

Tourism, protected areas and development in South Africa: views of visitors to Mkambati Nature Reserve

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Tourism to areas of natural beauty has recently been seen as one of the fastest growing interests in many countries around the world. This brand of tourism also encompasses celebrating and sharing with tourists the uniqueness and diversity of different cultures in areas visited. Through a case study of current tourism trends in Mkambati Nature Reserve on the Wild Coast, where an ambitious ecotourism project under the auspices of the Spatial Development Initiative (SDI) is planned, this paper attempts to emphasize the role played by local visitors in making ecotourism a success or failure. The study found that local tourists are currently the majority of visitors to Mkambati Nature Reserve. It also shows that while unimpressed with infrastructure and other services, local tourists are prepared to spend money to enjoy the quietness that is offered by protected environments. However, local tourists to Mkambati are not as enthusiastic about visiting and sharing experiences in adjacent rural areas. If based on current trends, then planning of ecotourism ventures should, at least initially, be based on local visitors' patterns.

Key words: conservation, development, recreation, visitor preferences.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism to areas of natural beauty has recently been seen as one of the fastest growing tourism activities in many countries around the world. Known by several names including 'ecotourism', 'green tourism', 'agri-tourism' and so forth, this form of tourism is expected to continue increasing well into the twenty first century (Yu, Hendrickson & Castillo 1997; Goodwin, Kent, Parker & Walpole 1998). This brand of tourism also encompasses celebrating and sharing with tourists the uniqueness and diversity of different cultures in areas visited (Nicolson, Norton & Myles 1996). Since its promotion by international development non-government organizations during the 1960s and 1970s, ecotourism has now been adopted as one of several key economic growth strategies by many less-industrialized countries (Roe, Leader-Williams & Dalal-Clayton 1997). Ecotourism in these relatively poorer countries in particular has been seen as a way to attract tourists from wealthier countries, in a way boosting foreign exchange earnings (Goodwin *et al.* 1998).

Following these international trends, the South African government and various sectors including non-government organizations and the private sector have warmly embraced the notion of

tourism as a potential solution to the country's economic woes. While tourism has been part of the South African economy over many decades, it is only recently that it has been aggressively promoted as one of the key economic growth strategies. The adoption in 1996 of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy by government gave rise to a number of Spatial Development Initiatives (SDIs) around the country, where the goal is to develop areas with both unrealized economic potential and economic need. Several of these SDIs – especially those located in areas of favourable natural beauty – are focussing on ecotourism. The Wild Coast SDI in the former Transkei area of the Eastern Cape Province, is one such development. The protected environment of the Wild Coast, which includes unique indigenous forests that have been under protection for more than 100 years (Cooper 1991) and at least six nature reserves, is the main selling point for ecotourism in this area.

There are three main accepted notions about ecotourism taking place in rural areas of less industrialized countries. The first one is that there is a strong relationship between ecotourism and biodiversity protection. This means that ecotourism is more likely to succeed in areas where

biodiversity is protected either through formal or informal means, and that ecotourism encourages biodiversity protection (Ceballos-Lascurain 1996). The first assertion of this link may well be true in most cases, but the second one is not as straightforward. Measuring the environmental, cultural and economic impact has proven extremely difficult (Roe *et al.* 1997). The second notion is that ecotourism should be, or is, for the main benefit of the often poor rural neighbours at a particular locality. Here two assumptions are made: first, that tourists have a desire to assist local people through sharing their wealth during their visits, and second, that rural people have similar interests. Third, there is a notion that ecotourism and foreign tourist from rich countries are intertwined. Foreign visitors – more than those from within the country – are seen as a prerequisite for successful ecotourism. Hence all the expectations about ecotourism boosting foreign exchange reserves.

In attempting to contribute to a wide-ranging debate about why ecotourism ventures fail or succeed, I wish to use the example of current tourism trends in Mkambati Nature Reserve on the Wild Coast. While I agree that 'foreign tourists' bring more foreign exchange, history shows that local (i.e. South African) tourists have been the most consistent and currently make up the majority of visitors to nature reserves and national parks in South Africa (Wells 1996). I, therefore, propose that their views should equally count in planning of ecotourism ventures.

This paper, therefore, presents profiles and views on conservation and economic development held by current local tourists to Mkambati Nature Reserve. While these lessons could apply in several related situations, no attempt is made to generalize the findings.

STUDY AREA

The Mkambati Nature Reserve is situated in north-eastern Pondoland (31°13' to 31°20'S, 29°55' to 30°4'E), on the Wild Coast of the Eastern Cape Province. The 7000-hectare state-owned reserve is situated between two rivers, the Mtentu and the Msikaba, which respectively form its northern and southern borders. To the east of the reserve are several communal areas whose inhabitants are Xhosa-speaking people (ama-Mpondo), who generate their livelihoods through a mixture of arable and livestock farming, the collection of a range of natural resources, and a range of off-farm sources, including remittances and

pensions (Kepe 1997). This high-rainfall area is rated highly by botanists for its floristic diversity, because it contains a rich endemic/near-endemic element of at least 118 plant species, making it one of the most important areas in southern Africa in terms of biodiversity.

METHODS

This study was conducted between May and October 1999 using a questionnaire as the main tool. The respondents comprised people who signed the visitor's register in Mkambati Nature Reserve between January 1996 and April 1999. A total of 117 questionnaires were sent out by post, including self-addressed and stamped envelopes for returning them. Of these, a total of 47 (40%) were completed and returned, and 16 were returned as undelivered post. The questionnaire contained 30 questions which covered visitors' profiles, views on facilities in the reserve, main attractions to the area, and perceptions about tourism and economic development (the SDI in particular). The respondents were given options from which they could select their responses, but space was provided for extra comments. The data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to generate frequency tables and graphs. Another very important aspect of the survey was the written comments made by the respondents on the questionnaire. These helped to understand why some respondents answered certain questions the way they had.

RESULTS

Visitor profiles

Most respondents (75%) came from KwaZulu-Natal Province, followed by those from Gauteng (11%) (Fig. 1). The majority (72%) earned more than R60 000 per annum. As shown in Table 1, almost 50% of the respondents had visited the reserve between three and nine times since their first visit. Nineteen percent of the respondents had made ten or more visits over the years. School holidays, including the Christmas/New year period and Easter weekend, were cited as the most popular times to visit, with over 40% of the respondents preferring these times. The importance of school holidays as the most preferred time of visit is further illustrated by the fact that 53% of the respondents came with their families, presumably including schoolchildren.

Only a very small percentage of visitors (4%)

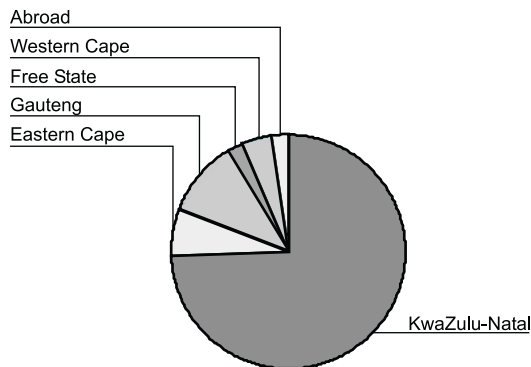


Fig. 1. Place of origin of visitors to Mkambati Nature Reserve.

spent only one night per visit. Almost 45% often spent more than five nights per visit. It also appears that the pool of visitors to Mkambati Nature Reserve tends to involve the same group of people who are related either as friends or as family. Two observations led to this conclusion. The first one is that judging from the register of visitors, there are people who can be classed as 'Mkambati faithfuls' because they come regularly each year, mostly around the same times (e.g. school holidays), with fishing as the main recreational activity for at least 47% of the respondents. Secondly, the survey data show that over 90% of visitors to Mkambati came with, or because of, a recommendation from a friend or family member. Advertising played a very limited role in influencing people's decision to visit the nature reserve.

Factors that encourage and discourage visitors

Respondents were asked to indicate what they most liked about Mkambati Nature Reserve that made them choose it as a place to visit instead of other protected areas in South Africa. The results are revealing, especially in the context of the SDI plans to encourage the addition and improvement of facilities so as to encourage more tourists to visit

Table 1. Number of visits to Mkambati since the first one.

Number of visits	% Frequency
1	21
2	11
3–5	28
5–9	21
More than 10	19

the Wild Coast.

As shown in Table 2, respondents chose Mkambati because they consider it as less crowded (28%), has unspoilt environments (32%) and is less commercial (9%) compared to other areas they could have visited for recreation. On the other hand, visitors indicated that they would consider choosing another place to visit because of poor facilities in cottages (36%) and poor infrastructure such as roads, electricity and so forth (40%) (Table 3). In spite of being relatively unhappy about the accommodation and other infrastructure in Mkambati, most respondents indicated that their overall experience was either excellent or good (Table 4). On the other hand, while most respondents were reasonably satisfied with the services they received from the security personnel at the entrance to the reserve, and receptionists at the office, a large percentage of them (over 40%) rated both as either mediocre or downright disappointing.

Views about tourism and development

Respondents were asked whether they had heard of the SDI in relation to Mkambati and an overwhelming majority (72%) responded in the negative. The few who have heard about it cited the reserve manager, television, business magazines as their sources of information. This failure to properly inform the current client base could later prove costly for the SDI's ecotourism venture. About half (51%) of the respondents did not favour private companies providing services in Mkambati Nature Reserve. They indicated that private companies, in their quest to maximize profit, could create more buildings and attract more people, thus destroying the environment they had come to enjoy. On the other hand, 30% did not think that the idea of private companies was a bad one and 13%

Table 2. What visitors like about Mkambati Nature Reserve.

Attraction	% Frequency
Less commercial	9
Nature reserve	11
Not overcrowded	28
Good fishing	2
Unspoilt environment	32
Vegetation	6
Game	2
Security	6
Nature walks	4

Table 3. What visitors dislike about Mkambati Nature Reserve.

Dislikes	% Frequency
Poor cottage facilities	36
Poor infrastructure	40
Poor level of cleaning staff	15
Difficulty in booking	2
Poaching and other illegal activities	6

were indifferent. Even though there were respondents who were against private companies in the reserve, there was general recognition of the fact that business development in Mkambati (by private companies) is likely to improve services and facilities, things that will bring more visitors to the area. Therefore, respondents were almost evenly divided between those who plan to continue visiting even if there are more buildings (47%), more visitors (45%) and those who say they would stop coming if there are more buildings (47%) and visitors (49%). A slightly higher percentage (64%) of respondents did, however, indicate that they would be willing to pay more for improved services.

In order to test the assumption that people who visit areas of natural beauty are also interested in learning more about the histories and culture of communities who live adjacent those areas, respondents were asked for their views concerning this issue. The first question in this regard was how much knowledge of history about the area on which the reserve is situated do they know. In general, the respondents indicated very little knowledge of any history, with only 9% claiming to know a lot. Others indicated that they know some detail (40%), very little (36%) and at least 13% said it did not concern them. Most visitors had also never visited the neighbouring villages (60%), nor purchased anything from them (53%). When

asked if they would ever consider visiting neighbouring villages as part of their trips to Mkambati Nature Reserve, the respondents tended to be positive, with only 25% indicating that they would not consider doing so. Their comments indicated that they are concerned about crime and that the environment inside the reserve, not rural people, is the only reason they visit the area.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current visitor trends in Mkambati, where almost all the tourists are from within the country, suggest a need to conduct more studies that solicit views of local tourists. While foreign tourists bring many desirable elements to the country's tourist market, local visitors show that small areas such as Mkambati can count on their business (Table 1). This suggests that their views need to be taken more seriously in the planning of such areas.

In this study, local tourists to Mkambati Nature Reserve have shown that highly commercialized environments would be a discouraging factor for continued visits, as this could have a negative impact on the environment they have come to enjoy. Yet they want better service, even if it comes at a price. While they are relatively unimpressed with accommodation and infrastructure, the protected natural environment serves as a major attraction.

There may as well be a difference between local and overseas visitors concerning the desire to experience rural life in settlements adjacent to the area they primarily visited. It appears that local tourists who visit areas of natural beauty want to do just that. They are not necessarily attracted to neighbouring rural settlements, let alone purchase goods and services there. Safety is one of the concerns. Therefore, while ecotourism can make a contribution to rural development, it should not be seen as a panacea for rural poverty. I suggest that ecotourism ventures – if they are to be introduced

Table 4. Rating of experiences, services and facilities in and around Mkambati Nature Reserve by percentage.

Issue	Excellent	Good	Mediocre	Disappointing
Total experience	32	40	19	9
Accommodation	4	26	36	34
Gate security	6	51	23	19
Reception	6	47	36	11
Roads to the reserve	2	6	30	61
Roads inside the reserve	2	32	36	30

in an area – should first focus on their strengths (e.g. natural beauty of an area) and not seek to stretch the politeness of tourists (local or overseas). Secondly, whenever local communities are involved in the venture, it should be made sure that their involvement is not at the expense of their other complex and diverse livelihood sources, unless there are clear, agreed and tested benefits to them.

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