

Ecotourism for development in south africa

[Sport & Tourism](#), [Ecotourism](#)



The South African government, along with many other governments of developing nations, has recognized the potential economic benefits of tourism. These include job creation, inflow of foreign exchange, and increased gross domestic product (Kaplan 2004: 219). The country's government has also made ecotourism a priority, updating infrastructure to support the industry (Van Amerom 2006: 115). If it does so with sustainability in mind, South Africa could use tourism to capitalize on the benefits of tourism and successfully boost their development in the long-term. My family and I got to experience South Africa's growing ecotourism industry when we moved there six years ago. My memories of living and traveling there sparked my interest in tourism's potential to reduce poverty. This paper will specifically focus on how South Africa could use the growing branch of ecotourism to increase employment and economic growth in some of the country's poorest areas, which happen to be rich in ecotourism potential. South Africa has the power to use ecotourism in a way that benefits the country's poor and simultaneously promotes environmental conservation to produce a sustainable profit-generating industry.

Before I examine how South Africa could use ecotourism as a means of development, it is important to recognize the massive increase in tourism that the nation and the continent have witnessed in the last ten years, especially since the dismantling of apartheid. The growth in tourism has been truly enormous and is demonstrated by UN World Tourism Organization's statistics. According to the WTO (2010), the continent of Africa saw a total of 46 million international tourists in 2009 (8). 28.1 million of these tourists went to Sub-Saharan Africa, up from 6.4 million back in

1990 (WTO 2010: 4). This figure displays the significant growth that has occurred in the region in just nearly a decade. What is most critical is that, in the past ten years, Sub-Saharan Africa has seen an average 6.3% annual rate of increase in the number of tourists arriving in the region (WTO 2010: 4). This steady rate of growth in the area is promising for South Africa's future and its potential to benefit from tourism and advance development. It is also important to note that South Africa is a major player in Africa's tourism, capturing 15.4% of all of the 46 million international arrivals in 2009 (WTO 2010: 9). While it is not known what percentage of tourists visiting South Africa are purely there as ecotourists, ecotourism is unquestionably a growing industry and has been credited for some of the growth of tourism on the African continent (Van Amerom 2006: 112). This is why I am going to critically examine how such tourism and ecotourism industry growth can help South Africa to develop.

The very nature of ecotourism makes it valuable to examine as a potential means of advancing development in South Africa. The South African government defines ecotourism as "environmentally and socially responsible travel to natural or near natural areas that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local people" (White Papers 1996 : Definitions). The fact that ecotourism is based in the environment, is supposed to be environmentally and culturally educational, and is environmentally sustainable (Ayotte 2009: 14) means that it can work in South Africa and for the country's overall development. South Africa is a country that is "well predisposed to take advantage of ecotourism" (Van

Amerom 2006: 115) because it has basic tourism infrastructure coupled with the fact that it is rich in history, culture and environmental treasures- all things that ecotourists seek to experience. These assets give South Africa an advantage over many other countries in the tourism industry, which gives it comparative advantage in the world tourism market. Furthermore, since ecotourism is nature and culture based, South Africans will be capable of and inclined to preserve these treasures that generate revenue. Ayotte points out that, because of its sustainability, ecotourism is an alternative to traditional resource dependent industries which deplete finite resources (2009: 2). One such example is the mining industry, which not only depletes limited resources but has also experienced massive job losses (Binns and Nel 2002: 236). Unlike the mining industry, tourism can be sustainable, as in the case of a local community being inclined to want to preserve a certain traditional ceremony of theirs that tourists will pay to experience. Instead of losing this aspect of their culture in any way, they will have the chance to profit off of it and preserve it for future profit. Profits support development of these host communities, especially in poorer rural communities, which ecotourism has the potential to extend to. Again, South Africa is in a superior position to take advantage of ecotourists because of the resources it has. What is more, tourism promotion is considered an inexpensive way to promote economic growth (Binns and Nel 2002: 236). These factors make ecotourism a good industry for long-term sustainable profit and sequentially long-term development.

Since the fall of apartheid in 1994, South Africa has been in a good position to take advantage of ecotourism for economic development. Since then,

Western governments have been eager to provide support politically and economically for the country that it had previously held sanctions against for decades (Van Amerom 2006 : 116). Such sanctions were certainly an economic hindrance to development in the country. The international community embraced South Africa after apartheid ended, and the country was allowed to host the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 as well as the Soccer World Cup in 2010. This international attention has boosted the marketing of tourism attractions (Van Amerom 2006: 116) The international attention that south Africa has received does not seem to be going anywhere. President Zuma recently boasted that he has already acquired ninety-five meetings and conferences between 2010 and 2016 (“Visas to promote tourism” 2011) for the country, which surely adds momentum to its positive international standing. The country is therefore in a position to take advantage of its good image and all of the attention it has gotten. With all of that being said, The West still holds a considerable amount of influence over tourism to the country. Unfavorable media coverage or travel advisories could affect the future of South Africa’s tourism industry negatively (Van Amerom 2006: 117). That is why South Africa should continue to pursue its positive international image and simultaneously work to promote ecotourism, a form of tourism that also has a positive image.

One development issue which South Africa faces that can be alleviated with ecotourism is unemployment. The number of unemployed plus those too discouraged to seek work is currently close to 30% (The Economist 2011: 54). That is why the South African government is presently focusing on

creating jobs and reducing unemployment. President Jacob Zuma gave an address to the nation on February 10th where he declared that he wants to boost tourism because “ every sixteen tourists create one job” (“ Visas to promote tourism” 2011). Regardless of how precise this statistic is, tourists do create jobs, and South Africa needs jobs. Therefore, the country should do all it can to promote tourism which alleviates joblessness and consequently promotes development. Kaplan elaborates that “ in addition, tourism typically employs a high proportion of women” (Kaplan 2004: 219). Ecotourism as an industry that is capable of spreading around profits and benefits which promote development for more people.

Along with providing jobs for women, ecotourism is able to spread development benefits to the poorer rural areas of South Africa, making it a beneficial aid to country’s overall development. These communities often hold unique cultural traditions or are located near natural treasures that are appealing to ecotourists. Ecotourism would bring profit and thus development to rural regions of the country that are excluded from the economic benefits of mass tourism, for instance in Cape Town or Johannesburg. This is what makes ecotourism superior to mass tourism. Binns and Nel explain that “ the government is anxious to ensure that the benefits [of tourism] are felt in all parts of the country” (2002: 236). Ecotourism can do this.

Binns and Nel highlight an example of a town called Still Bay, which experienced economic collapse after its fishing industry failed. The area consequently faced a disastrous 85% unemployment rate (2002: 240). The

town desperately needed to diversify its economy and create jobs so they began to market themselves as a tourist destination, calling the town “ The Bay of Sleeping Beauty” (Binns and Nel 2002: 241). The leaders of the community also coordinated to build the Jagersbosch Community Care Centre, which managed funds to promote development. “ The Bay of Sleeping Beauty” tourism campaign was remarkably successful because the town is located along “ The Garden Route”, an already popular tourism area. Still Bay was also blessed with incredible natural beauty as well as archaeological heritage sites, whale watching, and an annual town festival. All of these factors helped lower the unemployment rate to almost 0% (Binns and Nel 2002: 242). Binns and Nel examine this case study to prove what a success ecotourism can be for a community, even though it may not work 100% of the time. There are still many areas in South Africa which could benefit from ecotourism and experience a success story similar to Still Bay’s.

Ecotourism as a means of development has its criticisms but these can be alleviated with skills development. One such criticism is that “ most companies involved in ecotourism have their headquarters in the north, and a large proportion of profits are repatriated” (Wall 1997: 488). While this is true, skills development can change this because it can promote entrepreneurship. Fortunately for South Africa, they have already established much of the “ hardware” of the tourism industry such as the necessary airport and road infrastructure. Entrepreneurship gives people in marginalized communities a chance to create products and services which, in their sale, can benefit the whole community. For ecotourism to be truly successful at reducing unemployment and promoting development, South

Africa must insure that it puts in place the industry's "software" of a skilled local workforce (Kaplan 2004: 217).

The country urgently needs better skills development for local people, which will not only enhance its competitiveness in the tourism industry but is central to the country's development as a whole (Kaplan 2004: 217). Skills development and thus the employment of local people will reduce leakage of profits to internationally hired employees. This is because now more and more local people can be hired, sometimes even at a lower cost. Kaplan also highlights the issue of inequality of who is employed in what positions in the tourism industry. Unfortunately, the more significant managerial roles are usually occupied by white males while black South Africans, particularly women, do the unskilled jobs (2004: 222). This issue, which is largely rooted in the country's ugly history of apartheid, can be alleviated with skills development initiatives. Ultimately, a lack of skills undermines the industry and will cripple its positive effect on development in the nation (Kaplan 2004: 225). Therefore, the South African government should invest as much into this "software" as much as it does in the "hardware" of the tourism industry to make it sustainable and beneficial to the country's most underprivileged citizens.

One such criticism of ecotourism is that it is merely a marketing-gimmick that people buy into (Wall 1997: 487) and is therefore not superior to mass tourism and will not benefit development. While this would be unfortunate, I think that because one of the fundamental principles that ecotourism is rooted in cultural and environmental education, this cynical critique is

sufficiently refuted. With the growth of the industry and as more and more people are exposed to and become educated about ecotourism, people will demand an honest and superior product in comparison to mass tourism. The south African government also has the ability to make sure that ecotourism doesn't become a mere gimmick by enacting laws that restrict the usage of the term ecotourism in marketing unless it meets their definition laid out in The White Papers.

Another criticism or paradox of ecotourism that seems to discount it's potential as a means of development is that countries who aggressively promote it actually run the risk of killing the industry because large influxes of tourists can easily damage the fragile environments they visit.

Fortunately, the South African government can single-handedly prevent this from happening to South Africa's special treasures. The government can impose caps and limits on the number of people who visit certain areas and what they are allowed to do in those areas. I know from personal experience that these types of restrictions exist in vulnerable environments in South Africa's neighboring country, Botswana. Though caps and limits may seem to limit economic growth in the short term, they are critical for long-term benefits of the ecotourism industry. Fundamentally, the South African government has control over ecotourism and how it is carried out in the country. In order for it to be successful, they must help to insure that South Africa's resources are not exploited to the point that they no longer exist.

As the statistics from the World Tourism Organization demonstrated at the beginning of my paper, tourism in Africa is growing rapidly. More and more

people visit the continent each year, even through this current economic recession. But the fact that tourism is inevitable does not dispel all criticisms of it and it does not mean that people should not try to assess its effects. This fact actually makes tourism more important than ever to scrutinize and critique because the industry that has a large impact on economies around the world. We need to understand this force that is tourism and how it can be used as a force for good in development. This paper has argued that ecotourism is a superior form of tourism because it is sustainable, can stimulate the economies of sidelined communities by creating jobs, and can improve South Africa's overall development situation. Ecotourism is an industry that South Africa can uniquely take advantage of. For these reasons, ecotourism is a critical industry to examine as a potential method of development. When paired with other development initiatives, ecotourism can be part of a comprehensive development plan for South Africa.