

Potentials of Rural Tourism Around Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park, South Africa: Local Community Perspective

Nelisile Zanele Mgabhi, Nomfundo Sinethemba Mzimela and Ikechukwu Onyekwere Ezeuduji

Department of Recreation and Tourism, University of Zululand, South Africa

MgabhiN@unizulu.ac.za

mzimela48@gmail.com,

ezeuduji@unizulu.ac.za

Abstract: Developing nations continue to place a high priority on rural development, especially those like South Africa (SA) that have large rural populations and little or no economic activity. In addition to urban tourism, rural tourism is another type of tourism that is gaining popularity. This study conducted in the context of SA, KwaZulu-Natal, aimed at assessing the potentials of rural tourism in the communities surrounding Hluhluwe iMfolozi Park (HiP). A qualitative research method based on the explorative and interpretative paradigms was used. A purposive technique was used in a form of non-probability sampling. Focus group discussions were held with the participants. Three (3) focus group discussions were conducted with a total of twenty-four (24) participants, eight (8) participants in each group. Content analysis was performed to analyse data. Results revealed that the study area lacked access to basic infrastructure like decent road networks as well as access to clean water and sanitary facilities. The research further revealed that residents in the study area lacked fundamental understanding of what it takes to operate effective tourism enterprises. The study recommends that rural offerings be positioned and offered as parts of tourist products and services within this rural space, after the study area weaknesses have been addressed. The study further suggests that leadership should be committed to advancing the growth of rural tourism through capacity building, including training citizens and assisting in the creation of business strategies and the acquisition of funding for the launch of new ventures.

Keywords: Rural Tourism, Rural Tourism Resources, Rural Tourism Capabilities, Rural Tourism Activities, South Africa.

1. Introduction

According to earlier research (Corina, 2018; Ghasemi & Hamzah, 2014; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020), tourism is both the largest industry in the world and the market segment with the fastest growth rate. According to several studies (Corina, 2018; Osman & Sentosa, 2013; Strydom et al., 2018), it is also regarded as one of the top and fastest developing sectors in the globe, considerably boosting the growth of the national economy as well as the prosperity of the surrounding areas. Rural tourism is a promising industry for the development of both urban and rural areas, according to contemporary researchers (such as Gao & Wu, 2017; Wijijayanti et al., 2020). According to Corina (2018), rural tourism is one of the types of tourism that is gaining popularity as an alternative to urban tourism. Additionally, the author (Corina, 2018) argues the point that rural tourism is mostly a private sector activity, driven by income production, employment creation, and frequently the diversification of agricultural holdings, which is built on landscape and conservation, as well as heritage infrastructure. In addition to protecting and enhancing the destination's socio-cultural, historical, natural, and built resources, this type of tourism has the potential to maintain a balanced and healthy economy by generating related jobs, revenues, and taxes (McComb, Boyd & Boluk, 2017; Munien, Phungula & Bob, 2018).

The literature review conducted revealed that many studies have been conducted and they have shown more interest concerning other aspects of rural tourism (Haven-Tang & Jones, 2012; Zhang, 2012; Vitasurya, 2016; Guzman-Parra et al., 2015; Gao & Wu, 2017). However, despite the growing body of research on rural tourism (e.g., Corina, 2018; Ghasemi & Hamzah, 2014; Osman & Sentosa, 2013; Strydom et al., 2018; Wijijayanti et al., 2020), only a small number of studies have looked at the potential for rural tourism in the regions surrounding popular tourist destinations (like HiP) that are in rural areas. Prior to starting the process of developing rural tourism, the current study suggests that it is crucial to look at the main stakeholders that need to be considered. Therefore, this study tried to add to the body of knowledge on rural tourism by evaluating the potentials of rural tourism in the nearby communities of HiP, which is in South Africa's (SA) KZN province. It can be argued that although HiP does employ locals, it may be argued that the local communities living close to this protected area can provide alternative tourism goods and services for outbound tourists or visitors, as well as increase the critical mass of attractions for the tourists.

2. Literature Review

According to Paresishvili, Kvaratskhelia, and Mirzaeva (2017), rural tourism can be thought of as a field with two sets of interests: on the one hand, there are the residents (hosts), while on the other, there are the visitors (guests). According to McComb et al. (2017), several characteristics in rural communities prevent them from fully benefiting from tourism. Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP) was enacted by the South African government that won the 1994 elections as a strategy to combat inequality, unemployment, and poverty (Strydom, Mangope, & Henama, 2018). Numerous recent studies (e.g., Strydom et al., 2018; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019; Bate & Taylor, 2019) have demonstrated that tourism has since been recognised as an engine for growth for the nation's economy and a contributor to the GDP of the country. Rural tourism is increasingly seen as a cure for boosting the economic viability of marginalised areas, as well as for promoting social regeneration and bettering the living conditions of rural populations, according to Munien et al. (2018, p. 65). According to the body of existing tourism research (Ezeuduji, 2015; Munien et al., 2018), rural tourism is addressing the issues that rural areas are facing, particularly those that are connected to the collapse of traditional industries and rising emigration.

In developing nations like SA, tourism is seen as a powerful tool for the development of small businesses, the generation of jobs, and the improvement of the standard of living in local communities (Ezeuduji, 2015; Ezeuduji, 2017; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020; Strydom et al., 2018). In other words, where rural tourism is effectively implemented, Strydom et al. (2018, p. 7) state that "there is a potential to provide some exceptional opportunities for communities by offering not only better benefits" but also enhancing their contribution in planning and managing tourism in their communities" (Ezeuduji, 2017). For instance, communities near the HiP (protected area) in the KZN Province of SA appear to have a significant growth potential for tourism due to its pristine natural beauty and significant cultural and historical aspects. To determine this potential in terms of resources and capabilities, research can be employed (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020; Sanagustin-Fons, Lafita-Cortés, & Mosee, 2018; Temelkov & Gulev, 2019; Zhou, 2018). In areas near HiP, previous survey research has revealed a high unemployment rate (Nsukwini, & Bob, 2016), and most families depend on state social assistance to put food on the table (Nsukwini, 2015). As a result, the development of rural tourism in these areas may be seen as one of the most effective methods for reducing poverty and creating jobs.

Nsukwini and Bob (2016) argue that it is important to pinpoint the local assets that draw visitors and encourage them to spend money participating in the activities or enjoying the rural lifestyle. Rural tourism typically depends on the unique region's natural and cultural resources, where people are the main drivers (Sanagustin-Fons et al., 2018). Capabilities are ways to combine and coordinate resources, according to Bakhru et al., (2013). According to Ezeuduji (2015), promoting rural communities' expertise and knowledge is a crucial step in the commercial process of creating rural tourism. Sanagustin-Fons et al. (2018) suggest that enabling factors, which include the necessary knowledge and experience, awareness, information accessibility, and financial assistance, determine the capacity of community members to participate in conservation initiatives and tourism-related activities.

Rural tourism can serve as a catalyst for a variety of new economic ventures, partnerships, and networks that just supplement established industries like agriculture (Zhou, 2018). However, the concept of rural tourism goes beyond simple village holidays to include all other activities in rural areas. Rural tourism's cultural attractions include traditional dances, regional cuisine, music, rural lifestyles, local crafts, local languages, festivals, and rituals, according to a study by Ezeuduji and Rid (2011) in rural Gambia. The reason why rural tourism operations and amenities differ from one country to the next may be because each one tailors its rural tourist development strategy to its unique circumstances (Temelkov & Gulev 2019). Therefore, a wide range of activities that might be offered by residents as a part of their rural tourism exist. As a result of the literature research, it has been determined that rural communities must highlight the skills and knowledge required to start developing their tourism industries (Ezeuduji, 2015; Temelkov & Gulev 2019; Nsukwini & Bob, 2016). For the growth of rural tourism, communities must also have the appropriate resources.

3. Research Design and Methods

The HiP is located to the west of Mtubatuba and borders Hlabisa town to the east. According to Adeleke and Nzama (2013) HiP is a well-liked tourist location and is recognised as the top wildlife attraction in KZN. This study used a qualitative research method since its research purpose leaned more toward exploratory and interpretive research. As the research target population was unclear, the study used a non-probability sampling technique in the form of a purposive approach to choose 24 participants. To gather information from participants (the

communities surrounding HiP), focus group discussions were held with them utilising a focus group guide. The variables that served as the basis for the data collection came from a variety of information sources and other research (such as Ezeuduji & Rid, 2011; Phi, Dredge & Whitford, 2014; Ezeuduji, 2015; Kheiri & Nasihatkon, 2016; Rangus, Brumen, & Topler, 2018). Verbatim transcripts of the information were created for data analysis after it was captured on audiotape with the participants' consent. Discussions were held with the nearby HiP communities' men, women, and youth.

The coding of the data was done using themes and sub-themes that were produced from the research and ultimately connected to the study objectives. This was done using the content analysis approach. Researchers independently reviewed the content analysis to make sure it was accurate, representative, and reliable. The codes for the themes and sub-themes were manually created after the verbatim transcripts had been prepared, based on the study objectives and discussion topics (See Table 1.1). Opinion frequency was divided into three categories: "very commonly recorded" opinions (those said five times or more), "commonly recorded" opinions (those mentioned three to four times), and "not commonly recorded" opinions (those mentioned one to two times).

Table 1: Main themes (MT) and sub-themes based on study objectives (Obj.)

MTs	Sub-theme 1	Sub-theme 2	Sub-theme 3	Sub-theme 4
MT 1 – Obj. 1 Rural tourism resources	Financial resources	Human resources /development	Physical resources/ infrastructure	Intangible resources (sanitation)
MT 2 – Obj. 2 Rural tourism knowledge and capabilities	Lack of business education	Lack of trust to cooperate with themselves	Lack of experience/ know-how, e.g. people who have operated tourism businesses	
MT 3 – Obj. 3 Rural tourism strategies	Training and development	rural tourism cooperatives	Securing funding to start business	

Note: The main themes (MT) reflect the research objectives (Obj)

MT1 reflects – Obj. 1; MT2 reflects – Obj. 2; MT3 reflects – Obj. 3.

The researchers selected the participants based on their belief that the participants could offer the pertinent data needed for the study's focus. Men, women, and youth groups from three nearby areas were used as study participants; for further information, see Table 1.2 in the following section.

4. Results and Discussion

Men, women, and youth groups were recruited as volunteers for this study from three communities close to the park. The participant profile is displayed in Table 1.2 of the results.

Table 2: Profile of the participants (N = 24)

Group number	Category	Size per focus group	Age groups
01	Men	Eight (8)	36 - 55
02	Women	Eight (8)	36 - 55
03	Youth	Eight (8)	18 - 35
		4 young men	
		4 young women	

Table 1.2 represents the demographic characteristics of the forty-four (24), where three focus group discussions were held with eight (8) participants in each group - men, women, and youths were divided into three (3) groups. In African culture, youngsters are not normally particularly loud when combined with more older people - and the same is true for women, who prefer men to lead talks because men are seen to be the heads of households (see Ezeuduji & Rid, 2011). As these participants felt free to respond to questions and participate in discussions without hindrance in their groups, researchers further separated them into distinct age and gender groups to gather as much information from them as possible. Four young males and four young women were recruited for the youth group, attaining gender equality. The men and women that participated were all over the age of thirty-five (35) while the participating youths ranged in age from eighteen (18) to thirty-five (35) years old.

4.1 Theme 1: Rural Tourism Resources

The research location (HiP)'s characteristics were discussed with the participants, as well as what they believed may draw tourists there. Some of the scarce resources were cited by locals as barriers to rural tourism. Along with physical resources (infrastructure), which are (*commonly recorded*), they also mentioned financial resources.

4.1.1 Sub-Theme 1: Financial Resources

Community members revealed that there is a high level of unemployment in the area and proposed, that if they could get financial support, they could establish their own employment rather than hunting for one elsewhere. (*very commonly recorded*).

“Most of our children do not work, maybe if there can be some sort of financial support presented to us they can be able to create their own employment and be able to put food on the table”. **(Men, community member).**

“Even if we want to start tourism businesses, it is not easy because we do not have money to start, and the level of unemployment in this community is too high, more especially unemployed youth”. **(Youth, community member).**

“Even though we make some money out of selling our craft works, as women we still feel the need to achieve greater financial independence. If maybe, we can be assisted with the construction of a craft market where we can exhibit and sell our craft works. Also financial support would be much appreciated”. **(Women, community member).**

The findings suggested that financial resources could make a significant contribution to the growth of rural tourism in HiP and the neighbouring communities. This supports the claim made by Radovi et al., (2020) that a lack of funding is a major obstacle to the growth of sustainable rural tourism. However, poor financial management by the owners or other management members could be a serious issue that results in stagnation or slow growth.

4.1.2 Sub-Theme 2: Human Resources Development

The findings typically show that residents of these communities lack sufficient awareness of tourism. Local community members have stated that they were not provided with enough tourism educational training and that if given the opportunity, they would take advantage of it (*very commonly recorded*).

“We see those big cars coming in and out of the park, they say ‘abavakashi’ I think that all tourism is about, people coming from other places to watch wild animals inside the park.” **(Men, Community member).**

“I studied Tourism in High School, I have a little background on what it is all about, it is basically about visiting places for different purposes” **(Youth, community member).**

“Eeh! my child I do not know what it is except that I sometimes hear children at home talking about but I have no idea of what it is all about”. **(Women, Community member).**

Pimonratanakan and Pooripakdee (2017) discovered that training is a vital activity that can generate learning and increase knowledge and skill for job operation.

4.1.3 Sub-Theme 3: Physical Resources (Infrastructure)

This sub-theme contains factors relating to physical resources, such as roads (accessibility) and lodging facilities. Local people in the neighbourhoods surrounding HiP complained about inadequate accessibility and poor road conditions (*Very commonly recorded*).

“We lack access to basic infrastructure, for instance, our roads consist predominantly of gravel, they often deteriorate rapidly, especially in the wet season, disrupting transport services and access to health centres, towns, schools and markets when it is most needed”. **(Women, community member).**

“Our roads are very bad, even the one that goes inside the park is not well maintained and most of the roads are not tared”. **(Youth, community member).**

According to Dalimunthe, Valeriani, Hartini, and Wardhani (2020), the growth of the tourism industry is closely tied to and dependent upon the improvement of the existing infrastructure. In this sense, infrastructure development may play a crucial part in the communities surrounding HiP.

4.1.4 Sub-Theme 4: Intangible Resources (water and sanitation)

Communities in areas surrounding HiP made note of the issue of the inadequate water supply and sanitation experienced by locals in the communities nearby HiP.

“We do not have water taps or tanks in the community, only rely on water from the dams and river, our local municipality does nothing about this issue, only once in a while (3 months’ time) they get to send water tanks to deliver water to the community”. **(Women, community member).**

According to this viewpoint, having access to basic sanitary facilities is one of the factors that should be considered to promote the tourism business, especially in developing nations (Elysia & Wihadanto, 2020).

4.2 Theme 2: Rural Tourism Knowledge and Capabilities

Communities near HiP should be given the knowledge and skills they need to be better prepared because the sector is continually in need of up-to-date information and new skills to keep up with shifting tourism trends. However, residents in these communities have demonstrated a lack of business education.

4.2.1 Sub-Theme 1: Lack of Business Education

The community's members unanimously agreed that they possessed the qualities needed to successfully operate and manage businesses on their own (*very commonly recorded*). Some of the statements they made are highlighted as follows:

“Although there are no formal business qualifications that we hold, but generally I think we can be able to run and manage a business successfully”. **(Men, community member).**

“I would say that we as black people are not into tourism because if you look at the tourism businesses found here are dominantly owned by whites”. **(Youth, community member).**

For two main reasons, according to Marais, du Plessis, and Saayman (2017), talent development is essential for the SA tourism business. First, skill development makes sure that formerly excluded groups of society are involved and able to participate in the industry, while making sure that they also get to benefit from it. According to these authors, to create enduring first impressions, personnel providing the service must be well-educated and outfitted due to the unique nature of the tourism sector, where both service production and consumption occur simultaneously.

4.2.2 Sub-Theme 2: Lack of Trust to Cooperate with Themselves

While some residents appeared to no longer believe in cooperative enterprises, others still expressed an interest in joining them. (*commonly recorded*). Some of the opinions they pointed out are presented as follows;

“We once tried a cooperative group whereby we were constructing bricks, the group failed, finances disappeared into thin air, I do not know if I can be able to be involved in any cooperatives programme”. **(Youth, community member).**

“I have heard of some cooperative businesses that went wrong, but that does not mean we are no longer interested in it, if the opportunity can present itself, I will certainly jump to it”. **(Men, community member).**

Trust, teamwork, and cooperation, according to Qurniati, Febryano, and Zulfiani (2017), are crucial for building social capital and boosting productivity. The results of this study indicate that locals prefer working alone since they don't trust one another. However, they are receptive to chances that can help them win back the lost trust.

4.2.3 Sub-Theme 3: Lack of Tourism Business Experience

Results revealed that most, if not all, of the participants lacked the essential business or job experience in the tourism industry. It was also observed that the locals were eager for any form of growth that would occur in the area. (*Very commonly recorded*).

"I do not have enough work experience but I am very good with people and I know that being in tourism requires one to be friendly to customers". (Youth, community member).

"Cleaning is part of our everyday chores that way I can be able to work in housekeeping department only if I can secure an employment." (Women, community member).

"We can be able to do a great work; experience is not a problem only if such opportunities can be presented to us". (Men, community member).

Considering these comments, Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, and Tangit's (2018) research revealed that a significant barrier to community participation in tourism is a lack of knowledge and expertise.

4.3 Theme Three: Rural Tourism Strategies

Based on the findings of the study, theme three of this research offers practical strategies to promote rural tourism in the areas surrounding HiP.

4.3.1 Sub-Theme 1: Training and Development

The findings indicated that training and development should be prioritised as one of the approaches to encourage the growth of rural tourism. (*commonly recorded*). Few of the participant's statements are presented hereunder:

"Training can go a long way on helping us to improve the little knowledge that we have about tourism and in assisting us to welcome tourism development in a positive manner". (Youth, community member).

According to the findings of this study by Bauer et al. (2012), education and training for local citizens should be provided on a regular basis to increase their knowledge, awareness, and capabilities.

4.3.2 Sub-Theme 2: Rural Tourism Cooperatives

Local communities agreed that if given the possibility to participate in rural tourism cooperatives, they would take the chance. A male community member said;

"Rural tourism cooperatives can help us eradicate hunger and reduce the level of unemployment we are faced with in this community". (Men, community member).

According to Aref and Gill (2009), who conducted research in Iran, rural cooperatives are the most effective organisations in the sector of rural tourism.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, it is suggested that other local attractions, such as local handicrafts, be identified and used as components of rural tourism products. These communities produce unique handicrafts such thatching, the creation of brooms, baskets, mats, wooden spoons, and trays, as well as African animal carvings in wood. Additionally, it is advised to host regular small local markets to sell handicrafts and other items produced locally because women have said they frequently struggle to sell their creations to clients one-on-one. Many other promising developments, however, can be seen in the development of rural housing, the beginning of cooperatives and training centres, and the creation of partnerships with academic institutions and other stakeholders in rural tourism. It may also help to develop a viable rural tourism industry to organise regional gatherings and rural exhibitions where locals may showcase their skills to tourists. After the study area weaknesses have been addressed, the study suggests that rural offers be positioned and offered as components of tourism products and services inside this rural space. According to the study findings, leadership should be committed to supporting the growth of rural tourism through capacity building, which includes training residents and assisting in the creation of business strategies and the acquisition of funds for the launch of new initiatives.

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