

# An evaluation of the performance of tourism at Mapungubwe National Park, South Africa

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## Abstract

Mapungubwe National Park is one of the parks that were created to conserve both biodiversity and cultural heritage in South Africa. It has also been awarded the status of a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This study evaluates the performance of tourism at the park and the cultural landscape. Data on visitations and lodging occupancy after the Park was declared as a World Heritage Site were examined. In order to understand possible causes of tourism trends, visitation data was supplemented by social survey data. The study established that there is no sharp increase on the tourist numbers to the Park. In addition, bed occupancy is below 50% since the Park was declared a World Heritage Site. Potential barriers contributing to low bed occupancy are discussed. The study concludes that the World Heritage Site status did not trigger an increase in tourism in Mapungubwe National Park. Contributing factor is newness of Mapungubwe as a national park in South Africa.

**Key words:** tourism, Mapungubwe, National Park, World Heritage Site, cultural landscape, bed occupancy, visitor numbers.



Source:<http://www.places.co.za/crs/photolarge/51862.jpg>

## Introduction

In 1972, the World Heritage Convention of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) launched an initiative to preserve World Heritage Sites considered to be of great value to humanity (UNESCO, 2013). According to Drost (1996), a World Heritage Site is a place of special historic, cultural, natural, scientific, and/or esthetic qualities that has universal value. Over the past three decades, there has been proliferation in the number of sites designated as the World Heritage Sites. According to the UNESCO website, in 2014, a total of 1007 sites comprising 779 cultural, 197 natural, and 31 mixed properties, have been recognized as World Heritage Sites in 161 enlisted countries. In South Africa, there are currently 8 sites that were selected by UNESCO as some of the World Heritage Sites. These include Mapungubwe National Park that was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in July 2003 at a meeting held at UNESCO headquarters in Paris. Mapungubwe National Park is South Africa's first Park and cultural landscape to be declared as a World Heritage Site.

To be included on the World Heritage list, sites must be of 'Outstanding Universal Value' and meet at least one out of ten selection criteria. 'Outstanding Universal Value' means cultural and/or natural significance which is exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity. As such, the permanent protection of this heritage is of the highest importance to the international community as a whole (UNESCO, 2013). Mapungubwe National Park and Cultural Landscape meet selection criteria (ii), (iii), (iv), and (v)<sup>1</sup>. Thus, Mapungubwe

fulfills four of the ten selection criteria for world heritage site. The inclusion of Mapungubwe National Park and cultural landscape as a World Heritage Site confirms the significance of the area in southern Africa. Since the Park was declared as a World Heritage Site, the bulk of the research conducted in Mapungubwe National Park concentrated on the history (Carruthers, 2006; 2009), vegetation (Götze, 2008; O'Connor, 2010) and archeology of the area (Kuman et al., 2005; Huffman, 2008; 2009). Literature suggests that no study has looked at the tourism potential of Mapungubwe National Park. This study bridges this gap in research.

World Heritage Sites are regarded as one of the most important and fastest growing components of tourism (Herbert, 2001). Over the past two decades, there has been an increasing interest in the impact of tourism on World Heritage Sites. From the tourism viewpoint, although the purpose of inscribing the World Heritage Site is to identify and protect sites of outstanding value, the UNESCO recognition has been widely used as an advertisement to attract tourists (Buckley, 2004; Li et al., 2008; Huang et al., 2012). Thus, the World Heritage Sites are increasingly used as a tool for national and international tourism marketing campaigns. This strategy is rooted in the belief that the World Heritage Site is a powerful boost for attracting tourism (Landorf, 2009; Huang et al., 2012). Subsequently, because of outstanding

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Criterion (iii): The remains in the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape are a remarkably complete testimony to the growth and subsequent decline of the Mapungubwe State which at its height was the largest kingdom in the African subcontinent.

Criterion (iv): The establishment of Mapungubwe as a powerful state trading through the East African ports with Arabia and India was a significant stage in the history of the African sub-continent.

Criterion (v): The remains in the Mapungubwe cultural landscape graphically illustrate the impact of climate change and record the growth and then decline of the Kingdom of Mapungubwe as a clear record of a culture that became vulnerable to irreversible change (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>).

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1. Criterion (ii): The Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape contains evidence for an important interchange of human values that led to far-reaching cultural and social changes in Southern Africa between AD 900 and 1300.

universal value of an area, using China as a case study, Yang et al. (2010) claimed that sites declared as the World Heritage Sites (especially cultural sites) have a greater tourist enhancing effect. This claim need to be subjected to empirical scrutiny. This paper uses empirical data from Mapungubwe National Park to assess the validity of this claim. The aim of this study is to assess the performance of tourism at Mapungubwe National Park after it was declared as the World Heritage Site. Assessing the site's tourism performance will help to evaluate if the World Heritage Status triggered an increase in the number of tourists visiting the Park and the surrounding lodges and guest houses. The key research questions are: Does designating an area as a World Heritage Site improves the tourism performance of that area? How has tourism at Mapungubwe National Park performed after it was declared as a World Heritage Site? In order to answer this question, visitor numbers and bed occupancy rate data are examined for trends. The next section present the location of the study area.

Source:[http://www.sa-venues.com/game\\_reserves/graphics/mapungubwe/1.jpg](http://www.sa-venues.com/game_reserves/graphics/mapungubwe/1.jpg)



## Study area and methods

### Location and characteristics

The study area is Mapungubwe National Park which is in Limpopo Province of South Africa. The Park is immediately south of the Limpopo River which serves as the border between South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana (Figure 1). The primary core area of the Park extends from Pontdrift border gate in the west to Weipe farm in the east incorporating 20 properties of varying ownership status with a total ecological land area of 19 810 ha. Mapungubwe area is characterized by high temperatures, very poor soils and low erratic rainfall. The area lies between 500 m and 700 m above sea level. Rainfall is highly seasonal and usually falls during the summer months between October and March (Götze et al., 2003; Kuman et al., 2005). The long-term mean annual rainfall in the study area is 350 mm to 400 mm. Evaporation from free water surfaces is in excess of 2 500 mm per annum for the largest part of the area (Götze et al., 2003). The vegetation is mostly low, open mopane veld (*Colophospermum mopane*) with *Commiphora* and *Combretum* species. Very attractive *Acacia* woodlands occur on riparian fringes and areas of alluvial soils (Cumming, 2003).

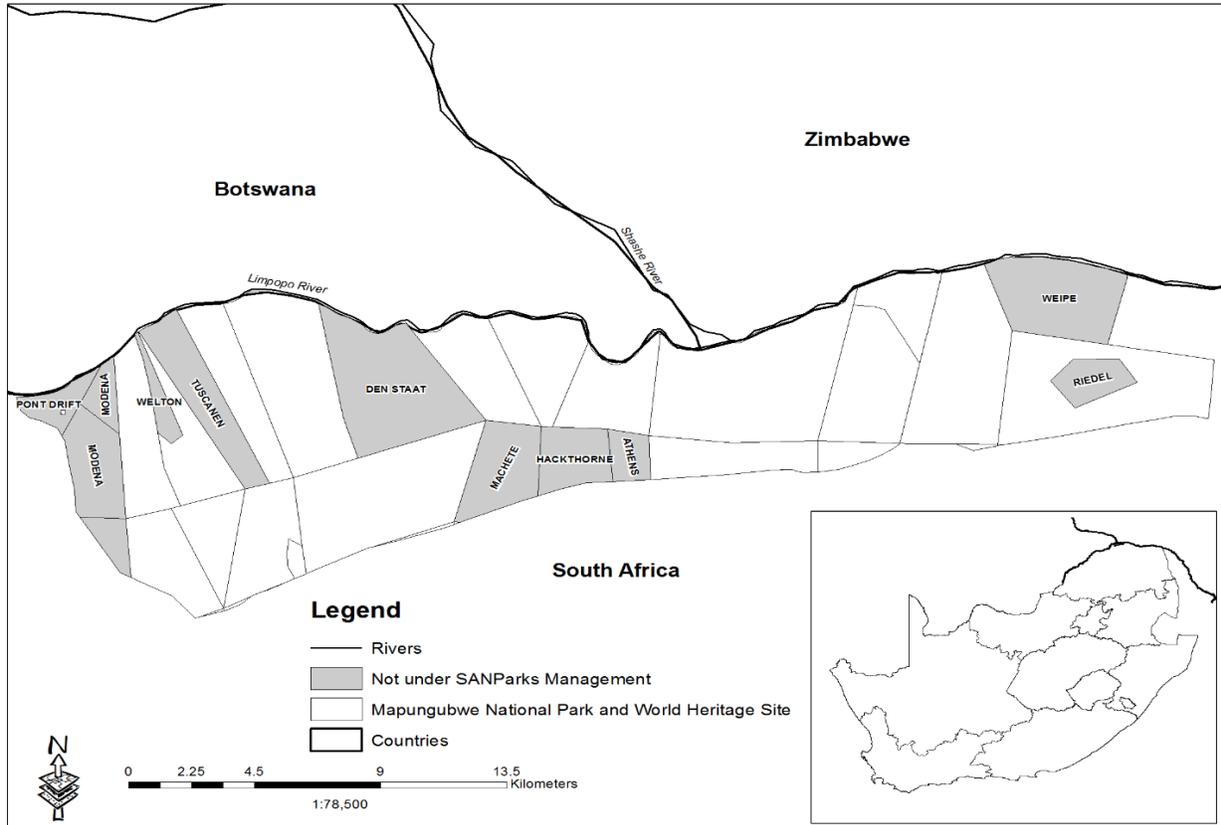


Figure 1: Location of Mapungubwe National Park. (Source, SANParks)

Tiley-Nel (2006) stated that Mapungubwe National Park has numerous archaeological sites dating from the Early Stone Age to the present.

Many of the archeological sites which are concentrated in the Limpopo-Shashe confluence area are of major significance and scientific value (Robinson, 1996). Of particular interest are the Zhizo site (AD 900-AD 1000) on farm Schroda, K2 or Bambandyanalo (AD 1030-AD1220) and Mapungubwe Hill (AD1220-1290 AD) situated on farm Greefswald (Robinson, 1996; Tiley-Nel, 2006).

#### Data and methods

The methods used in this study aimed at assessing the performance of tourism in the area and evaluating if the World Heritage Site status triggered an increase in the number of tourists visiting the Park. Visitation and occupancy data for

Mapungubwe National Park for the period 2005/06 to 2013/14 were obtained from South African National Parks (SANParks) Tourism Department. Data on day versus overnight visitors, as well as domestic and foreign visitor arrivals into Mapungubwe National Park were also obtained from SANParks. Annual reports of SANParks from financial year 2003/04-2013/14 were also consulted. It is important to note that data before the Park was declared as a world heritage site is not available. The data on wildlife found in Mapungubwe National Park were downloaded from Park's website. A time series analysis was applied on visitation, occupancy, as well as day versus overnight visitor data in order to detect the general pattern over a long period of time.

The tourism data to the Park were supplemented by semi-structured interviews collected in 2012-2014 with 17 key informants, selected to include park officials

and private lodge or guest house owners around Mapungubwe National Park. The interviews aimed at finding out the conditions that attracts tourists into a National Parks and to gauge managerial confidence regarding the future tourism performance of the Park.

The private lodge or guest house owners were interviewed to distil out if the Heritage branding in the area has made an impact in their guest houses and lodges. A semi-structured interview was judged to be more suitable in this study because it is flexible and allows for an open dialogue that can extend beyond the parameters set by the interview schedule. An average of one hour was spent during each interview. A face-to-face interview was conducted in the working or home area of each informants.

Data obtained from each participants were recorded on a notebook. All the written notes were typed and summarized. In instances where there were gaps in the recorded notes, a follow-up interview was arranged in order to understand what the interviewee actually said.

The summary of information gathered was compared with the objective and the research questions. This helped to determine the type of information to be collected in the next field visits. This was done throughout the research process until all participants were interviewed.

## **Results and discussion**

### **Visitor numbers**

From 2005/06-2006/07 the number of domestic visitors to Mapungubwe National Park was at 96%, but visitor number dropped in 2007/08 to 93%. In 2008/09 and 2009/10 visitor numbers increased to 94% whereas in 2010/11 the number of domestic visitors increased to 95%. An increase in

domestic visitors recorded in Mapungubwe in 2010 is attributed to the FIFA World Cup that was held in South Africa. After the world cup, visitor numbers dropped to 92% in 2011/12 but increased slightly in 2012/13 to 93%. In 2013/14 visitor numbers decreased to only 91% (Figure 2). The proportion of domestic visitors to Mapungubwe National Park does not show a steady increase in the number of visitors, rather there is fluctuation in the number of visitors.

International arrivals were used as the key indicator of tourism business in Mapungubwe National Park. This is because the World Heritage Site is anticipated to attract more international tourists and improve the tourism performance of an area (Drost, 1996; Yang et al., 2010). The increase in the number of tourists is significant to park managers, local residents, tour operators and regional economies as they may benefit from increased tourist expenditure. In Mapungubwe, the study found that from 2005/06-2006/07 international visitors formed only 3%. In 2007/08-2008/9, there was an increase of international visitors to 6%. Thus, the global finance crisis in 2008 and 2009 did not influenced the decrease of international tourist arrivals in Mapungubwe National Park.

In 2009/10-2010/11 international visitors dropped to 5% and 4% respectively. This means that the FIFA World Cup that was held in South Africa did not have an impact on tourism business in Mapungubwe National Park. It is only after the word cup that international visitors increased to 7% in 2011/12. In 2012/13 international tourist numbers decrease to 6% but in 2013/14, visitor numbers increased to 8%. (Figure 2).

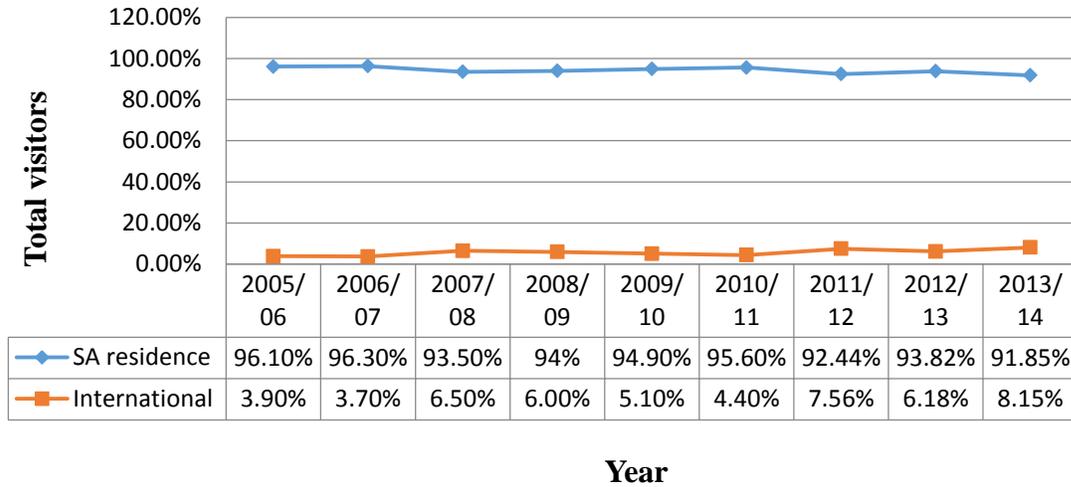


Figure 2: Annual visitor composition in Mapungubwe National Park. (Source: SANParks, 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013).

As with domestic visitors, there is no steep increase in the number of tourists, rather there is fluctuation in the number of tourists from 2005/06-2013/14. According to the Park Manager through an interview, visitor numbers in both the domestic and international tourist categories have not made an impact on the tourism value of the Park; the Park remains quiet most of the year even though the area is a World Heritage Site.

### Bed occupancy

Mapungubwe National Park has a total of 136 rooms available. The target of the Park is to fill up the 136 rooms throughout the year. The study found that from 2003/04-2011/12, there was an increase in bed occupancy from 11.06% to 46.30% (Figure 3).

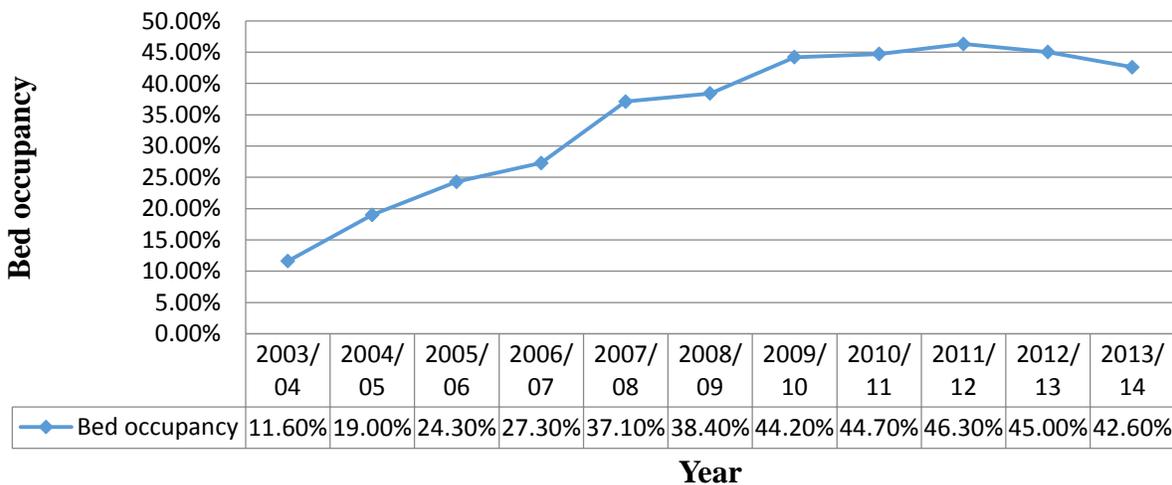


Figure 3: Annual bed occupancy in Mapungubwe National Park. (Source: SANParks, 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013).

Although bed occupancy in Mapungubwe National Park increased between 2003/04

and 2011/12, the increase cannot necessarily be ascribed specifically to the

attainment of the world heritage site status. Rather, the general increase in the bed occupancy in Mapungubwe is attributed to infrastructural development within the Park. For instance, whilst construction was still going on during 2003/04 financial year, bed occupancy was only 11.60%. In 2004/05 financial year, the construction of tourism facilities through the Poverty Relief Project Programme funded by the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) were completed with an increase in bed occupancy to 19%. Thereafter, bed occupancy increases until 2012. Works completed include 107 km fencing, construction of Leokwe main camp with 40 beds, tented camp with 16 beds, trails camp with 8 beds, renovation of two lodges with 29 beds, treetop hide, game hide, bird hide, confluence picnic site and facilities, and

construction entrance gate (SANParks, 2005).

In 2012/13 and 2013/14, bed occupancy dropped to 45% and 42.06% respectively. It is important to note that the bed occupancy in Mapungubwe National Park from 2003/04 to 2013/14 is below 50% (Figure 3). Thus, of the 136 rooms available in Mapungubwe National Park, the average bed occupancy remains below 50%. This means that about 68 rooms remain unoccupied throughout the year. According to the Park Manager, problems contributing to low bed occupancy in Mapungubwe National Park include the fact that the Park does not attract large numbers of tourists throughout the year. The number of tourists visiting Mapungubwe National Park is not constant throughout the year but fluctuates from one month to another (Figure 4).

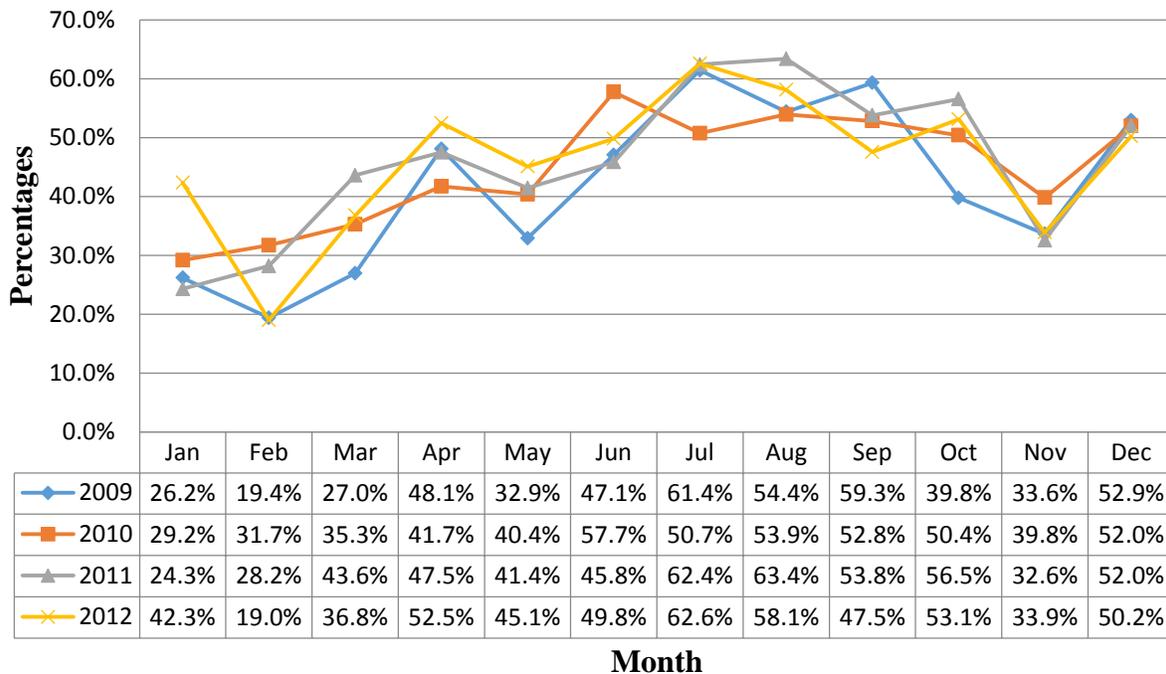


Figure 4: Monthly bed occupancy in Mapungubwe National Park. (Source: SANParks, 2009; 2010; 2011; 2012).

Figure 4 shows that the number of tourists visiting Mapungubwe National Park is below 40% from January to March. In April, there is an increase in the number of people visiting the park to an average of around

47% but the number drops to an average of around 40% in May, and averages above 50% from June to October. As the Park Manager pointed out through an interview, the increase in the number of tourists in

April is attributed to Easter Holidays whereas the rise in number of tourists in June and July is because the schools in South Africa are on recess and most teachers use Mapungubwe as their tourist destination area. In November, the number of guests visiting the Park is below 40% while the figure is above 50% in December due to a festive season.

The camp site occupancy is also contributing to low bed occupancy in Mapungubwe National Park. Whereas the bed occupancy is below 50%, the camp site

occupancy is above 50% (Figure 5). There has been a steady increase in camp site occupancy since 2007 and in 2014, the camp site occupancy was at 64.2%. It appears that camping is preferred by the majority of tourists visiting Mapungubwe National Park. The favourable price of camping site accommodation and preference of tourists/guests to be close to nature through camping seems to be the major factors influencing tourists to use camping site than Park accommodation.

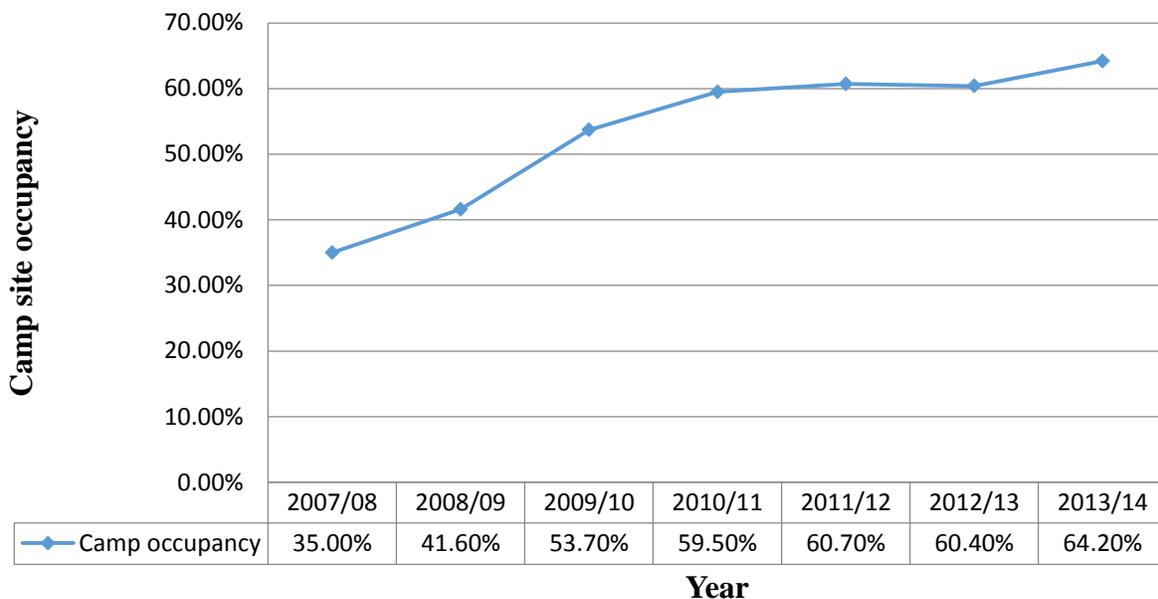


Figure 5: Annual camp site occupancy in Mapungubwe National Park. (Source: SANParks, 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013).

Another factor contributing to low bed occupancy is that, Mapungubwe National Park has more day visitors as compared to overnight tourists (Figure 6). According to SANParks (2013), more than 70% of the people who visit the Park are South African citizens who come mainly from Limpopo Province. The large percentage of tourists in Limpopo Province visiting the Park could be because they are close to the Park. The semi-structured interviews with Park officials confirmed that the majority of the tourists visiting the Park during the day include school children and local communities. The areas that are normally visited include the

Interpretation Centre and Mapungubwe Hill where the visitors learn about the cultural heritage. It appears that the majority of tourists visiting the Park during the day, particularly school children and local communities, cannot afford to spend their night in the Park because there are no dormitories for students and low income people and this contributes to lowering the number of people sleeping in the Park. Thus, the available accommodation within the Park can be afforded by the middle and high income group as well as international tourists.

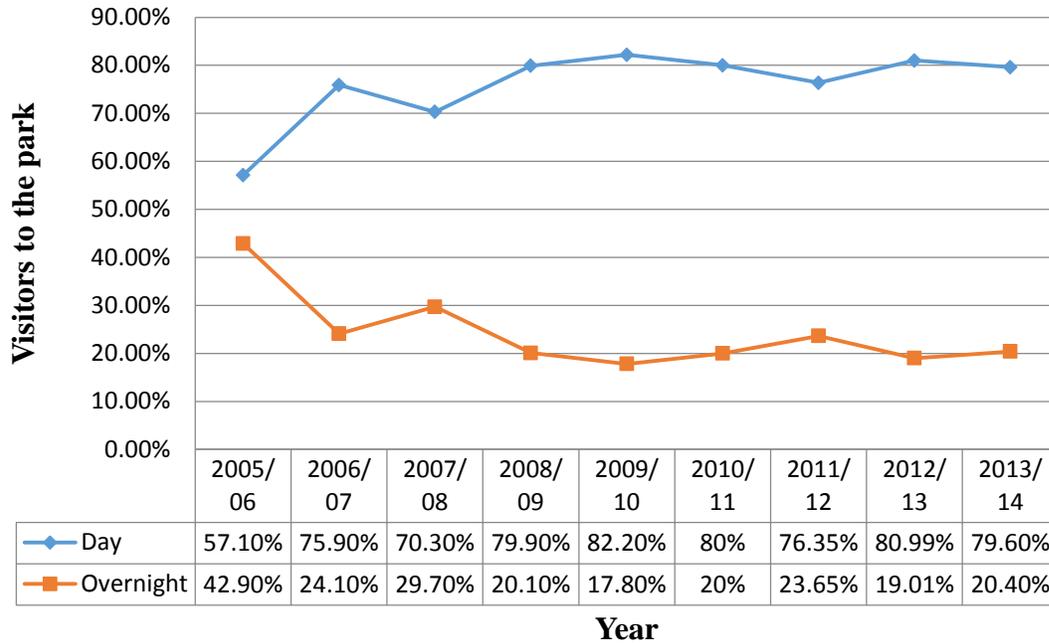


Figure 6: Day and overnight visitors in Mapungubwe National Park. (Source: SANParks, 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013).

In addition, Mapungubwe National Park is surrounded by game lodges and guest houses that also offer accommodation to tourists. As the private lodge owners pointed out during the interviews, some local tourists visit Mapungubwe National Park to learn about cultural heritage during the day but prefer to sleep outside the Park because accommodation there is affordable.

The private lodge owners were of the opinion that the World Heritage Site status has not increased the number of tourists visiting the area since the lodge owners rely profoundly on contractors working in the mines in Mapungubwe area to fill up their lodges and guest houses.

The Park officials agreed with the views of the private lodge owners, pointing out that Mapungubwe National Park offers a diversity of tourism which includes but not limited to cultural history, San and Khoikhoi rock art, wildlife tourism, adventure tourism, geological interest tours (as some of the oldest rocks on the planet are situated in the area), the confluence of the Shashe and Limpopo Rivers, astronomy, botanical tours and birding.

Site visits during field data collection in Mapungubwe National Park confirmed the existence of these tourist attractions in the area. Though there is diversity of tourism in Mapungubwe National Park, the list of game species does not include all of the 'big five' game species (Table 1).

Table 1: Wildlife found in Mapungubwe National Park.

| Name            | Status | Name         | Status |
|-----------------|--------|--------------|--------|
| Eland           | Common | Kudu         | Common |
| Blue Wildebeest | Common | Zebra        | Common |
| Waterbuck       | Common | Impala       | Common |
| Bushbuck        | Common | Klipspringer | Common |
| Duiker          | Common | Steenbok     | Common |
| Red Hartebeest  | Common | Gemsbok      | Common |
| Giraffe         | Common | Bush pig     | Common |
| Warthog         | Common | Baboon       | Common |
| Elephant        | Common | White rhino  | Rare   |
| Lion            | Rare   | Leopard      | Common |
| Cheetah         | Rare   | Hyena        | Rare   |
| Wild dog        | Rare   | Aardvark     | Common |

(Source: <http://www.sanparks.co.za/parks/mapungubwe/conservation/ff/mammals.php>)

The presence of the big five game species (elephants, leopards, lions, rhinos and buffalos) is known to attract tourists from all over the world as is the situation in Kruger National Park. The unavailability of some of the big five species in Mapungubwe National Park is seen as contributing to the low bed occupancy in the Park. Furthermore, some of the big five that are available in the Park (lions and white rhinos) are rare to see in the Park.

The size of the Mapungubwe National Park is small as compared to other Parks under SANParks management. The creation of Mapungubwe National Park dependent on two processes, namely, buying of land and negotiation for contractual agreements with private land owners. The Peace Parks Foundation, Rupert Family Foundation, De Rothschild Foundation, De Beers, National Parks Trust (NTP) and World Wildlife Fund for Nature in South Africa (WWF-SA) assisted SANParks by facilitating negotiations with landowners to either contract land or purchase properties to consolidate the core of Mapungubwe National Park (Peace Parks Foundation, 2006). According to these contractual agreements between SANParks and private land owners, SANParks takes full responsibility for conservation and management of biodiversity whereas the ownership of the land remains with the owner of the land (Interview, Park Manager, 22/06/2011; Warwick Mostert, 30/06/2011).

The process of buying land and contractual agreements with private land owner has made Mapungubwe National Park to have an ecological land area of 19 810 ha which has been formed from a total of 20 properties of varying forms of tenure. It is important to note that there are a number of private pieces of land, including game and irrigation farms that are within Mapungubwe National Park and World Heritage Site but not part of the Park (Figure 1). Under these circumstances, Mapungubwe National Park is highly fragmented. It is for this reason that there are currently no private concessions operating in Mapungubwe National Park because the Park is too small. Furthermore, unlike in other parks managed by SANParks, there are no private tour operators in Mapungubwe National Park. The game drives and other tours in the Park are only conducted by Park officials (Interview, Park Manager, 22/06/2011). It is also important to note that there are no local street vendors selling woodcraft at the main entrance gate and areas along the R572 and R521 roads. The absence of local street vendors could be attributed to the size of the Park and generally low number of tourists who visit the Park.

Access to the Park by airline is also seen as another factor contributing to low bed occupancy in the area. In 2001, Limpopo Valley Airfield was constructed across the border in Northern Tuli Game Reserve in Botswana. The reason for the introduction

of the Limpopo Valley Airfield was to ensure easy access to the conservation areas across the border by tourists, thereby improving tourism in the region. However, Limpopo Valley Airfield is used for domestic and regional flights on an unscheduled basis. Thus, the airfield does not accommodate scheduled airlines; rather it is used only by private airlines. International flights from overseas cannot use the airfield (Interview, David Evans, 15/01/2013). This limits the number of people visiting the Park particularly international communities.

## Conclusion

This paper has presented the empirical findings of tourism performance of Mapungubwe National Park in terms visitor numbers and bed occupancy. The study has shown that there is no steep increase in tourists visiting the Park but rather visitor number are fluctuating from one year to another. Tourist numbers alone suggested that Mapungubwe National Park has not made an impact on the tourism value of the Park. Furthermore, the bed occupancy was found to be lower than 50% since the Park was declared as the World Heritage Site.

Contributing factors include the fact that no big five game species are present in the Park, guests visiting the Park mainly during vacations and not throughout the year, lack of scheduled airline flights to the area, the small size of the Park, high camp site occupancy as opposed to the regular accommodation, high number of day visitors, and competition with surrounding lodges and guest houses.

Taking tourists numbers and bed occupancy together, declaring a Park as a World Heritage Site does not seem to necessarily have enhanced its tourism potential because every Heritage Site is unique and activities attracting tourists are also different. Contrary to the claim by Yang et al. (2010) that the World Heritage Status has a greater tourist enhancing effect, this study concludes that the world heritage

status did not instigate an increase in the number of tourists visiting the Park. The increase in bed occupancy that has been observed is due to infrastructural development. Thus, though the area has potential to attract tourists from all over the world, so far there is no significant growth in the number of tourists visiting the Park. The main contributing factor to low tourism business in Mapungubwe National Park may be ascribed to age of the Park. Mapungubwe National Park is one of the youngest national parks in the portfolio of SANParks, having been officially declared as a national park in 1998.

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