

Sustainable Tourism Practices in the Post-Covid Era: Lessons from Southern Africa

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Abstract: For several decades, the southern African region, with its diverse natural and cultural attractions, has been an uninterrupted prime destination for sustainable tourism. However, a devastating Covid-19 pandemic presented severe challenges to the global tourism industry, crippling several businesses. The effect was more pronounced especially in the global south, including southern Africa which is confronted by a multitude of challenges. Meanwhile, this crisis presented opportunities for the adoption of sustainable tourism practices in the post-Covid era. This paper provides insights into sustainable tourism practices in the post-Covid era, drawing lessons on how the southern African region survived the crisis. The paper discusses the concept of sustainable tourism and its importance in the post-Covid era. Furthermore, it explores the impact of the pandemic on the tourism industry in southern Africa and the need for sustainable tourism practices. Sustainable tourism practices that have been adopted in the region, such as community-based tourism, eco-tourism, and responsible tourism are discussed. This paper highlights the lessons that can be learned from sustainable tourism practices in southern Africa in the post-Covid era. These lessons can be applied globally to promote sustainable tourism and ensure the resilience of the tourism industry in the face of future crises.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Post-Covid-19, Pandemic Recovery Strategies, Eco-Tourism, Community-Based Tourism, Tourism Development.

1. Introduction and Background

For several decades, the southern African region, with its diverse natural and cultural attractions, has been an uninterrupted prime destination for sustainable tourism (Wondirad et al, 2020). However, a devastating Covid-19 pandemic presented severe challenges to the global tourism industry, crippling several businesses (Dube, 2021; Dube et al, 2023; Muresherwa et al, 2022). The effect of this pandemic was more pronounced especially in the global south (Lone & Ahmad, 2020), including southern Africa which is confronted by a multitude of challenges (Stone et al, 2022). These challenges include high unemployment, governance and corruption related issues, HIV/AIDS and healthcare challenges, poverty and inequality, regional conflicts, political instability among others (Musavengane et al, 2022; Saarinen, 2020; Stiegler & Bouchard, 2020). Meanwhile, the emergence of the devastating Covid crisis presented opportunities such as the adoption of sustainable tourism practices which could be applicable in the post-pandemic era.

Tourism remains an important industry in southern Africa, and it plays a vital role in the economies of the region. The tourism industry in southern Africa has been growing steadily in recent years, and it is expected to continue to grow in the future. Several factors have contributed to the growth of tourism in this region, and this has been attributed to the increasing popularity of Africa as a tourist destination, improvement of infrastructure, introduction of new visa regimes making it easier for tourists to visit the region, and the growing awareness of the natural beauty and cultural diversity of this region (Musavengane et al, 2022; Snyman, 2021; Toerien, 2020). However, more is still expected for the region to fully benefit from the vast opportunities available.

The growth of tourism in southern Africa has had a number of positive impacts on the region. It has created jobs, generated income, and helped to develop local communities (Adeniyi et al, 2023; Toerien, 2020). However, it is important to note that tourism can also have negative triple bottom line impacts, such as environmental damage, undesirable economic consequences, and socio-cultural erosion (Hambira et al, 2022). It is thus important to ensure that tourism in southern Africa is developed in a sustainable way that benefits both the local communities and the environment.

The current paper provides insights into sustainable tourism practices in the post-Covid era, drawing lessons on how the southern African region survived the crisis. The chapter begins by discussing the concept of sustainable tourism and its importance in the post-Covid era. Furthermore, it discusses the impact of the pandemic on the tourism industry in southern Africa, emphasizing the need for sustainable tourism practices. The sustainable tourism practices that have been adopted in the region, such as community-based tourism, eco-tourism, and responsible tourism are described in the current study. The challenges faced in implementing sustainable tourism practices in southern Africa are also discussed with some suggestions for possible solutions. The paper underscores the importance of promoting sustainable tourism practices by highlighting the role of multi-stakeholders (government, the private sector, and local communities) collaboration especially in managing crisis. This paper emphasizes the lessons that can be learned from sustainable tourism practices in southern Africa in the post-Covid era. These lessons can be applied globally to promote sustainable tourism and ensure the resilience of the tourism industry in the face of future crises.

The current study addresses a critical gap in the literature by investigating the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on southern Africa's tourism industry and elucidating the sustainable practices adopted for recovery. The findings contribute valuable insights that can inform academia, policymakers, and industry stakeholders globally, supporting the development of resilient and sustainable tourism practices in the post-Covid era and beyond.

Several justifications underscore the importance of this research study. Global Significance of Tourism Industry. Firstly, it is vital to note that tourism is an important industry for the global economy and contributes substantially to GDP, employment, and cultural exchange. Since the pandemic decimated the industry's performance, severely impacting it in many fronts, it becomes imperative to investigate and understand how regions, particularly those in the global south like southern Africa, cope with and recover from such crises. Secondly, noting that the southern Africa is the microcosm for the challenges faced by the region, an understanding of the specific challenges posed by the pandemic and how sustainable tourism practices have been implemented to navigate these challenges enables better comprehension of them. Thirdly, the study sheds light into resilience and recovery revealing valuable lessons from southern Africa's experience particularly in adopting sustainable tourism practices during the post-Covid era. These lessons are not only applicable locally but also offer a blueprint for global application, contributing to the resilience and recovery of the tourism industry on a broader scale.

2. A Methodological Note

This conceptual paper was created through a review and analysis of relevant scholarly literature. The sources included both published and unpublished texts that was in alignment with the phenomenon being investigated. The key concepts drawn from an analysis of literature were utilised to provide insights on sustainable tourism practices taking lessons from southern Africa. The overview of tourism in the southern African region was firstly presented. This was followed by a discussion on how the region commits to sustainable tourism. Moreso, a brief discussion of the challenges and solutions that relates to sustainable tourism practices was presented in the current paper. The paper further highlights the Covid-19 pandemic and details the role of sustainable tourism practices in reviving the tourism industry. The Covid-19 survival strategies implemented by the southern African region are also reviewed. The above themes are presented provide insights into how other regions in the world can also adopt sustainable tourism practices.

3. Overview and Background of Tourism in Southern Africa

The southern African region consists of a collection of twelve countries extending from Tanzania to South Africa (Sanusi et al, 2022). This region is sandwiched between the Atlantic and Indian oceans, composed of a massive landmass spanning 6.8 million square kilometres (Australian Parliament House, n.d). With a total population exceeding 151 million people (Sanusi et al, 2022), the southern African region presents a large market capable to participate in global economic activities.

The history of this region reflects a fascinating journey of evolving trends challenges and accomplishments. The beginning of the southern African region is predominantly marked by two eras, the colonial and post-colonial eras. In the colonial era, Europeans were the major tourist groups, mainly attracted to the region by the abundant natural resources and wildlife. This however, mostly led to exploitation and unsustainable practices (Chiutsi & Mudzengi, 2012). The post-colonial era, which was the time after gaining independence, many countries' foci was on the development of responsible tourism models centred around benefiting local communities and protecting the environment (Rasdi et al, 2019). With proper management of tourism, mainly

due to enactment of focused policies, the late 20th century saw a surge in tourism. Improved tourism infrastructure, political stability in most countries and the unique offerings including cultural experiences and safaris also contributed to tourism growth in the region. Despite this growth, political instability (e.g., violence, terrorism etc) in some countries and environmental concerns (climate change) continue to threaten this growth.

The southern African region is renowned for its diverse landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and abundant wildlife. This makes this region a popular destination for tourists especially those seeking a wide range of experiences. The travel and tourism industry in southern Africa play a significant role in the economies of the countries in the region. Most tourism activities in this region are nature-based and supported by the vast natural attractions in the different countries (Spenceley, 2008). Several renowned national parks and game reserves are found in southern Africa, providing opportunities to view the 'Big Five' (buffalo, elephant, leopard, lion, and rhinoceros) and other unique animal species (Mushawemhuka et al, 2021). A spectacular waterfall in the world, Victoria Falls between Zimbabwe and Zambia draws thousands of visitors each year. In addition to the natural attractions, the region is endowed with cultural and historical heritage sites. It is also home to several diverse ethnic groups which allow visitors to explore cultural heritage through traditional ceremonies, dance, music, and local crafts. Several UNESCO heritage sites are found in different countries in this region, also provide opportunities for cultural tourism. Those seeking sun, sea, and relaxation, are catered for at the various beaches and coastal areas in South Africa, Mozambique, and Namibia.

Tourism in southern Africa has the potential to contribute significantly to economic development, job creation, and conservation efforts. The region's commitment to sustainable tourism practices is increasingly important to balance the economic benefits with environmental and cultural preservation. Having experienced the severity of Covid-19 from early 2020 to mid-2022, the southern African region was presented with invaluable lessons which would see it prepared for future uncertain times.

4. Southern Africa's Commitment to Sustainable Tourism

Southern Africa recognizes the immense value of its natural beauty and vibrant cultures, but also the importance of preserving them for future generations. Among the vast ways the region can highlight its commitment to sustainable tourism include action towards conservation efforts, ecotourism initiatives, policy and regulation enactment and ensuring community beneficiation. These practices are further discussed below:

4.1 Conservation Efforts

The region boasts numerous national parks, game reserves, and marine protected areas, safeguarding biodiversity and iconic landscapes. The Kruger National Park in South Africa, Chobe National Park in Botswana, Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe, Namib-Naukluft National Park in Namibia, and Nyika National Park in Malawi are just five examples. A strong emphasis on wildlife conservation has been noticed in the region which help protect wildlife. Most southern African countries are seen collaborating on initiatives to protect endangered species, combat poaching, and preserve natural habitats for example Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, and South Africa's anti-poaching units share resources and expertise to assist in protecting wildlife (Africa Community Conservation Foundation, n.d.; Duffy, 1999; Mkono et al, 2023).

4.2 Ecotourism Initiatives

Tourism operators and accommodations in the region are seen increasingly adopting responsible and sustainable practices. This includes eco-friendly construction, waste reduction, energy efficiency, and water conservation measures to minimize the environmental impact of tourism. Most of these efforts put local communities at the centre, particularly through their involvement and ensuring that they experience quality living, free from negative aspects. Certifications such as Green Tourism and Fair Trade in South Africa have been established to guide responsible choices. These certifications also help consumers identify businesses that prioritize social, economic, and environmental responsibility.

4.3 Policy and Regulations

Governments in the region continue to work on the development and implementation of policies and regulations that support sustainable tourism. This includes guidelines for land use planning, environmental impact assessments, and measures to control visitor numbers in sensitive areas. Moreso, regional collaboration

through organisations such as the southern African Development Community (SADC) play a critical role in promoting regional cooperation and knowledge sharing on sustainable tourism.

4.4 Community Beneficiation

In trying to ensure that communities see value in tourism and eventually support tourism development initiatives, it is crucial to maximise local benefits. This could be better achieved through enhancing and empowering community members by engaging them in key tourism development decisions. Local participation could be advanced through involvement in tourism planning and management, ensuring that benefits such as jobs are created, and the culture is preserved (Dube & Muresherwa, 2019). Moreso, partnerships could be fostered between local community members and various stakeholders which could lead to successful wildlife conservation efforts since a sense of ownership and responsibility is fostered in this way (Thetsane, 2019). Many southern African countries such as Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana, and South Africa have adopted community-based tourism models that involve local communities in decision-making processes, benefit-sharing, and the development of tourism initiatives. This helps ensure that communities benefit economically and socially from tourism activities.

The journey towards sustainable tourism in southern Africa is ongoing, but these efforts highlight the region's commitment to balancing economic growth with environmental and social responsibility. By embracing sustainable practices, southern Africa can ensure its precious natural heritage and vibrant cultures are enjoyed by generations to come. It is however important to note that each country in southern African region has its own unique initiatives and challenges related to sustainable tourism.

5. Sustainable Tourism Practices: Challenges and Solutions

Implementing sustainable tourism practices in southern Africa faces challenges such as limited financial resources for conservation, inadequate infrastructure, and economic pressures which prioritizes the short-term gains (Eyisi et al, 2021; Murima & Shereni, 2023; Musavengane et al, 2022). Additionally, there is an inherent lack of awareness among tourists and local communities about the importance of sustainable tourism practices (Gohori & van der Merwe, 2021; Saarinen et al, 2020). Policy and regulatory gaps (Arica, 2023) also weigh in contributing to inconsistencies especially in the promotion of responsible tourism, thus limiting its widespread adoption. Overcoming these challenges requires fostering public-private partnerships for funding and implementation (Murima & Shereni, 2023), providing incentives for sustainable initiatives (Dladla, 2022), launching comprehensive education campaigns (Musavengane et al, 2022), and addressing policy reforms to strengthen regulations (Murima & Shereni, 2023). Successfully navigating these obstacles will enable southern Africa to ensure the long-term viability of its tourism industry while promoting environmental conservation and community well-being.

6. The Impact of Covid-19 on Global and Regional Tourism

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on global and southern African tourism. Travel restrictions, lockdowns, and safety concerns led to a severe decline in international and domestic travel. Globally, the tourism industry faced unprecedented challenges, with disruptions to air travel, closures of attractions, and economic setbacks for businesses reliant on tourism (Dube, 2021; Dube et al, 2023; Muresherwa et al, 2022; Stiegler & Bouchard, 2020).

In southern Africa, renowned for its wildlife, natural wonders, and cultural experiences, the Covid-19 pandemic dealt a significant blow to the tourism-dependent economies. National parks and game reserves, vital for the region's safari tourism, experienced a sharp decline in visitors. The loss of income affected local communities, conservation efforts, and tourism businesses. The pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of southern Africa's tourism sector to external shocks, emphasizing the need for diversification and sustainable practices.

As recovery efforts and vaccination campaigns progressed, the region implemented measures to revive tourism, including health protocols, marketing campaigns, and initiatives to rebuild traveller confidence. The experience underscored the importance of resilience and adaptability in the face of global crises for both the global and southern African tourism sectors.

7. The Role of Sustainable Practices in Reviving the Industry

Sustainable practices play a crucial role in reviving the tourism industry by addressing environmental, socio-economic challenges. In the aftermath of events like the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a growing recognition that a resilient and responsible approach is essential for the industry's recovery. The pandemic underscored resilience and adaptability as crucial in surviving uncertain occurrences (Bryce et al, 2022; Monternel et al, 2023). Sustainable practices such as adaptability thus enhance the tourism industry's resilience by promoting diversified revenue streams and reducing dependence on vulnerable sectors (Bassett et al, 2022). This adaptability is vital in the face of global uncertainties, such as health crises or environmental changes. In addition, community engagement and empowerment emanated as critical in the face of disasters. Considering this, sustainable tourism would involve local communities in decision-making processes, ensuring that they share in the benefits of tourism. This not only supports economic development but also fosters a sense of ownership and pride among community members (Dube & Muresherwa, 2019).

It is also important to note that tourism usually relies on natural attractions, making environmental conservation integral to the industry's sustainability. Therefore, sustainable practices could focus more on minimizing the environmental impact of tourism activities, preserving ecosystems, and combating climate change impact (Murphy & Price, 2012; Pan et al, 2018). Another important aspect in ensuring sustainable tourism growth is enhanced cultural preservation, which entails respecting and preserving local cultures, sustainable tourism contributes to the authenticity and uniqueness of destinations (Kim et al, 2018). This, result in attracting responsible visitors interested in authentic experiences, promoting cultural understanding and appreciation (Buonincontri et al, 2017).

Sustainable practices have been seen as instrumental in contributing to the long-term viability of the tourism industry. By balancing economic gains with environmental and social responsibility, destinations can attract a more conscientious and loyal customer base, ensuring continued success over time. Research has shown that incorporating sustainable practices in the tourism industry not only mitigates negative impacts but also positions destinations for long-term success by fostering resilience, community engagement, and environmental stewardship (Brown et al, 2017; Tompkins & Adger, 2003). This approach aligns with evolving consumer preferences for responsible travel, contributing to a more sustainable and ethical global tourism landscape.

8. How the Southern African Region Survived the Covid-19 Crisis

The southern African region navigated the challenges of the Covid-19 crisis through a combination of collaborative and adaptive measures. In responding to the devastating pandemic, several governments in the region implemented immediate and focused public health measures, that included closure of ports of entry, travel restrictions and national lockdowns, extensive testing, and vaccination campaigns (Bryce et al, 2022; Dube, 2021; Haider et al, 2020). These measures were aimed to contain the spread of the virus, protect public health, and curtail the impact of the virus on the economy (Elbany & Elhenawy, 2021).

The impact of the pandemic on the region was almost similar, and mainly affecting the tourism economies, with a sharp decline in travel (domestic and international). To survive this destructive crisis, the region focused on diversifying its economic base, exploring alternative revenue streams, and promoting domestic tourism (Karunarathne et al, 2021; Spenceley et al, 2021). Governments and tourism stakeholders in the region also engaged in marketing campaigns intended to boost traveller confidence, and emphasised safety protocols and the region's unique attractions (Spenceley et al, 2021). In addition, community engagement played a pivotal role in the survival strategy, with a focus on supporting local businesses and involving communities in decision-making processes (Dube, 2021). Sustainable tourism practices gained prominence (Bhatia et al, 2022; Polukhina et al, 2021), and these mainly aligned with the global trend of responsible travel. Efforts were also made to preserve biodiversity, protect cultural heritage, and ensure that tourism benefits reached local community members (Dube et al, 2023).

During the Covid-19 era, international collaboration and regional partnerships was underscored, particularly the sharing of information, coordination of responses, to address the common challenges (Kimura et al, 2020). As vaccination efforts gained momentum, several countries in the region began a gradual reopening of the economy whereby international travel was permitted, however with the implementation of health and safety protocols (e.g., face masking, sanitising, social distancing, temperature checks, negative PCR tests certification etc) aimed to instil visitor confidence (Arefi & Poursadeqiyani, 2020; Blišťanová et al, 2021; Dube et al, 2023). In all these efforts, the region demonstrated resilience by taking a multifaceted approach combining public health

measures, economic diversification, community involvement, and a commitment to sustainable practices, which helped to navigate the complex terrain of the Covid-19 crisis.

9. Conclusion

Drawing lessons from southern Africa's experience, the paper extrapolates insights that have global applicability in promoting sustainable tourism. By examining the successes and challenges faced by the region, the paper delineates a roadmap for the global tourism industry to navigate the complexities of the post-Covid era. It emphasizes the need for collaborative efforts between governments, businesses, and local communities to ensure the longevity of sustainable tourism initiatives.

Addressing the identified issues requires a multi-pronged approach that involve multi-stakeholder groups including governments, civil society organizations, the private sector, and international partners. Through concerted efforts, southern Africa can overcome these hurdles and build a brighter future for its people (Saunders et al, 2012). It is important to note that despite these challenges, southern Africa holds immense potential for growth and development. Its rich natural resources, diverse cultures, and resilient people can be the driving force for positive change. By investing in education, healthcare, infrastructure, and good governance, southern Africa can unlock its potential and create a more prosperous and equitable future for all.

In conclusion, this conceptual paper underscores the transformative potential of sustainable tourism in the aftermath of a crisis. Southern Africa's journey through the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic serves as a testament to the resilience and adaptability inherent in sustainable tourism practices. As the world charts a course towards recovery, the lessons gleaned from this region offer invaluable insights for shaping a more sustainable and resilient global tourism industry.

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