values pertaining to social, cultural, and environmental responsibility in the destinations they visit and the products they utilize draw tourists. Additionally, consumer demand for "authentic experiences" is driving growth in the various ecotourism market segments. The African continent has benefited greatly from this change in many ways, primarily due to its unique cultural and geographic diversity (Oladeji et al., 2022).

Like many other developing countries, South Africa has adopted tourism policies that advocate the active participation and involvement of local communities in ecotourism initiatives to improve sustainable livelihoods. This study aims to investigate how ecotourism initiatives is contributing to local communities improved livelihood. The study focused on UMkhanyakude District Municipality, which comprises the four local municipalities of Hlabisa, Jozini, Mtubatuba, and UMhlabuyalingana.

2. Literature review.

Numerous studies have evaluated the impact of ecotourism on local communities through economic, social, and environmental indicators (Kummitha et al., 2021; Guri et al., 2021). These are considered briefly below.

2.1 Economic impacts.

One of the key principles of community-based ecotourism is that the indigenous host community should receive a fair share of the economic benefits deriving from ecotourism projects. These consist of foreign exchange gains, more job openings, the development of infrastructure, and a more varied local economy (Zondi et al., 2023; Wearing et al., 2020). While initial tourism expenditures on food and lodging have direct positive effects, local communities also benefit indirectly when local businesses, like restaurants and lodges, purchase goods and services.

Table 1 summarises the positive and negative economic impacts of ecotourism on rural communities. These impacts were also used to measure the efficacy of ecotourism in alleviating poverty and unemployment.

Table 1. Economic impacts of ecotourism.

Positive	Negative
1	2
• Increased employment opportunities	• Leakage of revenues and inflation-increased prices for goods, services and land
• Higher household income	• Income disparities and an uneven distribution of revenue
• Infrastructure funding	• Limited access to resources (such as wood and medicinal plants)

Table 1. Continuation.

1	2
• Protected areas funding	• Loss of revenue from resources due to public protected areas
• Revenue-sharing	• Foreign ownership of businesses

Adapted from: Matthews (2002).

2.2 Social impacts.

When local indigenous communities actively participate in all stages of planning and implementation, ecotourism development projects have the potential to be long-lastingly successful. However, in practice, ecotourism-focused development is frequently imposed at the national level, and local communities are left out of the planning stages (Xu et al., 2023; Oladeji et al., 2022). The long-term viability of ecotourism is contingent upon the concurrence and degree of endorsement from the neighboring local community. However, the locals in these protected areas frequently lack a thorough understanding of the possible socioeconomic and environmental effects of ecotourism; thus, making them unsupportive of ecotourism development (Yanes et al., 2019; Adanlawo, 2017). The positive and negative social impacts of ecotourism are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2. The social impacts of ecotour.

Positive	Negative
• Growing interest in customs and traditions	• Disappearance of native wisdom
• Government protection of important cultural resources	• A shift from independence to reliance;
• Preserved cultural identity and community pride	• Modifications to the cultural environment, including housing and work
• Encourage cultural exchange	• Restricted access to natural resources
• Development of local cooperatives	• Adjustments to family economics
• Training and education	• Increased locals' exploitation
• Providing funding for the preservation or upkeep of natural and cultural landmarks	• Wildlife harming crops, livestock, or residents in protected areas
• Reducing poaching and other illegal activities	• Locals' forced participation in customary dances or activities;
• Increased market for [development of] local goods	• Vandalism, prostitution, and criminal activity on the rise
• Utilizing more local labour and expertise	• Commodification" of culture and modifications to family structures and values

Wearing et al. (2020).

2.3 Environmental impacts.

The direct and indirect impacts of ecotourism activities on the environment are listed in Table 3. The type of ecosystem being impacted as well as the nature of the activity determine how severe these effects will be. The obvious effects of ecotourism, like the trampling of vegetation and alterations to the habits and patterns of wildlife, have been the focus of much research.

Table 3. Environmental impacts.

Positive	Negative
• A wildlife reserve or sanctuary could be established	• Disruption of breeding habits
• Habitat restoration could occur	• Wildlife migration patterns may alter
• Less intensive resource use could be an option	• Sewage or petroleum waste may pollute water
• Park protection could be justified	• Facilities and litter may have an aesthetic effect
• There will be less incentive for other more resource intensive uses	• Oil compaction may cause increased runoff and erosion
• Environmental education could occur	• Overexploitation of biological resources, such as overfishing, may occur.
• Stewardship could increase	• Changes in land use in primary
• Private conservation efforts could be encouraged.	• Vegetation destruction

Wearing et al. (2020).

Based on the above impacts, Selepe et al. (2018) contend that mitigating and reducing poverty through ecotourism requires the proper capacitation of locals to ensure that they participate in and benefit from ecotourism initiatives. It can be deduced that effective capacity building is key to addressing poverty in rural communities, particularly UMkhanyakude.

3. Theoretical foundation.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA).

The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 is credited with inspiring the concept of sustainable livelihood and establishing the agenda for the twenty-first century. Agenda 21's aim is to afford all and sundry the opportunity to have a sustainable livelihood. Since then, various attempts have been made to conceptualise and institutionalise the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach. According to Chaka and Adanlawo (2022), a livelihood consists of the activities, and capabilities necessary for sustaining one's way of life. When a livelihood can maintain or improve its assets and capabilities, deal with stress and shocks, and create opportunities for the next generation, then it is sustainable. In the short and long terms, it must provide net benefits to other livelihoods both locally and globally.

The identification and evaluation of the various capitals or assets that are thought to support livelihood at the individual, household, village, or collective level is fundamental to the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (Stoffelen et al., 2020; Hameed and Khalid, 2018). The formation and preservation of these community assets are important for the study as they help to determine whether or not real development is taking place in remote areas such as UMkhanyakude. These assets, which include human, social, physical, natural, and financial capital, are summarised in Table 4 below:

Table 4. Livelihood assets.

Type of capital	Description
a) Natural capital	Stocks of natural resources (soil, water, air, genetic resources, etc.) and environmental services (pollution sinks, the hydrological cycle, etc)
b) Social capital	Social resources include social claims, affiliations, networks, and social relations.
c) Human capital	Knowledge, labour, and skills (including physical capability and good health)
d) Physical capital	Infrastructure includes structures, roads, and tools and technologies used in production.
e) Financial and economic capital	Cash, credit/debt, savings, and other financial assets make up the capital base.

Source: Quandt (2018).

These assets are indispensable for poor people in the community, as they are used to build and strengthen livelihood strategies (Quandt, 2018). The assessment of these assets (Table 4) takes into account both their institutional context and shock vulnerability. After this is realized, interventions can be implemented to improve livelihoods and their sustainability through lowering vulnerability or raising available capital. The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach seeks to avert a situation where ecotourism interventions are unguided, thereby having little positive impact.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach resonates with this study in two ways. Firstly, it promotes a strong focus on the various kinds of community assets that ecotourism operators should work with local communities to promote and preserve. It also offers helpful guidelines for the situational analysis and planning of ecotourism projects. The major contribution of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, which resonates with this study, is the principle that successful development interventions, especially if led by local communities, must begin with a reflective process of deriving evidence sufficiently broad in vision and not limited to what may seem to be a good technical fix (Tambe, 2022).

4. Research methodology.

A qualitative research approach in the form of a semi-structured interview was adopted in this study. Participants were selected from each of the four local municipalities (Hlabisa, Jozini, Mtubatuba, and UMhlabuyalingana). A total of thirty-two (32) participants, eight from each of the four local municipalities, were selected purposefully. The sample was fairly balanced, with all the categories being represented in the study. The participants include program officials, project managers, and owners or operators of ecotourism enterprises. The criteria used to select participants included expertise, understanding of ecotourism program implementation processes, skills, and proximity to ecotourism projects. Collected data were processed through the ATLAS TI application, which entailed the creation of a hermeneutic unit (HU).

5. Results and discussion.

The results presented and discussed are reflective of the perspectives and experiences of programme officials and project managers regarding their support for the implementation of ecotourism projects in Hlabisa, Jozini, Mtubatuba, and UMhlabuyalingana Local Municipalities.

5.1 How ecotourism is used to improve community life.

Across the three local municipalities, the implementation of ecotourism was facilitated through the integrated development planning process and the local economic development strategy. In all three cases, tourism featured strongly in these documents, although practical implementation had been limited.

The results show that well-implemented ecotourism initiatives are more likely to benefit local communities, especially where community members are involved in the planning and monitoring of ecotourism activities. One official in UMhlabuyalingana said:

“There are many programmes in place. We teach community members about water resource management, conservation of wildlife, protection against wild animals, self-employment, wellness, and HIV/AIDS management. We work with wildlife management services. It is starting to bear fruit.”

Corroborating the above finding, Gumede and Nzama (2019) found that ecotourism contributed to poverty alleviation in KwaZulu-Natal Province. Cultural tourism, as a dimension of ecotourism, positively impacts income-generating activities in communities in and around Durban. The above finding on local government's efforts to improve community life through ecotourism initiatives resonates with recent research conducted by Palmer and Chuamuangphan (2021), which found that positive attitudes and strong political leadership at the local government level positively influenced the successful implementation of ecotourism projects and strategies. This was evident in Jozini and UMkhayanyakude, where, despite the hugely underdeveloped ecotourism sector, programme officials and project managers were confident that the perceptions of the community regarding ecotourism would gradually become positive with increased awareness programmes in remote villages.

5.2 Budget allocation for ecotourism, and how is it spent.

This question sought to find out if adequate financial resources had been allocated to improve the implementation of ecotourism projects in Hlabisa, Jozini, Mtubatuba, and UMhlabuyalinga. The results partially confirmed that ecotourism was being funded through the Local Economic Development Strategy (LEDS). In Hlabisa, it emerged that the municipality only facilitated the achievement of the objectives of ecotourism through promotions and awareness campaigns; hence, there was no specific budget set aside for ecotourism projects in Hlabisa. One official from the Hlabisa Local Municipality described the situation as follows:

“Lack of funds does not inhibit the municipality from supporting the development of ecotourism. We work in tandem with wildlife offices and tourism safaris (companies) to develop the whole tourism sector, including ecotourism. The idea behind these concerted efforts is that tourism should benefit all of our people, not just tourists. It is a long process, but we are making progress.”

In St. Lucia (Mtubatuba), the local government had spent approximately R200, 000 to build a fruit and vegetable market for small ecotourism ventures owned by local groups of women. In Jozini, the municipality had spent R120, 000 (a special grant) to support the establishment of a women's empowerment programme linked to ecotourism. One official described ecotourism support services as follows:

“Ecotourism has not yet realised its full potential in our community. We still need to speed up the transformation process so that all the resources flowing from tourism can also benefit local communities. However, there is a challenge emanating from a lack of understanding. People here still think that tourism is meant for visitors. They do not realise that they can earn a living from tourism activities.”

These results indicate that the funding arrangements for ecotourism were severely limited across the four local municipalities. The general understanding in the four local municipalities was that the municipality was not directly involved in the implementation of ecotourism; rather, it allocated financial resources for marketing purposes.

5.3 Activities to promote ecotourism at the community level.

None of the local municipalities had a programme dedicated to the promotion of ecotourism awareness at the community level. Officials conceded that there was no formal communication strategy for ecotourism, and as such, information about opportunities in ecotourism was very scarce, especially in remote areas. Generally, only communities situated along the main tourist routes had access to relevant and current information on the available tourism services. Examples of promotions used included exhibitions and community awareness campaigns (Jozini), IDP meetings and budget speeches (Hlabisa), meetings between local businesses, municipalities and small business owners (Mtubatuba), and community meetings organised by local chiefs in collaboration with tourism operators (UMhlabuyalingana). In all these cases, promotional activities were largely sporadic and unsustainable,

as they were not formally scheduled. This finding contravenes the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), which provides that:

“Local tourism is singled out in Schedule 4 (B) as one of the competency areas of local government and also a concurrent responsibility between national and provincial governments (Schedule 4 (a)).”

With ecotourism as an essential component of socio-economic development. Since unemployment is a major cause of poverty in South Africa, a strategy to ensure labour absorption is one important element of policy direction, particularly at local government level, and ecotourism promises exactly that, putting local communities at the centre of the development process.

5.4 Community empowerment initiatives.

In Hlabisa, the participants indicated that communities are empowered in various ways, such as by allowing people to set up their stalls along tourist routes; thus, they could use that space without fear of eviction. Officials in Mtubatuba expressed a similar view, saying that any community member could sell their produce to tourists freely. One official intimated, thus:

“People here have access to public space where they can ply their trade.”

Participant 2B emphasised the role played by his municipality in community empowerment. He stated that:

“Our move to support ecotourism supports our mandate of providing basic services and therefore bringing development to our communities. Tourism, not just ecotourism, is an important driver of job creation. We are working on our policies and procedures to ensure that more resources are channelled towards the development of tourism.”

However, this view was dismissed by some community members who were involved in informal trading activities, saying that they faced harassment from local law enforcement agencies and farmers, with the municipality doing nothing to protect them, despite repeated attempts to bring this matter to its attention.

In Jozini, one participant reported that:

“Women groups involved in craft work had been assisted with education and training; including awareness-building activities to sensitise women about the benefits of ecotourism to the villages” (Participant 3A).

Participant 3B described community empowerment initiatives as follows:

“The idea is to bring all stakeholders, including traders, safaris, hotels, municipalities, community leaders, public transport operators, and wildlife management services, together so that we pool our resources to increase community beneficiation in ecotourism.”

However, these claims contradicted data from the survey, which showed that perceptions about ecotourism were relatively low in this municipality and that ecotourism opportunities were largely underutilised here.

The results on the limitedness of community empowerment efforts conflict with the reviewed literature, which emphasises that an important factor in the overall growth and sustainability of ecotourism activities is community capacity building for effective participation. Ecotourism is an extremely complex sector, requiring local communities to have an array of competencies. Quite often, these competencies are hard to develop as most rural communities’ grapple with high levels of illiteracy. There is a need to train local residents on customer care and to appreciate the service dynamics in the tourism industry to enable communities to create and sustain demand by maintaining high levels of guest satisfaction.

5.5 How ecotourism is used to reduce unemployment and poverty.

The question aimed to establish how each of the four local municipalities used ecotourism to mitigate unemployment and poverty.

In Hlabisa, the participants reported that the municipality, through the wildlife management agencies, identifies and allocates land for tourism development. This requires collaboration between the municipality, local communities, and tourism operators. This view was corroborated by Participant 3D in Jozini, who said that most tourism projects are labour intensive and thus absorb a large number of local people; for example, game rangers, tour guides, professional chefs, and waiters. Upon leaving employment, some of these people go back to the community and start their own small businesses that

supply goods and services to local and international tourists. This was the general view across the local municipalities regarding the contribution of ecotourism to the reduction of poverty and unemployment at the community level. In UMhlabuyalinga, Participant 4A indicated that ending poverty through tourism involved both short-term and long-term investments in a wide range of tourism-supporting initiatives, including:

- *Regular upgrading of the basic infrastructure*
- *Improving security for tourists*
- *Electrifying tourism sites and destinations*
- *Training employees in wildlife management services*
- *Infrastructure maintenance services*
- *Enforcing bylaws to improve quality standards and security*

The finding that local municipalities supported the implementation of ecotourism as part of their local economic development (LED) strategies resonates with Palmer and Chuamuangphan's (2021) study, which revealed that local governments perceived ecotourism as a development tool and an important source of employment, income, and wealth. The study established that local governments supported ecotourism for the well-being of their communities. There were opportunities for local ecotourism development programmes to be integrated into regional or provincial plans to ensure consistency and uniformity in the delivery of ecotourism services to tourists and local communities. The current study found this thinking pervasive in areas like Mtubatuba and Hlabisa, where some officials viewed ecotourism services not just in terms of local economic development, but as an engine to build resilient and sustainable livelihoods in remote villages.

Stone et al. (2020) argue that even though the local government may want to support ecotourism earnestly, this is often hampered by an array of challenges, including the inability to integrate the management of tourism with other functions and activities of the local government. Proper ecotourism planning requires strategic orientation, which most local governments do not have due to a lack of high-level skills. The promotion of ecotourism as a tool for economic development and expansion presents local government with another challenge; as a result, the policies being pursued are primarily in line with the interests of the economy and the tourism industry's commercial sector, rather than local communities where ecotourism resources are concentrated.

6. Conclusion.

Data from the four local municipalities confirmed that ecotourism initiatives were benefiting local communities. The evidence from Sodwana Bay (UMhlabuyalinga) proved that ecotourism enabled community members to support their families, providing them with shelter, food, and education. Similar results were reported in St. Lucia (Mtubatuba), where some community members operated their own (traditional) boats to ferry tourists along the wetlands, with earnings averaging R260 per trip, depending on the distance being travelled. While increased commercialisation of ecotourism activities in St. Lucia (Mtubatuba) and Sodwana Bay (UMhlabuyalingana) has created job opportunities for some, it has also put pressure on community assets such as land, wildlife, and cultural practices. Restricting finishing, hunting, and bee harvesting activities made life very difficult for poor families whose lives depended entirely on these natural resources prior to the introduction of ecotourism projects in their areas. In this regard, excessive use of town-down implementation approaches has rendered ecotourism unsustainable, leaving local communities desolate and disempowered.

The study discovered challenges in the execution of ecotourism projects. The challenges included limited access to the relevant information, a lack of transport; and tough local government regulations, which discouraged informal ecotourism trading activities in some areas. However, to some extent, community members benefited from these activities. Examples of benefits or advantages accruing to local people included employment opportunities in hotel and lodge services; small business opportunities in local sourcing; high value returns as goods were bought in foreign currency at market price; and a reduction in illiteracy owing to skills transfer to local communities through employment and small business development. Overall, the study concludes that despite the prevailing challenges, opportunities exist regarding improvement in the implementation of ecotourism projects and the beneficiation of local communities. The question of what could be done to improve the contribution of ecotourism to livelihood in the UKDM highlighted salient issues that impact directly on ecotourism

policy practice at the local government level, including local municipalities' weakening capacity to deal with ecotourism and the dissipated nature of ecotourism efforts across the participating local municipalities. Further research could look into how to counter the challenges limiting the contribution of ecotourism to improved livelihoods.

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