



Conservation volunteer tourism in the Hartbeespoort region, South Africa: an exploratory study

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Abstract

It is critical to promote the development and vigorous growth of responsible and on all levels sustainable tourism destinations. In general terms, travelling is increasingly a privilege and if tourism is handled responsibly, all the participants can benefit and enjoy immense privileges. Volunteer tourism remains under-researched topic in Africa and specifically South Africa. This research provides novel evidence from an exploratory study on conservation volunteer tourism in the Hartbeespoort region in the North-West Province of South Africa, to address the current paucity in research on this topic. This paper presents the main motivations of tourists for volunteering in conservation programmes, and the range of different volunteering projects available. Key points that emerged include the value that the tourists placed on their interaction with animals and developing personal awareness around environmental and conservation issues. Overall, conservation volunteer tourism has positive impacts, however a number of potential ethical problems are highlighted. The paper concludes highlighting a number of future research prospects.

Key words: conservation, volunteer tourism, Hartbeespoort, South Africa

Introduction

Scholars globally use different terms to define volunteer tourism, such as “*volunteer vacation, mini mission, mission lite, pro-poor tourism, altruistic tourism, service based vacation and voluntourism*” (Tomazos and Cooper, 2012:407). More formally, volunteer tourism is an alternative form of tourism for people that seek sustainable and interactive experiences that contribute direct financial and labour resources to specific projects, unlike mass tourism (Keese, 2011; van Zyl et al., 2015; Ong et al., 2014). Volunteer tourism is both consumption and production based with a combination of travel for leisure purposes and volunteering work (Rogerson and Slater, 2014).

Internationally, research has primarily focused on the positive aspects of volunteer tourism, yet more recent critiques having emerge, questioning the altruistic motives and impacts of this type of tourism (Wearing and McGehee, 2013). A sub-group of volunteer tourists are conservation volunteer tourists, who are personally driven to conserve the natural environment, but may, in addition have personal motivations such as self-development (Tomazos and Cooper, 2012). Moreover, some tourists are motivated to volunteer with specific projects, because of their fondness for certain types of animals (Lorimer, 2009; 2010), or



because the location of the conservation project is ideal to their touristic needs (Grimm and Needham, 2011; 2012). The economic result of volunteer tourism is twofold. Firstly, Brondo (2015) argues that conservation volunteer tourism can provide long term funding for conservation. Smith and Font (2014), however, argue that conservation volunteer tourism is the unsustainable commodification of nature and volunteer tourism organisations are overly profit driven. Tourists from the global North participate most prevalently in volunteer projects in the global South, with South Africa ranking consistently among the top ten international destinations for volunteer tourists (Keese, 2011; Rogerson and Slater, 2014).

Research on volunteer tourism in South Africa for the most part, have focussed on humanitarian volunteering (Akintola, 2010). Despite this, limited research has been done on conservation volunteering despite some notable examples (see Cousins et al., 2009; Olivier et al., 2015). Despite South Africa's geographical importance with regard to volunteer tourism, with multiple wildlife sanctuaries, game lodges and private game farms that host volunteer projects for conservation purposes, research remains scant. It therefore necessary for further research to be undertaken to understand conservation volunteer tourism in South Africa in order to improve and monitor its value to conservation and tourism more closely. This paper focuses specifically on conservation volunteer tourism in Hartbeespoort in the North-West Province of South Africa.

Literature review and conceptual framework

Volunteer tourism is a niche travel market that is rapidly growing, forming a multi-billion-dollar industry globally. Since 1990 it has been estimated that approximately 1.6 million people participate in volunteer tourism projects annually, with recent estimates closer to 10 million (McGehee, 2014). As a result, volunteer tourism is a very lucrative form of tourism, because, instead of getting paid for labour, volunteers pay to provide labour. The payment can range from a once-off placement fee to a larger fee that covers living expenses that benefit the overall cause of the project (Tomazos and Cooper, 2012). Tourists also partake in sightseeing and adventure based activities while volunteering (Barbieri et al., 2012). Typical volunteer tourism projects include community welfare initiatives, environmental regeneration, construction, medical assistance, education and research (Ong et al., 2014; Knollenberg et al., 2014). However, this literature review will specifically focus on volunteer tourism related to conservation, also known as wildlife volunteer tourism, volunteer ecotourism, scientific ecotourism and conservation volunteering (Cousins et al., 2009).

There are various locations where conservation volunteering takes place, such as tropical rainforests, wetlands, lagoons or beaches where volunteers can help and interact with endangered species (Stoddart and Rogerson, 2004). For volunteers, the destination itself is just as important as the volunteer work performed, and there are various factors that influence the volunteer's choice of destination such as safety, accessibility, attractiveness and adventure (Keese, 2011; Lorimer, 2010). Often volunteer tourists are women and the majority are either under 30 years of age, or retirees with advanced levels of education (Knollenberg et al., 2014).

In terms of motivations to volunteer, tourists fall into two categories: self-development or self-interest (Brondo, 2015). Self-interest is reported to be the primary motivation amongst younger people that do volunteering in the period between school and tertiary education, or between tertiary education and full time employment (Wearing and McGehee, 2013). Often arguments are made that volunteer tourists are more altruistic or egoistic, consensus is that volunteering contains both aspects (Grimm and Needham, 2011). However, some volunteers are more 'volunteer minded', while others are more 'vacation minded' (Keese, 2011). Davies (2016)



argues that volunteer tourism is often more utilitarian, and the way in which volunteers see or value the environment may be complex. Therefore, conservation volunteering requires an expansion of the motivations beyond just altruistic or self-development motives, as, for example, some volunteers want to work with specific animals due to special interest (Grimm and Needham, 2011; 2012).

For many volunteer tourists, visiting locations in the global South is motivation in itself, and they are often at the same time attracted by many of the elements that make up the mainstream tourist experience (Benson and Seibert, 2009). *“Research has shown that people choose a specific organisation based on its reputation, programme variety and structure, marketing, safety, specific projects, organisation type (e.g., NGO), people involved, and recommendations from family or friends”* (Grimm and Needham, 2011: 18). Organisations will therefore often prefer a project location that is less than four hours away from an international airport or close to a capital city (Keese, 2011). For many tourists, choosing a destination is just as important as the volunteer work itself (Keese, 2011).

Volunteers choose a specific country for various reasons. First, according to Keese (2011), economic and political stability is important. Second is a personal need central to altruistic goals. The third is attractiveness, such as appealing places with an ‘exotic’ image which will attract more volunteers (Grimm and Needham, 2011; 2012). As an example, an idyllic view of the African wilderness is often used in marketing by conservation tourism companies to attract international volunteers (Cousins et al., 2009). Certain animal species are popular for conservation programmes and volunteers. For example, the Big Five animals, i.e. rhino, African elephant, buffalo, lion and leopard, and other carnivores, primates, turtles and herbivores (Lorimer, 2009).

Close-up encounters or touching of animals is another motivation for volunteers, this is usually the case in captive breeding, in-situ rehabilitation and animal protection projects (Lorimer, 2010). Adventure may also be considered a motivation, for example, volunteers are encouraged to take on physically challenging tasks, like hacking through the jungle, avoid snakes and encounter the unknown or ‘roughing it’ (Lorimer, 2010). Conservation volunteer tourism can be considered as an example of neoliberal conservation (Brondo, 2015). Hosts of volunteer projects primarily offer volunteer tourism projects because it is profitable (Govender and Rogerson, 2010; Alexander, 2012). Profits are made due to the influx of foreign exchange and as international volunteer tourists often spend more money than domestic volunteer tourists and often stay longer (Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004). Although conservation volunteer tourism may provide funds for conservation, and labour to assist projects, it can also create dependency for host communities (Guttentag, 2009). It can be seen as problematic that the main focus of volunteer tourism projects are often based on the needs of the tourists and not the needs of host populations surrounding volunteer projects (Crossley, 2012; Wearing and McGehee, 2013). In some cases, volunteers are known to push out local residents from possible employment opportunities (Brondo, 2015).

While Smith and Font (2014) recognise that volunteer tourism is a business, they argue that more sustainably oriented forms of volunteer tourism should be promoted. Some argue for the decommodification of volunteer tourism and that alternative approaches to the practice of this type of tourism should be considered (Wearing and McGehee, 2013). For example, a decommodified agenda will empower the destination communities. While others have questioned the value of de-commodified volunteer tourism and argue for an acceptable relationship between monetary gain and altruistic services (Tomazos and Cooper, 2012). In essence, monetary gain creates tension tourist needs and conservation priorities (Boluk et al., 2016; Cousins et al., 2009). However, some projects align better with conservation priorities,



taking volunteers on an emotional journey with highs and lows, and forces volunteers to reflect and modify their beliefs about 'wild Africa' vs. an idyllic view (Cousins et al., 2009). The next section will provide information on the study area and the methods used to gather data.

Study area, background and methods

The study was conducted in the popular tourist area of Hartbeespoort in the North-West Province, South Africa. Hartbeespoort hosts a number of leisure orientated experiences and is a popular location for second homes (see Long and Hoogendoorn, 2013; 2014) and is relatively close to OR Tambo International and Lanseria airports. Hartbeespoort was specifically chosen because of the variety sanctuaries and private game lodges where international tourists can volunteer.

This research utilized convenience sampling and used a qualitative data collection technique similar to that of Phelan (2015). This study focuses on three volunteer tourism offerings. The first is the *Hartebees Animal Sanctuaries Projects* (which includes projects such as the *Owl Rescue centre, Monkey and Elephant Sanctuary, Ann van Dyk Cheetah Centre, Vulpro and the Magalies Biosphere Project*). The second is the *Wildlife Sanctuary and Game Reserve*, hosted at *Glen Afric Lodge*. The third is a predator project which is hosted at *Ukutula Conservation and Research Centre*. The map (figure 1) indicates these different sanctuaries or conservation centres in the study area. Twenty-five international volunteers were interviewed, including three volunteer hosts and one local placing agency. The interviews were conducted during July and August 2016.



Image 1. Aerial cableway at Hartbeespoort
Source: <http://hartbeespoortinfo.co.za/item/hartbeespoort-aerial-cableway/>

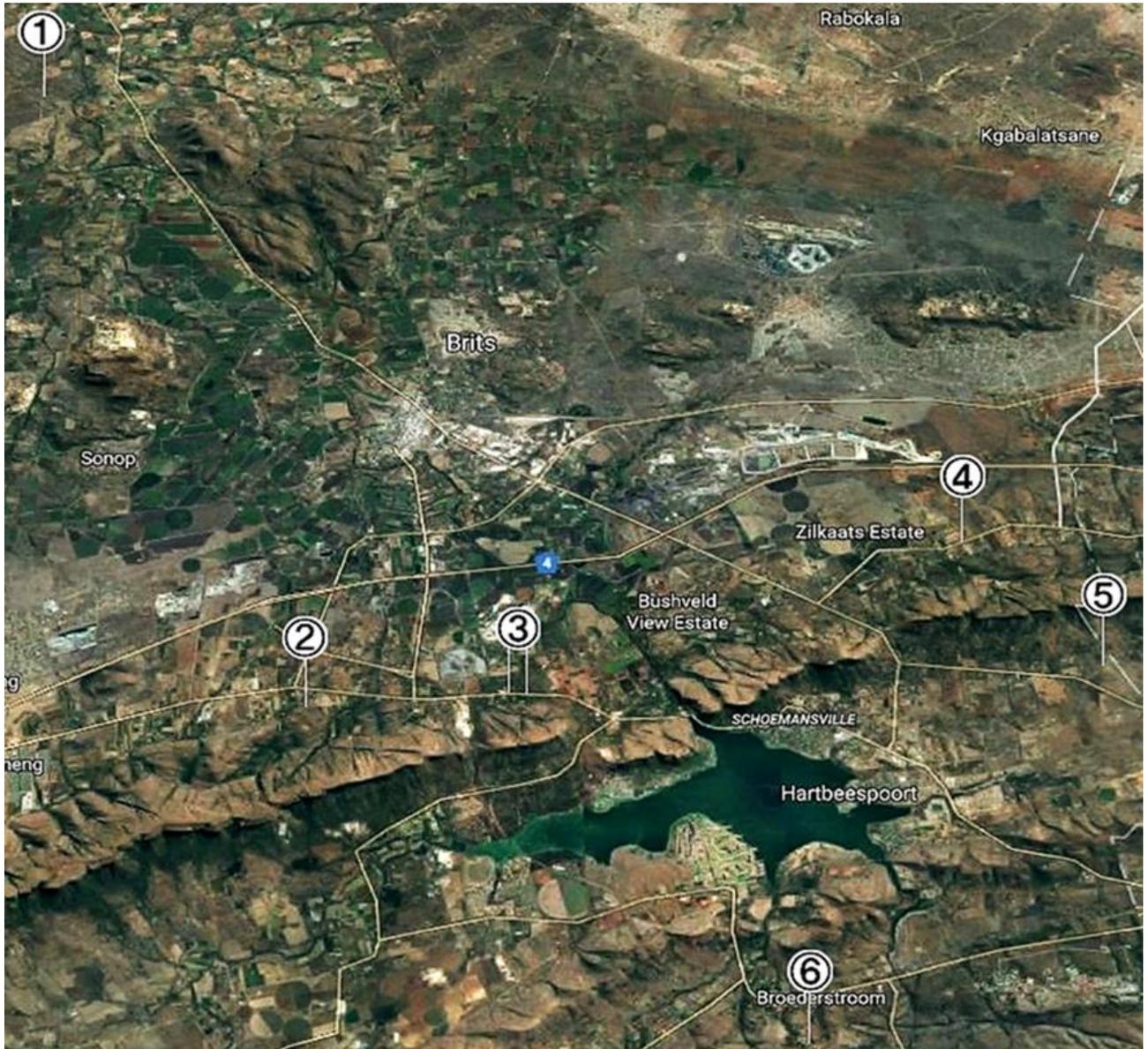


Figure 1: Map of study area

Legend

- 1. Ukutula Lodge
- 2. Owl Rescue Centre
- 3. The Monkey and Elephant Sanctuary
- 4. Ann van Dyk Cheetah Centre
- 5. Vulpro
- 6. Glen Afric Lodge

Results

The results are presented in two sections of analysis and debate. Firstly, the background to volunteering opportunities is provided, followed by a description of the different projects based on the personal in-depth interviews with volunteer hosts and the local planning



agency. Secondly, the profile of the volunteers is provided, followed by their motivations to volunteer, their experiences and satisfaction, and their perceived impact.

Background to volunteer opportunities

In terms of background to volunteering opportunities, most volunteers booked their experiences through international placing agencies such as *GoEco* and *Kilroy*. Through these agency websites, potential volunteer tourists can choose what kind of volunteering they want to do, and the agency places them with a project that suits their needs, specifications and expectations. The international placing agencies often sell the projects on behalf of the local placing agencies, including *SAVE* (South African Volunteer Experience), *SA Volunteering*, and *Awesome Travel*. Local placing agencies make additional arrangements, such as transporting volunteers from the airport and shuttling to and from volunteer projects. Local agencies also arrange orientation and weekly “socials” or leisure activities for volunteers. The weekly socials include activities in the area, such as visiting elephant sanctuaries and adventure activities. One activity per week is included in the price for all volunteer projects, but on weekends volunteers can arrange their own activities at their own cost.

Hartees Animal Sanctuary Project

The *Hartees Animal Sanctuary Project* has been headed up since 2012 by *Africa Sol Safaris*, a company that specialises in safari experiences in South Africa and neighbouring countries. Through an interview with the owner of *Africa Sol Safaris*, it was found that the company realised a demand for volunteer projects in South Africa. After doing market research on ideal locations for volunteer projects, the owners of *Africa Sol Safaris* decided to host volunteer projects in the Hartbeespoort area. During peak season (July and August) the company hosts between 10 and 15 international volunteers. During off-season, the number of volunteers varies depending on availability. In an interview with a representative from *SAVE* and with the owners of *Africa Sol Safaris*, the following information was gathered regarding volunteering activities. The volunteers visit a different sanctuary each day, with the work at the sanctuaries including preparing food, putting out food, counting monkeys and cleaning the *Elephant and Monkey sanctuary*. At the *Owl Rescue Centre* and the *Ann van Dyk Cheetah Centre*, the volunteers help mainly with building, repairing or maintaining animal enclosures. Volunteers are also involved in the *Magalies Biosphere project*, where they go, on request, to private farms in the area, or to the *Saartjies Nek Nature Reserve*, to clear alien vegetation or remove snares.

The Wildlife Sanctuary and Game Reserve Project

Through an interview with the *Glen Afric* volunteer manager, the following information was gathered. The *Wildlife Sanctuary and Game Reserve Project* has been hosted at the *Glen Afric Lodge* since 2012. The lodge offers accommodation and game drives as part of their products outside of volunteering. There are wide variety of animals at the sanctuary, including lions, tigers, elephants and hippos. *Glen Afric Lodge* hosts between 20 and 30 volunteers on average during the off season, and in peak season they host up to 50 volunteers (July and August). A representative from *SAVE* also noted that the objective of the volunteers' involvement in this project is to create a fully functional, clean and well managed nature reserve that is accessible to the public, and which will attract a consistent flow of visitors to the area. Volunteers help to clean enclosures and assist with the removal of alien vegetation, planting and re-establishment of indigenous grasses and trees, developing new eco-friendly visitor paths, and building bird hides. Volunteers also assist in developing regular feeding



areas and shelters for the winter month when food is scarce, and do regular burning and bush clearing to ensure grass is accessible to animals.

Ukutula Lodge and Conservation Centre

The *Ukutula Lodge and Conservation Centre* offers accommodation and day tours, and is host to a conservation centre that focuses on predator conservation. The main focus of the conservation centre is on the reproductive and genetic research of lions. They also run an adoption program where volunteers or the public can “adopt” a lion cub for a year and provide monetary support to raise the lion at the conservation centre (Showme.co.za, 2017). *Ukutula Lodge and Conservation Centre* also hosts a big-cat volunteer project, in which the volunteers work predominantly with lions. The volunteers stay on the premises of the lodge next to the lion enclosures, and take part in a feeding programme for different cat species and antelope. The volunteers also do general maintenance and cleaning of enclosures.

The next section will provide information of the tourists that volunteer at the different projects described.

Profile of volunteers

International volunteers from various countries were interviewed, mainly from European countries including England (7), Norway (3), Belgium (2), Denmark (1), Germany (1), the Netherlands (1), Spain (2). A number of volunteers came from the United States of America (5), Canada (2), and Brazil (1). There is a notable gender division between respondents. The majority (20) of the volunteers were female, and only five male. The placing agency and hosts confirmed that this is the general trend. Eleven of the volunteers were between the ages of 18-20, nine were between the ages of 21-25 years old, four were between 26-30 years old, and one volunteer was over the age of 31. Fourteen of the volunteers interviewed were students. For interest sake, two of the respondents studied veterinary science and one studied ecotourism. Eight of the volunteers were employed full time. Three of the volunteers are unemployed, including one respondent who noted that volunteering was part of their gap year. All of the other volunteers who were interviewed indicated that volunteering was part of their summer vacation.

Respondents volunteer both internationally and locally, and 11 of the volunteers stated that it was their first-time volunteering. Three respondents volunteer every week and three volunteer once every month. Those who volunteer every week or monthly usually volunteer at their local animal shelters, horse ranches, or at children’s homes. Seven indicated that they volunteer once a year, and one respondent noted that they try to volunteer at least once every two years. Those who responded that they volunteer once a year or every two years already volunteered internationally once or twice before this interview. Some volunteers volunteered in other countries, for example, one respondent volunteered at a sea turtle conservation project in Fiji, and another respondent worked with children in Swaziland and volunteered at a Buddhist school during the Olympics in Beijing.

It can be argued that the majority of the respondents enjoy volunteering and purposefully incorporate volunteering into their holiday. For some it is their second or third time at specific projects in the Hartbeespoort area. This possibly shows a longitudinal commitment to issues around conservation. However, it is important to understand what motivated the respondents to volunteer, their perceptions about volunteering and how conservation forms part of their volunteering efforts, and how satisfied they were with the respective volunteer projects.



Motivations of the volunteers

Altruism was not mentioned as the main motivation for volunteering by the respondents. Often, the first response of the majority of volunteers was that they wanted an alternative holiday experience. For example, one volunteer noted that “*when you volunteer you get to see and experience much more than a normal Kruger tourist*”, while another said “*it is not so touristy*” and lastly another volunteer stated that “*you can work hands-on with the animals, not just look at them*”. However, nine of the volunteers said, in general terms, that they wanted to help the animals, assist sanctuaries, or ‘give back’ to the environment. The main reason that the respondents chose to volunteer was because of their love for animals. A common response to the question of why they volunteer was “*I don’t really know... I just like animals*”. A few respondents seemed more certain. For example, “*animals are my lifelong passion*” or “*last year I helped at a zoo and really liked working with the animals so I wanted to do something similar*”. However, not all the respondents chose to specifically volunteer with animal: four respondents said that they chose animals because they did not enjoy working with children. One respondent stated that “*animals are easier to work with than children because you don’t need to know much, anyone can do it*”.

Other respondents chose to volunteer because they wanted to learn new skills or learn more about the animals. For example, respondents who studied veterinary science indicated that they wanted to see gain experience working with African animals. One volunteer said that she planned to do her practical year for veterinary science at *Ukutula Lodge and Conservation Centre*. Some respondents said that they wanted to improve their English, and that volunteering was a good way to achieve this. The fact that there are volunteers from various countries also appeared to be a motivation because volunteers are afforded an opportunity to meet people from different cultures and backgrounds. Volunteering also provides a sense of independence to volunteers. For many respondents, it was their first trip abroad, and the fact that the trip was in a group was comforting.

There were also no prominent place specific motivations for the volunteers. Only four respondents indicated that they chose to volunteer at Hartbeespoort because they always wanted to visit Africa. Some respondents said that they chose to volunteer in South Africa because it is safer than other parts of Africa or Asia. The fact that Hartbeespoort is close to an international airport also seemed appealing to the respondents: a few said that they did not want to travel for 4 or 5 hours on a bus to their destination.

The primary motivation for volunteering was the type of project. The majority of the respondents said that they looked for a specific type of project, and often Hartbeespoort was the locality in which this particular type of project was a possibility. Volunteers from different projects had different motivations for choosing specific projects. For example, those who volunteered at the *Hartebees Animal Sanctuaries Project* said they chose it because they can work with different animals and continually assigned different tasks. For example, one respondent noted that “*I saw some other projects with lions but the people just cleaned and I did not want to clean the whole time*”. The volunteers at the *Wildlife Sanctuary and Game Reserve Project* also chose to volunteer because there are a wide variety of animals there. However, many of the respondents said that they chose *Wildlife Sanctuary and Game Reserve Project* because it is reputable and popular.

Volunteers who specifically wanted to work with lions chose *Ukutula Lodge and Conservation Centre*. The majority of the volunteers referred to the research that *Ukutula Lodge and Conservation Centre* is conducting, and that it motivated them to choose this particular project



and not a similar project with big cats. Moreover, the volunteers believe that the research is 'authentic' or of good quality, based on what they read before choosing it. For example, "*I watched the video about the research they do and it looked very good*", noted one respondent. Other respondents from *Ukutula Lodge and Conservation Centre* were more motivated by the possibility of close interaction with the lions, and that they could pet and bottle feed cubs. One respondent said "*I just wanted to take nice pictures with the cubs to put on Facebook*". Social media played an important role as part of the volunteers' experience and knowledge about projects. Twenty of the respondents found out about project on the internet through specific websites such as YouTube, blogs and Facebook. The remaining volunteers heard about the project from friends or family members.

Experiences and Satisfaction of the volunteers

The majority (20) of the respondents volunteered for two weeks during their visit to South Africa. A small number volunteered for three weeks (2) and four weeks (3). Only three of the international volunteers stayed longer in South Africa to do additional travelling. The longest stay in South Africa was six weeks. As an example, one respondent volunteered for two weeks, and then went to the Kruger National Park and East London for four weeks afterwards. Three respondents also planned to go to Cape Town to see Table Mountain, and do cage diving and surf. Another three respondents visited the Kruger National Park during the previous year when they volunteered, and one respondent plans to visit Kruger National Park in the future. In general terms, the Western Cape Province and the Kruger National Park were the most common tourist destinations for respondents after volunteering. Other examples of tourist destinations that were visited were in the broad geographical area that they volunteered. For an example, the *Ukutula Lodge and Conservation Centre* arranged skydiving for volunteers at Sun City, a major resort destination.

The cost of the volunteering ranged between R18,000-R36,000 for two weeks. Including flights, the trip often exceeded R50,000. Only two volunteers felt that it was excessively expensive, the rest of the respondents felt that it was good value for money. An example of why it was considered good value for money is one respondent noting "*well it is a bit expensive but it's a once in a lifetime experience, so it is worth it*". Four respondents also mentioned that the volunteer packages were good value for money, because the accommodation and quality of food was to their liking.

One respondent said that "*The rooms are bigger than I expected. You share a room and bathroom with few people. And every afternoon we make a fire at the back to get hot water and it really works, there was not one time that I did not have hot water to shower*". Another volunteer argued that the money he paid for the project is an investment in his future: "*Yes. it is good value for money and it is actually an investment. Like I said, I study ecotourism and you see I want to maybe work as a ranger, so this is good work experience. And I am also doing the predator course which is very good*". All but one of the volunteer were satisfied with the volunteering experience, and all of the respondents said that they will suggest it to their friends and family.

However, one respondent expected more of the experience, primarily because she wanted to be involved in the release of animals into the wild. Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents were very satisfied, and one respondent noted: "*I am over satisfied, it is more than I expected*", and another mentioned that "*so far it is the best trip I've been on*".

The majority (22) of the volunteers enjoyed the close interaction with the animals the most, including feeding or playing. The big cats were the favourite animals of the volunteers with the



lion being a particularly popular. Volunteers from the *Hartees Animal Sanctuary Project*, however, enjoyed monkeys and elephants the most. The volunteers also enjoyed maintenance work, and said that they did not work as hard as expected. The respondents seemed to feel that the maintenance work that they were involved in was important, and that it gave them a sense of satisfaction and that their experience volunteering is ultimately has a positive impact.

Impact of the volunteer's work

Thirteen of the volunteers felt that the projects they were involved in had a significant positive impact, and six felt that their involvement had a moderately positive impact on the sanctuaries. This is largely because the volunteers believe that their work reduced work pressure on permanent staff members. For example, one response said "*we help the rangers a lot and then they can do their other work*", and "*there is less strain on the staff*". They also acknowledged that the money that they paid to volunteer also helped the sanctuaries in a number of ways. For example, "*I think our work is not that important but the money we bring in helps a lot*". Moreover, other volunteers felt that they help animals specifically. For example, "*because they (the monkeys) were pets they are used to love and we can give them a bit of love*". Another respondent explained that the volunteers help to keep the tigers fit: "*what was cool is that last week we helped to train the tigers, you take a stick and let them (the tigers) jump from one box to another one to keep their muscles strong*".

The volunteers at Ukutula Lodge and Conservation Centre felt that they were important in providing in the basic needs of the lion cubs: "*we help them (the lion cubs) a lot, they need to be bottle fed and we also play with them so that they won't get bored*". Further examples of what volunteers viewed as a positive impact was the interaction with the animals: "*we help taming the animals because we make them used to people when we work in their cages and then it is safer for the tourists*" and "*it is important for the cubs (lion cubs) to be around people because when they are older they will be used for research and then they won't bite or like attack the people*".

The volunteers at *Ukutula Lodge and Conservation Centre* also said that when tour groups visit, they help to keep an eye on the group and show visitors how to handle the cubs. *Ukutula Lodge and Conservation Centre*, in particular, focused more on educating the volunteers, and the volunteers recognised that they are were acutely aware of the main issues pertaining to the conservation of lions, and, through word of mouth, felt that they could extend their impact beyond volunteering experiences. Unfortunately, four of the respondents felt their personal contribution did not have much of a positive impact on the particular projects, but one volunteer stated; "*...every little bit helps*".

Only a few respondents had previous experience in conservation or conservation orientated volunteering. However, all of the volunteers said that they had learned a lot and were more aware of conservation issues that before the volunteering experience. Examples are the volunteers at the *Hartees Animal Sanctuary Project*, who were made aware during volunteering that keeping monkeys or lemurs as pets is was ultimately bad for the animal. The volunteers at the *Wildlife Sanctuary and Game Reserve Project* said that they learned a lot about animal behaviour, and that they were also more aware of intricate issues relating to rhino poaching. The volunteers at *Ukutula Lodge and Conservation Centre* were also made aware of the plight of the decreasing lion populations in Africa.



Conclusion

Conservation volunteer tourism remains a chronically under-researched topic of investigation in Africa, and in South Africa in particular. Despite some recent research emerging, tourism research still largely remains ignorant about the effects and impacts of conservation volunteering in the African context. Conservation volunteering is undoubtedly forms part of the neo-liberal tourism sector and has a number of positive and negative impacts. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to make a modest attempt to shed some light on a number of issues relating to this type of tourism. Therefore, this paper will ideally stimulate debate and hopefully spark new research investigations on conservation volunteer tourism. Drawing from the findings of the research, the following key points are worth investigating further in future research projects in South Africa in particular, but Africa as a whole.

Firstly, the volunteers are willing to pay to provide labour in order to have self-fulfilling experiences, with conservation awareness being emphasised in particular by hosts of conservation projects. However, it might be argued that conservation volunteering is more connected to the volunteers' expectations and idealistic perceptions or what they consider to be conservation, rather than the actual needs of conservation in Africa. For example, the volunteers, by and large, chose the experiences that they perceived to be important, such as petting and feeding lion cubs, rather than volunteering on serious conservation issues, notably the rapid decline in populations of the soon to be extinct rhinos in Southern Africa. Secondly, it is questionable whether the conservation volunteer projects can truly be considered successful, especially in terms of conserving different animal populations.

Only one of the volunteer projects focuses on releasing animals back into the wild, while the majority take place in a captive or semi-captive setting, where animals are often tamed or domesticated for research and displayed to tourists. However, some animals were rescued and kept alive at sanctuaries, which can be considered as valuable, depending on one's personal views on conservation. Potentially, future research projects could scrutinise these issues more in depth.

Lastly, conservation volunteer tourism is profit driven, and to convince tourists to pay to do labour, a successful business model is essential. However, with the desperate levels of unemployment in South Africa and in Africa at large, it must be queried whether conservation volunteer tourism does not push local unemployed residents out of the job market. However, the amount of foreign revenue earned is beneficial to the particular region, and the additional trips that are taken after volunteering is beneficial to the tourist economy at large in South Africa. Nevertheless, it would worthwhile to explore these issues in greater depth in terms of deprivation of local employment opportunities and broader economic benefit.

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